STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS ON POLITICAL CONFLICT AND TRUST IN AUTHORITIES TO DEVELOP ECOTOURISM IN CAMEROON

Vyasha HARILAL[*]
School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Bunting Road, Johannesburg, South Africa, e-mail: vyashah@uj.ac.za

Tembi M. TICHAAWA
School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Bunting Road, Johannesburg, South Africa, e-mail: tembit@uj.ac.za

Abstract : Ecotourism is often touted as an ideal model for community-based tourism, where the involvement and participation of locals forms the basis of the sector, bringing with it an amplitude of benefits to participants. The aim of this study was to examine stakeholder and community perceptions of conflict, corruption and a lack of trust as having negative impacts on the development ecotourism in Cameroon. The study employed a qualitative research approach, conducting in-depth interviews with stakeholder groups with knowledge of ecotourism in the country. Key findings reveal that barriers stemming from closed social networks, a lack of trust, and instances of conflict and corruption mar the ability of locals to effectively participate in the sector, rendering negative perceptions towards the sector. In many cases, the sector has come to be seen as one that breeds or encourages corrupt exclusionary practices, such as nepotism and the dominance of the private sector in what should be a public affair.

Key words: Conflict, trust, authorities, Ecotourism, Cameroon

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INTRODUCTION

The success of ecotourism at a local level is incumbent upon several factors, most of which relate to the presence of trust amongst all stakeholders, especially those in local communities and the government. The issue of trust, especially as an enabler to community participation, has become an area of focus in the literature on tourism development (Tichaawa et al., 2023; Hadinejad et al., 2019; Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2017; Moyo and Tichaawa, 2017; Mura and

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[*] Corresponding Author

Tavakoli, 2014; Nunkoo and Smith, 2013; Ramkissoon and Nunkoo, 2012; Adler and Kwon, 2002), highlighting the importance of giving due consideration to this issue, especially in cases where ecotourism sectors are faced with hurdles to their development. The notion of trust is heavily reliant upon the notion of transparency, where all concerned stakeholders are privy to the goings on in the sector (Musavengane and Matikiti, 2015). A lack of transparency oftentimes undermines trust among stakeholders in the sector, ultimately leading to discord and miscommunications between them, and can stem from, lead to or be exacerbated by high levels of conflict and corruption in both the public and private sector spheres (Farrelly, 2011). We argue in this paper that, In Cameroon, where the ecotourism sector is still developing, the stakeholder and community perceptions of conflict and corruption, relating to trust, is important to consider. This is especially important given that the country has previously been ranked as one that is plagued by high levels of corruption and has experienced unprecedented levels of conflict in recent years (Mbatu, 2009; Alemagi and Kozak, 2010). Additionally, given the crucial space that the sector finds itself in post-COVID-19 pandemic, in the midst of the political crisis and trying to adapt to the climate crisis, it is essential that issues related to perceptions of trust, conflict and corruption are fully understood, so that they may be minimised as an inhibitor to the development and regeneration of the ecotourism sector to meet current sustainability imperatives. Consequently, in this paper, we investigate stakeholder and community perceptions of conflict, corruption and a lack of trust as having negative impacts on ecotourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Conflict and corruption as negative impacts of (and on) ecotourism

Corruption in Cameroon's political systems has been cited as being an inherent problem in the country (Alemagi and Kozak, 2010). Understood to be "private gains from public goods which are linked to a public role" (Van der Geest, 1982, p. 2145), corruption is a problem that should be conceptualised considering various factors, including the state of economic development (in an underdeveloped economy), the nature of a country's political system, and the degree of socio-economic change in the communities. Furthermore, certain cultural or traditional practices might also have perpetuated a culture of corruption, such as that marked by traditional gift-giving (Van der Geest, 1982). Alemagi and Kozak (2010) note that corruption was an ordinary occurrence in Cameroon, with the spread of corruption undermining the democracy within the country (Kindzeka, 2019), and therefore preventing the widespread dissemination of benefits to the communities. Furthermore, as Alemagi and Kozak (2010, p. 558) state, "Cameroon's economy is weak. Most Cameroonian's earn low wages and work long tedious hours. Due to the high rate of unemployment, many citizens have been forced to engage in criminal activities and other unlawful practices." Thus, the abject state of poverty in which many Cameroonians found themselves living might have served to encourage (and perpetuate) the corrupt practices involved.

