

Analysing Local Participation in Agro-Tourism in Abakaliki Area of Ebonyi State

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Abstract

Inquiry into the participation of local farmers in agro-tourism activities in Abakaliki region of Ebonyi State was the nucleus of the Study. Employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the study found that the participation of local farmers in agro-tourism businesses was insignificant. This was blamed on factors such as the overall poor educational status of farmers which hinders awareness on the benefits of agro-tourism, small scale farming, farming on rented land which provides restricted opportunity for developing land for entrepreneurial agricultural tourism, inauspicious attitude of government towards tourism development, and lack of access to credit facilities. A major consequence of this is that supplementary income accruable from agro-tourism is not forth-coming. Nevertheless, local farmers' overwhelming willingness to associate their farming endeavor with agro-tourism activities is heartening since this will lead to participatory agro-tourism development.

Introduction

Agro-tourism is concerned with agricultural related activities and operations that bring visitors to a farm, ranch or agricultural processing firms for the purposes of leisure, entertainment or education. Agro-tourism is often viewed as a sub-set of rural tourism, thus, it connotes closer interface with folk people, rural landscapes and nature in general. Regarded as a crucial approach to rural development, agro-tourism has the potentials for enhancing the economic performance of rural enterprises, particularly small scale farmers who are presented with the opportunity to expand the profitability of their businesses (Chawla 2006:51-52). However, active participation in agro-tourism activities is a prerequisite for local farmers to benefit profoundly from agro-tourism. Apart from the well-known benefit of supplementary income, participation in agro-tourism can as well bring about improved democratic and service accountability, enhance social cohesion, shape policies and make them relevant to local communities, develop skills and self-esteem, preserve cultural resources and promote sustainability etc.

Whether agro-tourism development has the capacity to improve agricultural production is one of the key issues in literature on agro-tourism. Optimists argue that tourism assists development by reducing the pressures of farming on local environments, by providing farmers with an alternative source of income, and by educating farmers on the non-agricultural

economy. Research shows, for instance, that since the emergence of tourism in the 1950s in the Khumbu region of Nepal, it has helped to decrease agricultural pressure on local environment, and has also contributed to local development (Stevens, 1993 and Sacareau, 2009). Conversely, Brscic's (2006) work cited in Songkhla and Somboonsuke (2012) points out that the development of agro-tourism activities is not a factor in agricultural productivity. Cox (1995), quoted in Liu, Liu, Hu, Wu and Dai (2008), contends that because tourism and agriculture compete for labour and land, tourism development can have a negative impact on local agricultural production. As has been noted, tourism development can provide more non-farm job opportunities for farmers; however, this has implication for agricultural production if not managed in a sustainable way. Thuvachote (2007) noted how agriculture's share in economic growth in Thailand has gradually declined in the past few decades as a result of the rapid growth of non-agricultural sectors like tourism. Equally, Songkhla and Somboonsuke (2012) suggest that farmers who engage in tourism on their farm as an alternative source of income to agriculture may slowly divorce themselves from agricultural activities.

The above argument can only stand in a situation where tourism is not introduced in a sustainable and integrated manner. That is why sustainable tourism development, which takes a holistic look at the welfare of all stakeholders in tourism, is increasingly being promoted in contemporary time. A veritable way by which sustainability can be achieved is active participation of farmers who should be at the forefront of agro-tourism.

Creating compact connection between local agriculture and hotels is a major way by which participation can be achieved, it is equally very crucial in maximizing benefits of tourism to host communities. Representing approximately one-third of all tourist purchases (Belisle, 1983), food is an absolute opportunity for tourism planners to create linkages between local agricultural industries and tourism. Such linkages would definitely help to minimize the level of economic leakages from tourism which will in turn increase the multiplier effect. However, there are certain obstacles to creating the linkage such as ill co-coordinated local agricultural industry (including poor transportation and storage facilities), corruption, and the perception that local food products may not be cherished by international tourists.

