

When Rural Tourism Development Stalls: A Community and Local Authority Perspective on Expectations and Challenges

Penitence Ndebele¹

Abstract

Community involvement in decision-making is significant for rural tourism development. However, tourism development faces challenges and obstacles, leading to incomplete development initiatives. This study focused on a South African rural community where there has been no progress in development for over a decade, to understand community perceptions, expectations, and challenges arising from this lack of development. A community meeting discussion was held with 55 community members and leadership from government structures. The thematic analysis yielded three themes: general perceptions, expectations and challenges. The perception of rural tourism development was generally positive, driven by expectations of economic gain through employment and entrepreneurship, while the major challenges were leadership conflicts and conflicts within the community itself. The results of this study show that challenges are not limited to governance but encompass issues related to the community itself. Therefore, policy development and strategy implementation should be context specific.

Keywords: *Challenges, Development, Community Involvement, Conflict, Rural Tourism.*

Introduction

Tourism has been identified as one of the industries that can drive economic growth and reduce levels of unemployment. In rural destinations, there is a need to diversify the predominantly agricultural economy by including sectors such as tourism, thereby boosting rural economic growth (Dimitrijević, 2022). According to Ramukumba (2024), rural communities have cultural, historical, and ethnic ties to geographic locations, which can be used as resources for tourism development and to attract tourists to these places. Tourism can create employment opportunities for local communities, thereby improving their standards of living (Sadeghi & Seidaiy, 2023). It is important to incorporate sustainable entrepreneurship into rural development by ensuring that available natural resources are used efficiently and that the environment is not strained by overdevelopment (Sadeghi & Seidaiy, 2023). Rural tourism offers an escape and a sense of relaxation for tourists seeking an experience that contrasts with urban living (Liu, Chiang & Ko, 2023). Rural tourism can thus be seen as a more authentic way of travel that enables tourists to immerse themselves in the destination. The focus on the benefits of rural tourism has been on its economic contribution to local communities; therefore, Liu Chiang & Ko (2023) add that socio-cultural, environmental, and leisure and educational perspectives are among the contributions of rural tourism to community development. Among these perspectives, the economic contribution remains highly important.

There are several stakeholders in rural tourism development, and it is important that the role and involvement of each stakeholder are understood. For successful rural development, cooperation between various stakeholders is paramount (Ayazlar & Ayazlar, 2015). The stakeholders in rural tourism include local communities, governments, non-governmental organisations, and tourism authorities (Ayazlar & Ayazlar, 2015). Managing the relationships among these stakeholders, especially with local communities, is a key aspect of rural tourism development (Litheko & Potgieter, 2021). Rural attractions are usually located within communities or near them; hence, tourism relies on the cooperation and understanding of these communities when tourists visit (Litheko & Potgieter, 2021). Several studies have looked at the community as stakeholders in rural tourism development covering topics such as

¹ iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu, Faculty of Management & Public Administration Sciences, Department of Tourism Hospitality and Sport Management Private Bag X3182, Butterworth, Eastern Cape 4960, South Africa. Email*: penitencendebele25@gmail.com; <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4497-5486> *Corresponding author

relationship management between the community and local authorities (Litheko & Potgieter, 2021), stakeholder understanding of rural tourism (Gonzo, 2022), pride of stakeholders through rural tourism (Soulard et al., 2024), stakeholders in sustainable rural tourism (Suherlan & Cheer, 2024), stakeholders in expropriation of rural land for tourism purposes (Ma, Dai & Fan, 2020), challenges in rural tourism development (Al Matris, 2023; Nzama, 2010; Ramukumba & Matyile, 2024), and barriers to stakeholder involvement in sustainable rural tourism development (Wanner & Pröbstl-Haider, 2019).

Phori, Hermann and Grobbelaar (2024) conducted a pre-development study and found that community members have mixed perceptions of the proposed development. On one hand, there were positive benefits related to employment and job creation, and on the other hand, concerns related to; high risk of increased crime, corruption of traditional customs, residents competing with tourists for limited resources such as healthcare, and prostitution. A focus on challenges in the lens of local government and community leadership by Ramukumba and Matyile (2024) centre on governance issues such as accessibility due to poor infrastructure, lack of funding, poor marketing initiatives, while community leadership highlight the exclusion of community members from the development processes as well as lack of the required skills among community members to actively participate in rural tourism development. Nzama (2010) shows a lack of understanding of the concept and process of rural tourism development, as evidenced by limited participation in rural tourism development planning processes and by viewing available resources as inadequate for tourism. These studies highlight a gap in the voices of general community members regarding the challenges they face in rural tourism development in areas where development has taken years to materialise. This study, therefore, focuses on an incomplete rural tourism development initiative in rural South Africa, with the aim of understanding the general perception of the development, the expectations from it, and the challenges hindering its progression from the community's perspective. Understanding the community's perspective is important so that the community's voices and concerns are amplified when planning to move the initiative forward. Thus, providing useful insights into tourism development aligned with community interests and expectations.

