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Influence of Community Engagement on Sustainable Development of Tourism in Nigeria: A Review

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Abstract

Community engagement is fundamental to the sustainability and success of tourism, especially when local communities are actively involved in planning, management, and in revenue-sharing. This paper reviewed the current tourism practices in Nigeria, communities' level of understanding and their attitude towards existing tourism development, the extent, and types of present community participation, factors that hinder community participation in the tourism development process, tourism planning and how community participation in tourism faces several challenges. The review conclusion is that community engagement can influence tourism policy, leading to more representative governance that considers local needs, priorities, but policy document and policy implementers often exclude local communities' causing conflicts and reduced trust. The review recommend, that government institutes and enforces policies that grant substantial authority to the local community to control and manage their natural resources and also encourage a strong partnerships between local communities and policy makers/implementers and tourism stakeholders.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Development, Tourism & Influence

Introduction

Community engagement is the process of involving a community in decision-making, including urban planning decisions, community participation are crucial for securing sustainable tourism and highlight the need to listen and respond to the broad range of stakeholders' voices, opinions, and concerns. Community participation is defined

as the redistribution of power to facilitate the conscious incorporation of the marginalized people who are excluded from the economic and political process (Arnstein, 1969). Others termed it as the process by which people, families or societies take up the responsibility for their well-being and build capacity to contribute to their growth and their society (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019; Xu, Jiang, Wall, & Wang, 2019). There has been a growing emphasis in the literature on the advantages of enabling the local community to participate in the tourism process for several reasons (Rashid, Shi, Rahim, Dong, & Sultan, 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017; Tosun, 2006). Community includes not only key stakeholders but anyone with legitimate interest in the site, city, or region being planned. Community often refers broadly to an area's residents, workers, visitors, and general public–and public engagement also works in these cases. Community can sometimes refer to a portion of the public, like citizens (in citizen engagement), or even project-specific groups, like public transit users or university students. Stakeholders or key stakeholders likewise bring different perspectives to the planning process. They are usually select community members, like decision-makers, interest groups, and community leaders. Engagement, like participation, aims to sufficiently represent a broad range of people and groups in a decision-making process. Consultation also falls under this definition, although mostly in the context of formal, government-led projects. Outreach (i.e. informing and educating) is an important kind of participation, but it certainly doesn't describe all of the different types of community engagement. Community engagement is beneficial, many studies such as the study of Aref, & Redzuan, (2009) on community development through tourism: A Case Study of the Offa Community, Nigeria and that of Suleiman, (2016) on impact of Community Participation on rural tourism development in Nigeria also identify challenges such as lack of government support, inadequate training, and limited access to funding. Addressing these challenges is crucial for effective engagement, for example, efforts in Niger State to promote cultural tourism face hurdles due to insufficient policy frameworks and local capacity-building efforts. Previous studies (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Arroyo et al., 2019; Boley et al., 2017; Hutchings et al., 2020 have investigated different perspectives on empowerment for example, women's empowerment explored the pre-conceived views of local communities in Barabarani Village, Arusha, Tanzania regarding their roles in tourism development, the study found that the local communities want to be involved in decision-making, in view of this paper explored the influence of Community engagement on the development of tourism in Nigeria.

Roles of community engagement in planning

Nigeria is blessed with diverse cultures and breathtaking land scopes and a rich heritage and has increasingly recognized the potential of community engagement as a driver of sustainable development through community engagement it empowers the local community by involving them in management, planning, decision making and benefits of tourism activities, thereby fostering economic growth, preservation of cultural heritage (Eyisi, Lee, & Trees, 2021). Community engagement empowers local communities by providing them with opportunities to show case culture, heritage and traditions, while benefiting from tourism economically (Adebayo, & Butcher, 2021). In Nigeria grassroots initiatives led by community members