Rebecca Torres's (2002) work on 'sectoral linkages between tourism and agricultural industries in the Yucatan area of Mexico shows that there is a strong potential for local agricultural products to be used in the tourism industry. But the problem lies in the pre-conceived idea that visitors (tourists) may not be inclined to food produced locally. After surveying a

good number of international tourists to the area, Torres concludes that food preference of tourists is not a considerable barrier to developing linkage between tourism and local agriculture. *Tastes of Niagara Alliance* in Ontario, Canada, is an illustration of how tourism and agricultural industry within a destination can collaborate to improve the quality of tourist experience, while at the same time contributing to the development of destination's local economy. Telfer (2000) describes *Tastes of Niagara* as a programme which proactively supports the use of locally produced food and beverage products through formal strategic alliances among growers, processors, suppliers, retail and catering outlets (Boyne, Williams and Hall, in Hjalager and Richards (eds.) 2002:97). Linkages have been developed by the coalition through combined promotional exercises, special events such as food tasting, partnerships and the development of new products. The programme has been instrumental in creating linkages between agriculture and tourism. It has also resulted in the wide acknowledgement of the cuisine of the region as high quality product. In the Mekong Tourism Development Project of the Lao National Tourism Authority and Asian Development Bank, efforts are being geared since September 2003 to develop local communities' capacity to participate in and benefit from tourism. The project provides training to local people on guiding, hospitality, cooking, tourism management, and marketing. Technical and financial assistance are also provided to help communities build tourism infrastructure such as guest houses, toilets, rest areas and nature trails (Pro-Poor Tourism: Annual Register 2007).

Abakaliki is the quintessence of an agricultural based society, where agro-tourism can be used as a tool for rural development with special emphasis on the improvement of the livelihood of rural farmers. Developing linkage between tourism and agriculture should be a high priority in attempts at rural development in the study area and Ebonyi State in general, because a strategic partnership between tourism and local agriculture is a veritable way of saving rural businesses from elimination. In this context, therefore, agro-tourism should be seen as a policy of rural development. It is therefore imperative to ascertain the level of participation by Abakaliki farmers in agro-tourism activities so as to make suggestions on how participation can be sustained where the level is encouraging, or provide explanations and the way forward where the reverse is the case. The specific objectives of the study were to: (i) ascertain the level of participation by local farmers in agro-tourism activities and (ii) identify the constraints to community participation in agro-tourism operations.

Method of Research

The research design was a combination of qualitative (in-depth interviews) and quantitative (questionnaire) approaches. A population of 143 registered farmers as derived from the Agricultural Department of Abakaliki Local Government Area was used as sample size for the quantitative study, since the population (143) was not large enough to necessitate sampling. Questionnaire administration was facilitated by extension workers. The findings were supplemented by secondary data gathered from books, academic journals, unpublished theses and public library. Thematic analytical approach was used in analyzing qualitative data and was presented in the form of interpretative-descriptive narrative. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16 was used to analyze quantitative data. Quantitative data for objective number one was analyzed using the likelihood ratio Chi-square to ascertain the significance of involvement of local farmers in agro-tourism activities. The p -value > 0.05 level of significance indicated insignificant involvement.

Background Information of Study Area

Abakaliki is situated at elevation of 65 metres above sea level and located on 6.32 Latitude and 8.11 Longitude (Abakaliki 2017). Abakaliki belongs to the Izzi clan which occupies the north-eastern part of Ebonyi State. As noted by Steensel (2009:5), the Izzi are a sub-group of the Igbo whose language and customs are considerably different from other Igbo people outside the Abakaliki area. The differences in language and customs are probably attributed to their isolated position and contact with other non-Igbo groups right from ancient times. Every Izzi village, according to Steensel (2009), consists of two groups of people: *uke* and *okoro*. Only the oldest son of a woman can become an *uke* after fulfilling cultural requirements, hence most people are *okoro*. The *uke* social structure helps to solve complex issues like land ownership, disputes, abominations, labour and gender issues.