Literature Review

Rural tourism development has been framed as a traditional diversification strategy for rural economies to alleviate poverty and improve the standards of living of communities. Rural tourism development is based on the natural, cultural, social, and human resources of the local community where the activities take place, thus positioning the community as an integral stakeholder in rural tourism development (Sadeghi & Seidaïy, 2023). The activities and rural tourism offerings are based on the local resources available, and therefore, the community becomes part of the development. The community provides the environment in which tourism activities take place, and interacts with tourists, thus establishing familiarity with them (Rasoolimanesh, Jafaar & Tangit, 2018). Community-based tourism is the backbone of rural tourism development, as it places the community at its core by leveraging their natural and cultural resources (Lemunge et al., 2025). According to a review by Lemunge et al. (2025), active community involvement and participation through ownership and employment are at the core of the CBT model of development. This ensures that the benefits of tourism development are also enjoyed by the local communities where the development occurs. Sustainability and cultural preservation emerge as important aspects of CBT across Africa, as evidenced by various national parks, protected areas and eco-lodges in various countries (Lemunge et al., 2025).

Gebreyesus et al. (2022) use social exchange theory (SET) to analyse how communities accept CBT, focusing on perceived gains and losses. They report that communities generally welcome CBT, expecting more jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities. Phori, Hermann, and Grobbelaar (2024) also find that communities have a positive attitude towards rural development due to perceived economic benefits. Community involvement is central to CBT, and the authors stress the importance of educating communities about tourism to build understanding and acceptance. However, communities express concerns about cultural erosion, loss of farmland—which threatens agriculture-based livelihoods, increased crime, and environmental harm. Phori, Hermann, and Grobbelaar (2024) add that communities worry about competing with tourists for limited resources. This suggests that residents already lack basic services, and that tourism may further strain these resources. Economic benefits remain a key reason for supporting and participating in CBT, and local communities view rural tourism positively if they expect direct benefits (Jaafar et al., 2013). Sun et al. (2013) found that communities often see tourism development through the lens of expected economic gain. Locals expect more jobs, direct income for households, and investments in community projects (Lenao, Mbaiwa, & Saarinen,

2014). Communities also want active roles in rural tourism, including managing and owning tourism ventures (Gonzo, 2022).

As evidenced by the literature, the community should be at the centre of rural tourism development from planning to maintenance. Communities, however, face several challenges in developing rural tourism attractions. The major challenge for communities is poor infrastructure in these areas, which makes access to these natural attractions difficult (Matris, 2023; Ramukumba & Matyile, 2024). The development of tourism requires substantial capital (Matris, 2023), and most rural areas are already considered impoverished and lack basic services; thus, funding for tourism development may not be a priority. Ramukumba and Matyile (2024) further highlight the negative impact of insufficient funding for rural tourism development and how this may hinder communities from fully engaging in tourism development in their areas. A lack of knowledge, awareness and skills to effectively participate in rural tourism development is another challenge that has plagued rural communities (Ramukumba & Matyile, 2024). Rural communities experience declining populations as working-age residents migrate to urban areas in search of greener pastures. This then leads to brain drain in these areas and, in turn, a shortage of people with the skills and knowledge to participate in tourism activities.

For some communities, they are not involved in any tourism planning activities and are therefore sidelined in the decision-making process (Nzama, 2010). This leads to a lack of community support for tourism development, which is integral to its success and longevity. Another challenge for communities is the use of private investors or developers, and according to community members, these developers do not have the community's interest at heart but are focused on profits (Nagarjuna, 2015). There needs to be transparency between the local community and the responsible authorities regarding rural tourism development. This ensures that the community is actively involved in and up to date on the planning and fosters trust among stakeholders (Litheko & Potgieter, 2021).

There is a need to understand rural tourism development from the perspective of affected communities to grasp the realities of rural development and its impacts. There have been calls to utilise rural tourism development as a driver of economic growth, focusing on the benefits it may bring to communities; however, very little information exists on rural tourism development that failed to take off and has now been abandoned. Development is often treated as something done for the community, not with the community. This study seeks to understand the failure of some initiatives from the community's perspective and to examine their views on rural tourism development in general, as well as their expectations for it.