The recent years have posed a number of challenges to Cameroonians, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the separatist conflict in the country placing a further strain on already stressed individuals (Djoumessi, 2021; Ekah, 2019). These crises have also inhibited the continued development and growth of the ecotourism sector in the country, resulting in degrowth due to

the inability of tourists to access the country due to lockdowns, or travel within the country stemming from safety and security concerns of the separatist conflict. Thus, these crises have targeted the core of the sector, having an unfortunate domino effect on all stakeholders involved, especially in terms of local communities who are at the heart of the ecotourism sector. Given that the country, like many is still recovering from the impacts of the pandemic and attempting to rebuild the sector in the face of ongoing geopolitical conflict, issues related to trust among stakeholders becomes a critical success factor.

The importance of stakeholder involvement in the development of a cohesive ecotourism sector

There are many studies (Forje et al., 2021; Harilal et al., 2022) that note the relationship between stakeholders' interest and involvement in the ecotourism sector, leading to their acceptance thereof. This is crucial for the development of ecotourism, especially regarding local communities as stakeholders. Ecotourism occurs within the immediate vicinity of locals, thus, attempting to develop ecotourism separate of local involvement and participation is inherently flawed. Local communities as a stakeholder group need to be incentivised to participate in the sector, which often leads to them being welcoming hosts for tourists (Harilal and Tichaawa, 2018). This is built upon the basis of equitable benefit sharing and recognition of locals as key stakeholders, that are central to the operation of the sector (Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2013). In instances where this is not done, locals have little to no reason to participate in the sector or tolerate any resultant disturbances to their daily lives. Additionally, attempting to develop ecotourism without the community as central role players can lead to fractured trust and low levels of interest in the sector.

The importance of trust for a sustainable and successful ecotourism sector

The concept of trust is one that emanates from the narrative of social capital (Aldrich and Meyer, 2014), and is essential for buy-in of all stakeholders for a successful sector. The concept of trust also works towards fostering goodwill between stakeholders, through the establishment of various social networks (Harilal et al., 2022; Aldrich and Meyer, 2014). Hence, in considering the importance of trust for the successful operation of the ecotourism sector, the establishment of equitable and fruitful relationships between the various stakeholders are essential. It is well documented that the contribution of locals in ecotourism is essential (Manwa et al., 2017), and this becomes more important in settings in global south contexts, where local contexts are nuanced with traditional community structures. This is particularly true in the Cameroonian context where traditional community structures and hierarchy are prominent (Cheka, 2008). This is a critical aspect for the success of the sector. The traditional community structure can serve to include or exclude locals, resulting in low levels of trust in the case of the latter (Harilal and Tichaawa, 2020). The buy-in, leading to involvement of locals is entrenched in trust, highlighting the importance of fostering this among all stakeholders (Situmorang, 2018). Furthermore, the existence of trust can also serve to draw on the goodwill of stakeholders (Harilal et al., 2022; Adler and Kwon, 2002), especially in periods where the sector is faced with various challenges. This is pertinent in the Cameroonian context, the long-standing geopolitical conflict has

afflicted various regions, in addition to the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of the climate crisis (Loveline, 2022; Djoumessi, 2021; Ekah, 2019).

Cameroon: A geopolitical overview

Inherited from its colonial legacy, the geopolitical situation in Cameroon is fractured by ongoing conflict between the two dominant groups of nationals, as previously mentioned, posing a challenge to (eco)tourism development in the country (Langoya and Long, 2016). Cameroon is divided geographically, politically and socially into two national groups, consisting of the French-speaking citizens (Francophone nationals) and the English-speaking citizens (Anglophone nationals). Geographically, the country is divided into nine provinces, with only two of the provinces being classified as Anglophone (Socpa, 2016). However, although housing the minority group in Cameroon, the two small provinces contribute significantly to the country itself, in the form of a significant amount of natural resources, in addition to the economic contributions emanating from the provinces (Ionova and Kouaheu, 2018). Socially, especially within the last five years, the tensions between francophone and anglophone nationals have reached crisis point, resulting in many regions becoming unsafe for travel due to the violence and protests (Browne, 2019; Kindzeka, 2019). Consequently, many of the ecotourism attractions in the region became inaccessible or unsafe. It is also important to note that the development of an ecotourism sector, which was flagged as a sector for strategic development in the country, with potential ecotourism hotspots located in both the anglophone and francophone provinces.