Before the advent of colonialism, people were governed by village and community elders (*ndubuogeranya*); this type of government is referred to as gerontocracy. "The group of elders is not a clearly defined group of people. Everybody who is married can be an elder, but influence depends on age, wealth, eloquence and having a title etc" (Steensel, 2009: 46). A set of age grades were necessary to help the council of elders execute decisions taken during meetings. They were also important for carrying out development projects such as construction and maintenance of roads, building of local bridges, cleaning of markets and play grounds etc. Traditionally, there are four age groups (*ogbo*) in Izzi land: *unwegirima* (children), *unwu-okorobya* (the circumcised), *unwoke-kporuepfu* (married men) and *ndu-bu-ogeranya* (elders).

Izzi is an agrarian society as over 70% of the people depend on farming for survival. In Izzi mythology, it was established that Nnodo, the founding father of Izzi land, was well-known for his yams. Yam is, thus, the chief plant cultivated in Izzi; and as the most important plant, farming activities of the Izzi center on yam cultivation. The Izzi practice shifting cultivation as elders decide which part of the communal land will be cultivated for the season’s farming. In the Izzi traditional society, it is not a good practice to eat new yam before the *Ojiji* festival as this signifies abject poverty. The official yam harvest starts in the middle of December and continues till February of the following year. Harvested yams are taken to the barn where yams of the same type and size are tied together. Those yams which were cut during harvesting, together with those that are not good enough to be preserved in the barn, are sliced and dried for the preparation of a local food known as *echa*.

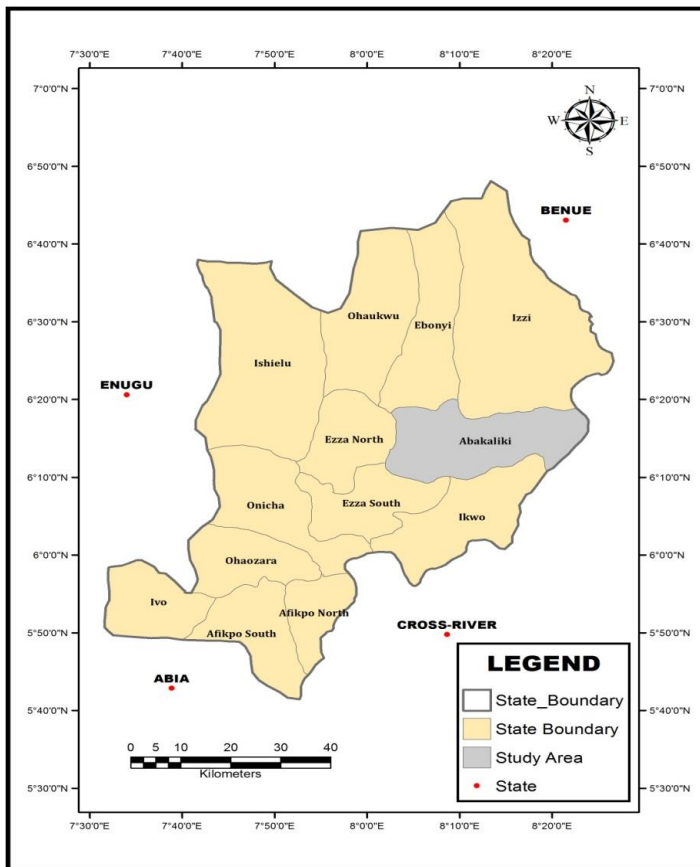


Fig 1: Ebonyi State Map Showing the Study Area

Findings and Discussion

Research results show that the participation of local farmers in agro-tourism activities was inconsequential. Only four out of twelve farmers interviewed said that they conduct 'guided farm tour' in their farms; while one farmer was into 'bee farming'. 'Guided farm tour' and 'bee farming' are only but two out of fourteen agro-tourism activities examined. The trivial involvement in agro-tourism practice was validated statistically and the likelihood ratio Chi-square had a value of 6.5935 with p-value of 0.154. Since the p-value was greater than the 0.05 level of significance at which the test was conducted, it was concluded that farmers' participation in agro tourism activities was insignificant. This result is akin to Adisa's (2013) finding in north-central Nigeria where farmers' participation in agro-tourism activities was generally very poor with agro-tourism practice index for most farmers (70%) ranging from 0.10 to 0.20. The implication is that agro-tourism opportunities have largely not been seized in the study area, resulting in the under-utilization of rural and agricultural assets. This means that supplementary income accruable to farmers from agro-tourism practice is not forthcoming; and the chances of agro-tourism contributing to entrepreneurship opportunities and preservation of cultural resources have not been taken.