have played a pivotal role in driving inclusiveness and sustainable tourism development (Ireri, (2022) for example, Kajuru castle resort in Kaduna State a luxury castle nestled in the scenic hills of Northern Nigeria the resort is owned and operated by the local community offers tourists a blend of local hospitality and modern amenities including castle tours, hiking trails and cultural performance (Onihunwa, Akande, Wealth, Irunokhai, & Mohammed, (2023). According to Onihunwa, Akande, Wealth, Irunokhai, & Mohammed, (2023) by promoting community engagement the resort has created jobs and stimulate local businesses and contributed to the socio-economic development of the surrounding area. This paper explores the influence of community engagement in tourism development and examines strategies to empower local communities for sustainable tourism growth. Tourism plays a significant role in driving economic growth and cultural exchange, yet its benefits are often unevenly distributed, with local communities in many destinations experiencing marginalization and limited involvement in decision-making processes Yazid, (2025) and recognizing this, there has been a growing emphasis on community engagement in tourism development, aiming to empower residents and ensure that tourism contributes to sustainable growth that meets the needs of both visitors and host communities, involving local stakeholders in planning, capacity building, and economic empowerment, tourism can become a force for positive change, support. The role of community engagement in the field of community practice and generally in social work have continuously evolved over the last century, included in this issue is Jesse Frederick Steiner in his seminal paper assesses community organization in 1922" so also Paul Stuart) in his 1922 article titled "Community organization in his study of the rise and recent tendencies" discusses the origins of the community organization in social work, including case study examples that illustrate community engagement strategies used by early community organizers (Stuart, 2022). Steiner (1922) described community organization practice as focusing on "the needs of the larger social group, the community," while "the other area of social work" (e.g., direct practice) focused on the "problems of the individual and the family." Steiner (1922) further emphasized that working with communities could not be separated from working with individuals and families. Community organization was also discussed by Stein as form of social work that was not entirely new but one that was integral and woven into social work to address the "conditions of community life." Stuart (2022) highlighted the importance of community collaboration and engagement as central to community organization practice. The role of social settlements (e.g., settlement houses) were described as the "very essence of community organization" because of their role in developing a cooperative spirit with the communities in which they worked. Community organization's purpose was seen as the socializing people by providing opportunities for them to address their common problems. Case studies discussed by Stein illustrated various forms of community organization practice in the early 19th century, including ways in which the community was engaged through collaborations among organizations, associations, or welfare agencies to address issues of recreation, health, and other public welfare issues. Most of the case studies described by Stein focused mainly on organizational forms of engagement and collaboration. However, there

were a few exceptions where community organizing efforts engaged regular citizens and residents in advising and guiding programs. For example, the Community Council Movement, whose governing board was made up of official social and civic organizations, also engaged "citizens chosen by the people of the community at an open meeting.

Community Engagement Strategies in Tourism Development

Community engagement strategies, which are central to community practice, have clearly evolved over the past century, while early methods discussed by Stein (1922) are still used today to forge collaborations and partnerships among community organizations and residents, today's community organizers and practitioners deliberately engage residents in ways that foster capacity building and empowerment at the individual, organizational and community levels. Current community engagement strategies focus on the *active* involvement of residents and community members in ways that foster empowerment and capacity building (Ohmer et al., 2019). Through active engagement residents are able to gain experience in organizing, identifying resources, and developing strategies to improve the community's wellbeing and achieve their goals (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988 as cited in Ohmer et al., 2019). Community practitioners Gamble and Weil (1995) define citizen participation and engaged as "the active, voluntary involvement of individuals and groups in changing problematic conditions in communities and influencing the policies and programs that affect the quality of their lives and the lives of other residents" (as cited in Ohmer, 2007). Through community engagement, "residents can influence external social systems and work with neighbors and community organizations to improve their neighborhoods" (Ohmer, 2007). Engaged citizens feel responsibility toward the communities in which they are embedded, as well as toward the well-being of society as a whole (Ohmer et al., 2019).

Boley, & McGehee, (2014) identify strategies that could be employed in sustainable tourism tourism of local communities in Nigeria include:

- Recreational activities serve as a vibrant hub for fostering community spirit and involvement. These activities, ranging from sports and games to cultural events and outdoor adventures, provide a platform for individuals of all ages to connect, share experiences, and build relationships. They are not merely pastimes but pivotal in knitting the social fabric, allowing for diverse groups to come together in a shared space, promoting inclusivity and understanding.
- Organized sports, whether team-based or individual, are powerful tools for community engagement. They encourage teamwork, discipline, and a sense of belonging. For instance, a neighborhood soccer league can unite various community members, fostering camaraderie and local pride.
- Art exhibitions, music concerts, and dance performances reflect the community's cultural diversity and heritage, these events can act as a bridge, connecting people from different backgrounds and creating a dialogue through the universal language of art.