Although the tensions are not new to the social, political and geographic spheres in Cameroon, the evolution of the tensions have a definite impact on the overall tourism sector in the country, and not only on ecotourism. The sentiments have been echoed by Kimbu and Tichaawa (2018), in relation to the negative impact of the Anglophone crisis on the tourism sector in Cameroon, with the affected areas being less than desirable destinations for the tourists to frequent. The above, inevitably, has had a knock-on effect on other aspects of the local economy in such regions, with other tourism-related businesses also suffering as a result of the conflict (Entsuah, 2019). Therefore, the need to examine the stakeholder and community perceptions of conflict and corruption, as negative impacts from the development of ecotourism in the country, is necessary for its overall growth.

METHODS

A qualitative approach was employed in this study; utilising in-depth, face-to-face interviews with key ecotourism stakeholders from the Douala Edea National Park (DENP) and Mount Cameroon National Park (MCNP) regions in Cameroon. The national parks are located in different provinces in the country, with the DENP located in a primarily francophone region and the MCNP located in a primarily angophone region – both of which host ecotourism sectors (Tegha and Sendze, 2016; Angoni, 2015). The significance of the geographical location is that it introduces a dual context to the study, underpinned not only by the different geographical locations, but also by the afore mentioned geopolitical conflict.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, in-depth interviews were deemed the most appropriate method of data collection (Mason, 2017), allowing for extensive insights into the causes of perceptions of levels of trust, and of

ecotourism being a vector of conflict and corruption to be gained. Key stakeholders, including community representatives, local community chiefs, non-governmental organisations, local tourism operators, government officials and representatives, were purposively chosen based on their vast and nuanced knowledge of ecotourism in Cameroon, and of the local contexts. Purposive sampling is frequently used in tourism research that adopts a qualitative design through the use of interviews, as it allows for specific informants to be selected based on their context specific knowledge and experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The total number of interviews conducted amounted to 22, with each interview having been audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. This allowed for thematic, content analysis to be carried out, with the assistance of Atlas.Ti.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data revealed several themes and sub-themes related to stakeholder perceptions of conflict, corruption and trust as negative impacts of ecotourism in Cameroon, as detailed in Table 1 below. The results and discussion are presented as combined, under each broad theme. The sub-themes are highlighted in the discussion.

Table 1. **Key themes from data analysis**
(Data source: Authors based on feildwork)

Theme	Sub-themes
Ecotourism activities in Cameroon	- Non-delivery by government - Inside 'trading' – corruption and nepotism - Government and locals – inequitable benefit sharing
Limited involvement of stakeholders	- Limited involvement of locals - Disinterest of locals to participate in ecotourism - Role of government in fostering involvement of stakeholders - NGOs as trustworthy intermediaries - Crises as a barrier to involvement
Management of ecotourism	- Collaborative and participatory management - Equitable benefit sharing - Consideration of local contexts increasing trust

Ecotourism activities in Cameroon

The results regarding the community perceptions of conflict and corruption within the government, emanating from the negative impacts of ecotourism, revealed that participants believed ecotourism activities have resulted in corruption and nepotism between the authorities and local community members, as well as that ecotourism activities have resulted in conflict over benefit sharing between local government and community members. A local community chief from the region alluded to the corruption that is present, whereby funds generated from the sector are not circulated within the community, as well as to the lack of benefit sharing to locals.

"Since the creation of the park, all the money goes to this government treasury. We don't know how the money is shared. We don't share that money. The ministry will decide. So, the only benefit the community people are having is

the porters and the guard [...] it seems as if they are dumping the money somewhere, we do not know."