Apart from the well-known unserious government attitude towards the development of tourism in general, another reason which explains the poor involvement of local farmers in agro-tourism is low level of education of the farmers which influences their awareness of the potential of agro-tourism in generating supplementary income. Deffa (2007) cited by Adisa (2013) remarked that farmers require supplementary skills (requisite competencies) to effectively diversify their farm enterprise. Phelan and Sharpley (2007) in Eshun (2014) classified the skills into 'business and management skills', and 'entrepreneurial and personal maturity skills'. The business and management skills are concerned with farmers carrying out the main functions of management which include: planning, organizing, leading and controlling. On the other hand, entrepreneurial and personal maturity skills complement business and management skills, at the same time as equipping farmers with abilities to grab opportunities in the business management environment. It is very glaring that absence of formal education (33.3% of respondents do not have formal education), or low level of formal education (80.1% possess only primary school education) may well present stiff oppositions to comprehending and applying the aforementioned agro-tourism business and management skills.

That 73.2% of farmers which represents a clear majority of farmer respondents carry out their agricultural activities on rented land suggests limited opportunity for developing land for entrepreneurial agricultural tourism, since landlords may place restrictions on what to do and what not to do on their land. Another probable hindrance to participating in agro-tourism is small scale operation of most of the respondents (80.6%). Small scale farming provides little room for adoption of modern innovations and techniques in farming, thus, it is not surprising that most of the farmers did not associate their farming endeavour with most of the agro-tourism activities that were examined. In their investigation on 'the role of owner and firm characteristics on the performance of agro-tourism farms', Barbieri and Mshenga (2008) found that larger farms tend to be more successful as agro-tourism sites. They argued that larger farms, as measured by larger acreages and large number of employees, are better placed to offer wider variety of tourism products and services that in the long run attract more tourists. Thus, creating favourable environment within which local farmers can expand their farming scale is considered very important in improving farmers' participation in agro-tourism.

Another explanation for poor participation in agro-tourism is inaccessibility to credit facilities. Indeed, farmers in the study area may grapple with such challenge since 33.6% of farmer respondents which is a little more than a third of respondents live below the international poverty line of US\$1.25 a day. In their study on Agricultural Tourism for Socio-Economic Development in Esie-Irepodun Area of Kwara State, Adefila and Yusuf (2013) identified lack of access to credit facilities as a top hindrance to farmers establishing agro-tourism businesses. As is widely acknowledged, poor people always find it increasingly hard to gain access to credit facilities, since in most cases, obtaining loans are linked to the ability to provide collateral.

Consequently, capacity building is seen as a main tool that can galvanize local farmers towards meaningful participation in agro-tourism. Capacity building is concerned with efforts at assisting people to have greater control over decisions, activities and actions that affect their lives. Through this means, farmers can recognize the tourism potentials of their farms and maximize the use of the potentials. Wahab in Jafari (ed.) (2000:14) has rightly noted that farmers most in need of supplementary income are often least able to benefit from agro-tourism because they lack the necessary capital, management and marketing skills. In this regard, capacity building is an invaluable mechanism through which farmers can benefit significantly from agro-tourism development.

Thus, extension workers (such as those who work under Ebonyi State Agricultural Development Programme) are invaluable in providing the training requirements for agricultural tourism. As noted by Adefila and Yusuf (2012), an up-and-coming concept for extension workers in Nigeria is that of organizing training courses for local farmers. Indeed, in the study area as well as other parts of Nigeria and developing nations at large, training farmers for active involvement in entrepreneurial agricultural tourism practice is of paramount importance if agro-tourism should be used as a pro-poor growth strategy. Areas of training may include: environmental management, water management, fruit and vegetable preservation, nursery production, entrepreneurial motivation and guidance, tour guiding, advertising skill acquisition and organizational management. Appropriate training would culminate in increased knowledge, skills, attitude and managerial aptitude for generating change which will bring about local economic growth.

