



CENTRALISED DECENTRALISATION OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A NETWORK PERSPECTIVE

Albert N. Kimbu

University of Surrey, United Kingdom

Michael Z. Ngoasong

Coventry University London Campus, United Kingdom

Abstract: While there is increasing recognition of the positive impacts of tourism on economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa, existing relationships between tourism industry stakeholders is fraught with challenges that constrain its development. Drawing on social network theory and stakeholder theory and through a series of key informant semi-structured interviews with tourism industry stakeholders, the paper explores the nature of participation by destination stakeholders in formulating and implementing tourism policy in Cameroon. It then explores a model of tourism development built around a centrally coordinated but decentralized tourism network that reaches out to all representative stakeholders when formulating and implementing tourism policies. The challenges involved in mobilizing destination stakeholders into such a system to allow for effective tourism development are critically examined. **Keywords:** Cameroon, stakeholder theory, network analysis, tourism development, (de)centralization. © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main goals of tourism development is to formulate and implement policies that provide high-quality tourist experiences that can maximize the benefits to destination stakeholders without compromising the short and long term environmental, social, and cultural integrity of destinations (Godfrey, 1998; Miller & Twinning-Ward, 2005). Achieving this goal has become crucial for sub-Saharan Africa countries as tourism has emerged as an important tool for local economic development (Dieke, 2000). An increasing shift away from the formerly state-centric towards some form of (pro)active involvement

Albert Kimbu (School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, United Kingdom. E-mail <a.kimbu@surrey.ac.uk>) studied English language and literature at the University of Yaoundé, Cameroon and obtained an MA in Heritage Management from the Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus, Germany. He then did his Ph.D. in Tourism at Nottingham Trent University, UK where he also worked as a Lecturer in Tourism before joining the University of Surrey in September 2010 in the same capacity. Albert's research interests include sustainable tourism development and management, ethics and social responsibility in tourism in emerging destinations of sub-Saharan Africa.

of local communities and economic (private) operators in tourism development has been observed in a number of sub-Saharan African destinations (Mbaiwa, 2005a,b). This raises the two key questions that are investigated in this article: In what ways does the structure and organization of the national tourism industry shape the nature of stakeholder participation in tourism development? What are the challenges involved in mobilizing destination stakeholders into a system that allows for effective tourism development?

The above questions are especially relevant for sub-Saharan African countries such as Cameroon, that recently (2010) satisfied the World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) criteria for being classed as a tourism destination even though efforts at developing its tourism industry began more than thirty years ago (Kendemeh, 2010; UNWTO, 2010). Although, the government has never exclusively developed a tourism policy per se, a Commonwealth sponsored Cameroon Tourism Marketing Plan (Expansion Strategies, 2002) and Cameroon Destination Branding Report (Emerging Markets Group, 2008) provided directives that were expected to be used by the National Tourism Council (NTC) to develop and implement national tourism policies. As an autonomous agency, the NTC was required to better engage both state and non-state actors in this process. However, the structure and operations of the tourism industry are centralized around the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure (MINTOUR) not the NTC. This obviously has implications for tourism development, in terms of the functional roles of the NTC vis-a-vis those of the MINTOUR when engaging destination stakeholders (public agencies, private operators and agents, local communities, national and international non-governmental agencies) in the process of tourism development.

The main objective of this article is therefore to explore a model of tourism development in Cameroon focusing on the nature of participation by destination stakeholders. Existing research (Barrosa & Dieke, 2008; Dieke, 2000; Tosun, 2006; Tosun & Dallen, 2001) suggests that decentralization (or political devolution) of tourism development (e.g. from central to local governments and communities), and not centralization is the key to ensuring effective tourism development in developing countries. There is also a wider debate on the effectiveness of networked approaches vis-à-vis centralized bureaucracies in producing tourism policy (Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008). The case of Cameroon adds to this extant literature by exploring the extent to which centralization and/or decentralization allows for various forms of participation (Tosun, 2006) by state and non-state stakeholders in tourism development.

Conceptually, the article integrates concepts from stakeholder theory and social network theory (Timur & Getz, 2008) to identify critical destination stakeholders in tourism development (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & Colle, 2010), examine the patterns of network relationships among them (Burt, 2000; Carlson, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004) and analyses their roles (Baggio, Scott, & Cooper, 2010; Scott et al., 2008) in shaping various aspects of tourism development in Cameroon. Empirically, the article uses a qualitative approach based on

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