- Interactive workshops on topics like gardening, cooking, or sustainability can engage community members in learning new skills while contributing to the community's well-being.
- Volunteer opportunities in local parks, shelters, or **Festivals and Fairs** are occasions that celebrate the unique identity of a community and can range from harvest festivals to book fairs, providing a space for local artisans, businesses, and residents to showcase their talents and products.

Through these varied forms of recreation, communities can discover and harness the potential of their collective energy, transforming leisure into a catalyst for positive change and unity.

Why is community engagement important?

The Federal Government of Nigeria on July 10, 1990 in Lagos formally approved a tourism policy for Nigeria with the following objectives:

i. Increasing the inflow of foreign exchange through the promotion on international tourism
ii. Encouraging and developing domestic based tourist enterprises
iii. Fostering social integration among the various groups in the country
iv. Promoting and encouraging active private sector participation
v. Preserving our cultural heritage and monument
vi. Making tourism a preferred commercial sector

It can be assumed that with the inclusion of 'encouraging and developing domestic base tourist enterprises' as one of the objectives of the tourism policy, the Federal Government has an agenda for the local inhabitants of the geographical location of the tourist attraction. It wouldn't come too much of a surprise that even though, there are many tourist centres in Nigeria, according to Aiyelabola (2006), tourism is largely neglected. In an industry that has the capacity to employ millions of people and currently targets an annual earnings of over $150 Billion according to Gada (2009); it comes as a surprise that in a survey by Ayodele et al. (1990), only 55% of Nigerians were aware of tourist destinations in their area, out of this figure, 46% of them were academics from higher institution of learning; a negligible 5.75% and 2.30% were among government civil servant and business executives respectively. Even with the rebranding Nigeria campaign, these figures have not changed much.

This demonstrates a chronic case of unawareness and seeming lack of interest at least on the part of the respondents (Muganda, Sirima, & Ezra, 2013) and in a world of accelerated urbanization and globalization, urban planning is an increasingly complex challenge. According to Novelli, (2015) mitigating climate change, providing affordable housing, expanding public transportation services, and nurturing social sustainability are among the countless interrelated issues that need careful attention in the planning process. Today's urban

planners must invest considerably into communication and collaboration with communities to strike a balance among competing interests and values (Woosnam, & Boley, 2016). To employ problem-solving that serves the needs of communities, it is essential to utilize local insights and offer context-specific solutions that reflect local identities (Maruyama, Movono, & Dahles, 2017); this has brought community engagement into the core of decision-making, and particularly in the domain of urban planning and a meaningful public engagement offers many practical benefits to planning and design, including a smoother process and better planning results. Research from the American Planning Association also underscores the importance of community engagement, finding that the best neighborhood plans come from informed residents collaborating with local authorities in a process designed and facilitated by neighborhood planners resort (Dolezal, & Novelli, 2020).

Benefits of community Engagement:

Participation cannot be mentioned without acknowledging the influential work of Sherry Arnstein, who first classified eight levels of community engagement in the Ladder of Citizen Participation. Arnstein's ladder highlights the critical difference between "the empty ritual of participation" and "the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process" (Arnstein, 1969). Long story short, engagement must be meaningful. Of course, Arnstein's work was just the beginning. More recent research has examined meaningful participation through different professional lenses. In urban planning, for example, it's important to consider a project's phases, as well as the interactions and partnerships that manifest between planners, officials, and community members. Muganda et al. (2013) described, the three types of community engagement as a simplified community engagement model tailored for urban planners. According to Boley & McGehee, (2014); Hutchings, Moyle, Chai, Garofano, & Moore, (2020) community engagement plays a crucial role in the development of tourism destinations in Nigeria, for example some factors influencing community engagement are

i. Engaging local communities helps in preserving cultural heritage, traditions, and practices that attract tourists seeking authentic experiences.
ii. Community involvement fosters the development of sustainable tourism practices, ensuring that tourism activities do not harm local ecosystems and cultures.
iii. When communities are engaged, they can directly benefit economically from tourism through jobs, small businesses, and local crafts, leading to improved livelihoods.
iv. Local knowledge and participation can enhance visitors' experiences through guided tours, cultural performances, and culinary offerings, making destinations more appealing.
v. Community-driven tourism initiatives often lead to requests for better infrastructure (e.g., roads, sanitation), which benefits both tourists and residents.