Another strategy for significantly improving the participation of local farmers is to create linkage between local agriculture and hotels. Creating compact connection between local agriculture and hotels is very crucial in maximizing the benefits of tourism to host communities since food accounts for a sizeable percentage of spending made by tourists. Such linkages would definitely help to minimize the level of economic leakages from tourism which will in turn increase the multiplier effect. The multiplier effect is concerned with “the way in which expenditure on tourism filters throughout the economy, stimulating other sectors as it does so” (Pearce 1989:205), cited from Hall and Page (2002:142).

However, there are certain obstacles to creating the linkage such as ill co-coordinated local agricultural industry (including poor transportation and storage facilities), inability to produce all year round, inadequate volume of produce, poor packaging, lack of intermediary support system that facilitates the coming together of buyers and suppliers, and the perception that local food products may not be cherished by international tourists and domestic tourists with high social status. However, linkage can also be created by encouraging homegrown tourism or domestic tourism. With adequate planning, domestic tourism equally has the capacity to constitute a significant market for agro-tourism destinations.

Furthermore, the value chain approach can be used in Ebonyi State to advance farmers’ participation in agro-tourism. A value chain approach entails identifying all the stakeholders and linkages in the tourism sector of a society, and not focusing only on the poor in isolation (Pro-poor Annual Register, 2007). According to this register, this method is being used by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to evaluate revenue flows to the poor

in various parts of the tourism value chain; the approach also helps to ascertain how impediments can be surmounted in order to increase participation of the poor in tourism. Farmers' participation can also be enhanced through government assisted formation of partnerships between local people and tourism outfits such as travel agents, tour operators, hotels and restaurants, transporters and agricultural businesses etc. This form of partnerships will not only encourage grassroots support for tourism but also promote local initiatives.

Assisting farmers to participate fully in agro-tourism through the means suggested is one sure way of achieving the multi-functionality of agriculture. Formally brought into limelight by the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, multi-functionality of agriculture indicates that the role of agriculture to society transcends its basic functions of providing food, fiber and raw materials. Huylenbrock et al. (2007), cited in Subejo (2012) categorized the functions of agriculture aside its basic role into the 'green functions' (landscape management, maintenance of biodiversity and the creation of wildlife habitats); the 'blue services' (water management, improvement of water quality and flood control), and the 'yellow services' (rural cohesion and vitality, maintenance of cultural heritage, creating regional identity and agro-tourism).

Recommendation and Conclusion

The discourse has shown the poor level of participation by local farmers in agro-tourism operations and noted the implications of this situation for the achievement of pro-poor tourism objectives. It argues that a key recommendation for improving local farmers' involvement in agro-tourism activities is the building of community capacity to effectively participate in agro-tourism planning and development. Agriculture is a major source of livelihood in the study area and as we know, tourism and agriculture are always in competition for available space. Attempts should be made by tourism planners to reconcile the two. By recommending agro-tourism as a rural development tool, synergy can be built between tourism and agriculture, especially when it is realized that tourism resources and agriculture are one of the few assets of the rural poor.

One cheering and encouraging discovery in the course of this research is the high willingness among farmers to participate in agro-tourism. This is a step in the right direction and can also be used to tap into farmers' social representation for agro-tourism development. This positive attitude has implications for sustainable agro-tourism development. If not for any other thing, willingness to become participants in agro-tourism will no doubt provide the platform for participatory agro-tourism development.

Participatory approach to development is known to have a couple of advantages such as facilitating the process of local empowerment by creating opportunities for poor people to access external assistance in terms of receiving training and credit facilities that can help them build the capacity to advance their livelihood and protect their interests. It will also make room for a mutual learning process among government, tourism developers and local farmers, thus, promoting institutional and political support for local planning by building a common understanding between institutions and indigenous people.

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