Interestingly, an opposing view was aired by some informants, who disagreed that corruption and nepotism were outcomes of ecotourism. This is linked to and reflective of the geopolitical and social situation which characterizes the region – whereby informants' responses are tempered by their sense of loyalty to the (francophone) political party. For example, a government representative noted:

"There is no difference, all citizens have equal benefits and opportunities [from ecotourism]"

Contrary to the above stance, issues of conflict, corruption and nepotism were flagged by the key informants interviewed, with the ecotourism-related business opportunities being accessible only to those with 'connections', such as to the relatives of those in influential positions, or with business opportunities being contained within the existing structures. Moreover, the perceptions of corruption stemmed from the lack of transparency in relation to the funds generated from ecotourism-related activities, with the communities concerned not benefitting (much) from the funds, despite such tourism being community-centric (Manwa et al., 2017). The issues of corruption, conflict and nepotism relate to the broader issues of trust and the notion of social capital, where the social networks and structures present in these communities served to contain opportunities for those within the network, as opposed to disseminating such opportunities widely (Zhang et al., 2021).

For example, it was noted that although community members are eager to become involved in and participate in the sector, the closed networks pose as barriers to their entry into the sector. A local NGO representative from the region elaborated on this:

"The community is not very involved in eco-tourism because there is no organization there. They (the community) don't have any personal contact with these tourists. Tourists come, yes. But when these tourists come, it is after they have seen the authorities and private companies in town" (NGO).

Communities also face barriers to entry into the sector, stemming from issues of corruption, conflict and nepotism, as detailed by key stakeholders from the region:

"There are too many of these (private) tour organisations, it becomes like a family thing. I'm having my tour organisation, I call my brothers and sisters to take part [...] There is a guy, who has one of the strongest tour organisations. He usually uses the other guys (from the French speaking provinces) ... you see what I mean? So, it becomes like a family thing now" (local community representative).

"They also take people from outside, we don't know. Formerly, these things were done by residents, people from this mountain. Now they take people from Limbe, people who do not have any impacts on this park. They say we are all Cameroonians" (local community chief).

Barriers to entry have increased in the face of the geopolitical conflict that has seized regions of the country, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, coupled with the negative effects of extreme weather events has only served to worsen these issues.

Limited involvement of stakeholders

In many cases, this has led to locals losing interest in becoming involved, residing themselves to the reality of their situation – that ecotourism in their locality is largely dominated by non-locals, who prevent local involvement by bringing in their relatives or people they know from other regions of the country to become involved. This was reiterated by a community representative from the region, who stated:

"They (the community) are not really involved; they are not interested" (Local community representative).

Again, this illustrates the closed social networks that exist in the region, and how this can ultimately lead to disinterest on the part of communities. Although aware of the potential benefits that being involved in the sector could result in, community perceptions of the sector have become clouded by the way in which the sector operates, which is supposed to be premised upon community participation and involvement (Moswete and Thapa, 2015). Characterised by closed networks and limited access and opportunities for locals to participate, the stagnation of the sector in Cameroon is unsurprising, as noted by an NGO.

"If the local are not involved in the ecotourism sector development, it will not be possible in such an area" (NGO).

Interestingly, interviews with government stakeholders revealed another perspective on this issue, with a government tourism official stating that if locals wanted to be involved, they would:

"We can't force people those interested will get themselves involved in ecotourism sector and those who are not interested will be left out" (Government official).

This points to the lack of awareness on the part of government on the effects of closed networks on opportunity and benefit sharing, related to widespread involvement and participation in the sector. Additionally, this also highlights the oversight of government on their role in encouraging local participation and ensuring that locals have opportunities to become involved in the sector. As drivers of the sectors growth and development, it is essential that government coordinates the roles of all stakeholders to ensure the sustainable and responsible development the sector. For example, it was noted that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play an important role, as intermediaries between government and locals, and can advance an agenda of decentralised ecotourism development (Romero-Brito, 2016). Locals tend to have a greater level of trust in individuals who belong to an NGO and are therefore more likely to trust the information that is shared by them. Moreover, NGOs can also act as

intermediaries who link people from different networks together, thereby creating opportunities for locals to have access to different people, organisations and resources to assist in their involvement and participation in the sector (Forje et al., 2021). This was iterated by an NGO that was interviewed, with the sentiments supported by a local community member.

"NGO are in the best position since they act like a neutral party, and they look at those who are best in need of what is needed in the ecotourism sector and its development" (NGO).

"NGOs can call for regular trainings to orientate the community and to assist them with startup capital" (Local community member).