Community engagement is vital for developing sustainable, responsible, and successful tourism destinations in Nigeria, because it enhances economic benefits, cultural preservation, and visitor experiences while fostering community pride and ownership.

i. Early engagement helps align goals between community members and planners. It can even reveal unexpected goals and inspiring direction from the community. Either way, the result is a plan that truly supports local values.

ii. Asking the right questions can yield valuable data from community members about what they want, plus where and why they want it. Good data will also open up insights for different demographics or neighborhoods. Relevant, detailed data is integral to functional and equitable plans.

iii. Actively engaging and communicating throughout the process increases buy-in for the whole plan. When communities and decision-makers are genuinely involved in a project from the beginning, there is much less room for surprise at the end.

iv. Builds trust with community members. People are more empowered to participate when they see their feedback put to its intended use: informing better plans and more lovable places.

Principles of community engagement

Principles are the foundation and are the starting point for a thoughtful, well-communicated engagement strategy and successful planning outcomes. According to Yazid, (2025) without a clear set of principles, engagement efforts can fall short, leading to information gaps, limited participation, and missed opportunities for meaningful collaboration, furthermore, when planning, communicating your process, goals, and methods. Some principles to keep in the foreground include:

i. Inclusiveness is emphasized to avoid reinforcing existing participatory biases, this involves proactively reaching out to all demographics, particularly those less likely to engage through self-selection methods.

ii. All participants should be able to share their perspectives in an accessible and respectful environment.

i. Good records of public engagement results help planners show their robust, accountable process.

ii. Boost project buy-in by showing the impact of community engagement through systematically measuring and communicating participation.

Stages of making a Community Engagement Plan

There are three stages in the planning process of developing a community engagement plan, these stages are i. Preparatory stage ii. Proposal stage and iii. Approval stage. Despite broad support for public engagement, community engagement stages requires start early and plan the most appropriate community engagement methods for each stage of planning.

Preparation stage

In the early stages of the planning process, community members are often informed about the upcoming changes which is very good but do not ask for any input, use this initial stage to collect data about participants' experiences with the existing environment and their needs for change. This stage is sometimes call in informative community engagement, planners strive to reach community members with easy-to-follow information about a project, from start to finish. Participants are familiar with the process and have already had several chances to influence the planning outcome.

This type of community engagement isn't asking for feedback or seeking active participation. Nevertheless, it the foundation of engagement, which gives the public a solid understanding.

Proposal stage

Once proposals have been prepared, participants need to get acquainted with them—that is, to meaningfully understand the proposed changes, how they affect the existing environment, and how new facilities will affect their everyday lives, at this stage local communities are made to prepare the community for engagement**,** planners invite community members to contribute their ideas regarding development projects. The community members don't act as decision-makers, but a well-communicated and transparent process can show them how their plurality of needs have been collected and addressed. Communicating and collaborating with a broad cross-section of the community throughout the phases of a planning process has been historically challenging (esp. with large populations), but online methods have made this type of engagement accessible to more planners.

Approval stage

This stage, is the final decision-making process which involves a public hearing a lengthy bureaucratic process that can invite a lot of complaints and create mountains of extra work for the planners. In decision-making community engagement, participants hold power to make decisions about their community, its future, and its use of resources. However, one way to nurture community decision-making is with participatory budgeting, where participants can propose and vote for projects.

Influence of Community engagement on the development of Tourism Destinations in Nigeria

Community engagement is vital for developing sustainable, responsible, and successful tourism destinations in Nigeria, because it enhances economic benefits, cultural preservation, and visitor experiences while fostering community pride and ownership. Several studies conducted on the influence of community engagement on the development of tourism in Nigeria has reveal that community engagement fosters sustainable tourism practices and when local communities are involved in planning and decision-making, tourism initiatives often align with their cultural values and environmental sustainability goals. For example studies of

Suleiman, (2016) on Impact of Community Participation on Rural Tourism Development in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Obudu Mountain Resort, this case study examines the positive outcomes of community participation in rural tourism initiatives. Also the study of Aref, & Redzuan, (2009) on "Community Development through Tourism: A Case Study of the Offa Community, Nigeria. This study brings to lights how community involvement can foster tourism development that respects local culture and environment.