Management of ecotourism

Reflecting on the foregoing discussion, issues of transparency, lack of access to knowledge and resources and networks all contribute to the low levels of trust that locals have in government actors, especially in regard to ecotourism development and their involvement or benefit sharing therein (Wu and Chen, 2018; Situmorang, 2018; Kimbu and Ngoasog, 2013). A proposed solution to this is a change in the management style of the sector, where a bottom-up, participatory management style is adopted to increase transparency, involvement, benefit sharing and ultimately trust amongst all actors (Park et al., 2015; Wishitemi et al., 2015). In doing so, many of the factors that have led to distrust of government could be addressed, with the decentralisation of power that this approach would institute also being beneficial to ensure that those admitted into the sector are not only through closed network connections of family and friends, as previously noted. This was echoed by a community representative, who stated *"If you increase collaboration you have to be transparent" (Community representative).*

Essentially, this approach would enable beneficial local economic development, as a favourable outcome of ecotourism development in the area. This is premised on the notion that locals are central to a successful ecotourism sector, and accounts for the nuanced governance structures in communities, whereby traditional community chiefs are recognised as an authority, thereby becoming central role players in the operation and management of a successful ecotourism sector (Harilal and Tichaawa, 2020; Wu and Chen, 2018). An NGO reiterated this sentiment, stating:

"If the locals are not involved in the ecotourism sector development will not be possible in such an area" (NGO).

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to investigate stakeholder and community perceptions on conflict, corruption and trust in government as as having a negative impact on the development of ecotourism. Although ecotourism has been earmarked as a sector to trigger strategic growth (Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2013), this study found that its development has been hampered by ineffective management strategies, a lack of appropriate infrastructure and relatively low levels of involvement (by locals) in the sector. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the political crisis and changing climatic factors have

placed further stresses on an already constrained sector (Harilal et al., 2022; Loveline, 2022; Ekah, 2019). In terms of the lack of involvement and the ineffective management strategies, the corrupt practices of those involved, as well as the non-inclusive management practices currently employed, serve to alienate local participation in the sector, as well as encourage negative perceptions of the sector as previous studies equally highlighted (Harilal and Tichaawa, 2018; Situmorang, 2018). It appears that perceptions vary across (Anglophone and Francophone) regions and stakeholders with different political/governmental affinities, illustrating the geopolitical and social nuance that exists.

Unfortunately, as the ecotourism sector is characterised by high levels of private sector involvement and dominance, the perceptions (and attitudes) of respondents and key stakeholders have accordingly become negative, viewing the sector as one that revolves around closed networks, thus encouraging corrupt practices such as nepotism, money laundering, the misappropriation of funds and the alienation and exclusion of people from ecotourism activities in their localities. This is despite locals having knowledge on the potential benefits that the sector (if appropriately managed) and their meaningful involvement can result in. Consequently, many have distanced themselves from the sector, leading to perceptions of disinterest by governmental stakeholders.

From a broader perspective, issues of conflict and corruption are not isolated only to the ecotourism sector but is rather a broader and multifaceted problem that affects many countries in sub-Saharan Africa at different levels and in different ways (Mbatu, 2009). Specific to the case of ecotourism, conflict and corruption seem to be exacerbated by a lack of trust, which is worsened by the top-down management of the sector. Unfortunately, the lack of dedicated ecotourism policy in the country worsens this situation, not being able to mandate a participatory management system (Harilal et al., 2022), which could aid in the cultivation of a culture of transparency among all stakeholders involved, and ultimately begin to foster trust (Aldrich and Meyer, 2014; Farrelly, 2011). Given the scant research that has been conducted specifically on ecotourism, trust, conflict, crisis and corruption in Cameroon, this paper contributes modestly to literature, by presenting an overview into the current situation in Cameroon, vis-à-vis stakeholder and community perceptions on conflict, corruption and a lack of trust as negative impacts of ecotourism.

It is recommended that further research be conducted on this specifically, and at a broader scale, with a view to enhance the sustainable re-development and regeneration of the ecotourism sector. It is important that these types of studies are undertaken, as the development of the ecotourism sector is heavily dependent on the meaningful involvement and participation of locals. Any hurdle to this involvement – such as negative perceptions (and the causes thereof) must be understood and resolved.

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