According to (Novelli, & Gebhardt, 2007**;** Gada, 2011) factors that influence community engagement are:

i. Engaging local communities helps in preserving cultural heritage, traditions, and practices that attract tourists seeking authentic experiences.
ii. Local knowledge and participation can enhance visitors' experiences through guided tours, cultural performances, and culinary offerings, making destinations more appealing.
iii. Community-driven tourism initiatives often lead to requests for better infrastructure (e.g., roads, sanitation), which benefits both tourists and residents.
iv. Involving communities in tourism planning promotes a sense of ownership and empowerment, reducing conflicts and fostering cooperation among stakeholders.
v. Engaging communities in the decision-making process can help address grievances and conflicts related to tourism development, ensuring a smoother implementation of projects.

The challenges of community engagement on the development of tourism in Nigeria

According to Maruyama et al., (2016) community engagement is beneficial, studies also identify challenges such as lack of government support, inadequate training, and limited access to funding. Addressing these challenges is crucial for effective engagement, for example, efforts in Niger State to promote cultural tourism face hurdles due to insufficient policy frameworks and local capacity-building efforts. Addressing these challenges is crucial for maximizing the benefits of tourism in Nigerian communities. According to Maruyama et al., 2016); Dolezal & Novelli, 2020) some of the challenges of community engagement in Nigeria include:

i. Lack of coherent government policies on tourism development can lead to confusion and mistrust among communities.
ii. Local governance issues can disrupt community engagement efforts and tourism development.
    Complicated bureaucratic processes can hinder effective community involvement in tourism development projects.
iii. Unsustainable tourism practices can harm local ecosystems, leading to resistance from communities.
iv. Lack of training and capacity building for locals to engage in and manage tourism effectively.
v. Issues with safety and security can deter both tourists and hinder local participation.

Strategies for Mitigating the Challenges of Community Engagement in tourism in Nigeria

Mitigating challenges of community engagement in the development of tourism in Nigeria requires a collaborative and inclusive approach (Movono & Dahles, 2017) in implementing these strategies need a collaborative approach that promotes meaningful community engagement in tourism development, ensuring that the benefits are equitable and sustainable for all stakeholders involved.

Strzelecka, & Wicks, (2010); Strzelecka et al., (2017) identify stakeholder involvement that include local communities, businesses, and government stakeholders in the planning and decision-making process to ensure their needs and perspectives are considered, some effective strategies that Nigeria could employ are:

i. Provide training and resources to local communities on tourism management, hospitality, and marketing to enhance their skills and knowledge.
ii. Conduct awareness campaigns to educate communities about the benefits of tourism, promoting a positive outlook and encouraging participation.
iii. Empower local leaders and champions who can advocate for community interests and foster a sense of ownership over tourism initiatives.
iv. Develop economic incentives for communities to participate in tourism, such as profit-sharing models or grants for community-led projects.
v. Design tourism experiences that reflect and respect local culture, ensuring that community traditions and heritage are showcased authentically.
vi. Encourage the establishment of small businesses (e.g., handicrafts, local food) that can contribute to the tourism sector while also generating income for the community.

Conclusion

Community engagement is vital for the sustainable development of tourism in Nigeria; this review concluded that:

i. Involving local populations, tourism initiatives can become more sustainable, economically beneficial, and culturally enriching, ultimately leading to a positive impact on both communities and the tourism sector.
ii. Community engagement in tourism helps preserve cultural heritage. Involving locals in tourism development leads to the protection of traditional practices, crafts, and festivals that attract tourists.
iii. Engaging local communities in tourism directly impacts their livelihoods, creating jobs and generating income.
iv. Community engagement can influence tourism policy, leading to more representative governance that considers local needs and priorities.
v. Effective community engagement requires collaboration among stakeholders, including government, NGOs, and local businesses.

Recommendations

Community engagement is essential to the success of development tourism in Nigeria and is integral to sustainable tourism development, empowering local communities and ensuring that tourism benefits are shared equitably; therefore this review makes the following recommendations, that:

i. The government should formulate a community engagement strategy that harmonizes conservation and development priorities.
ii. The government institutes and enforces policies that grant substantial authority to the local community to control and manage their natural resources.
iii. Development Agencies should involve a representative percentage of the local community in planning and decision-making processes.
iv. Local communities should organize themselves effectively to produce capable representatives for collaboration.

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