Methodology

The study follows a phenomenological approach, a qualitative technique used to understand a group of 'persons' lived experiences concerning a particular phenomenon (Ayton, 2023). This approach allows researchers to answer the 'how' and 'why' questions, which are considered difficult to quantify. In this study, the local community's perceptions, expectations, and challenges regarding a stagnant rural tourism development initiative are examined. The study's sample comprised communities surrounding rural tourism attractions, as they are believed to be directly or indirectly affected by rural tourism development in these areas. A purposive sampling method was used to select the study participants, based on the premise that communities surrounding a rural tourism development initiative in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa are affected and stand to benefit from the development, and can offer important insights regarding rural tourism development in the area. The study used a large focus group method, in which the office of the speaker in the municipality and the ward councillor were engaged to arrange a community meeting on the development of Bawa Falls. Attendance of the meeting was voluntary, and each community member could participate. The group discussion followed a semi-structured format, with direction shifting in response to participants' answers to a previous question. This allows respondents to provide in-depth information without being limited by questions. A discussion on a rural tourism development initiative that has been stagnant for years was held, with the researcher acting as the moderator and asking open-ended questions. The discussion sought to understand why the development has been stagnant from a community perspective. A total of 55 community members, including the chief of the community (CL), five representatives from local government (GR), a community committee member (CCM) and general community members (GCM). The group discussion was recorded, and participants were informed that the data collected was for research purposes and would be used in academic journals and, if requested, shared with relevant authorities. Participants were also informed that attendance at the meeting was voluntary and that no personal information would be published. The recording was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document, and participants were given pseudonyms. The data were not excessive, so manual thematic

analysis was used instead of software. The transcribed data were then grouped into themes encompassing general perceptions regarding the development initiative, expectations, and possible challenges contributing to the project's stagnation. Similar methods of analysis can be observed in studies by Guo and Jordan (2021); Gavaza and Ndebele (2025), and Ramukumba and Matyile (2024).

Results

The three themes derived from the data analysis are: general perceptions, expectations, and challenges. The 'general perceptions' theme focuses on the community's opinions regarding the rural tourism development initiative, while the 'expectations' theme focuses on what community members envisage gaining from the initiative. The 'challenges' theme looks at the factors hindering the development according to the community members and local authorities.

General Perceptions

Community members expressed a positive attitude towards the development initiative, indicating that they are keen to welcome it into the community. However, there was also frustration with the development process. Community members stated that the development has taken too long to materialise, and the constant discussions without action regarding the initiative seem like an election campaign tool, leaving the community disappointed. GCM1 expressed that the issue with this development initiative is a sore one, given the great potential that is going to waste, leaving the community undeveloped. The researcher observed an agreement with this sentiment by several community members. A sample of the response is provided below:

GCM 1: I do not know where to start, as we all know elections are coming up, and you are speaking positively about the development that should happen at Bawa Falls. It is not the first time this discussion has come up; it is painful what is happening to us regarding that development. There was a time when a list of names was collected regarding the development, and we have youth here who are unemployed, and we are also unemployed. It is painful to depend on a social grant when there is potential for development in your area, but nothing materialises from the talks of development. You see, you came now, that is the end of it.... we will talk and share our views on what we want from the development, but it feels like we are being played, and that is the pain we feel. It is not the first time the Bawa development has been discussed; that area has significant development potential to provide employment for our children, brothers, and sisters.

Finding

This study finds that community members are very keen to support the development initiative, but also express frustration with the development process. Despite constant promises and discussions, with no action from relevant stakeholders, the issue of the rural tourism development initiative has become a sore subject for the community. Several studies have also found that community members are generally keen on rural tourism development in their communities, largely because of the opportunities it may bring. Community members have a limited understanding of what rural tourism development entails, which poses challenges for articulating a way forward for the initiative. Gonzo's (2022) findings show that stakeholders differ in their understanding of rural tourism. It is essential that local communities acquire the knowledge and skills to fully participate in and contribute positively to rural tourism development.

Expectations

The recurring theme regarding expectations of development centres on the benefits it can bring. The community grapples with high unemployment; therefore, the expectation from development is employment, which will lead to higher standards of living. Community members also want to be part of tourism development through entrepreneurship, selling various arts and crafts to tourists. So economic gain emerges as a major driver for a positive attitude towards rural tourism development initiatives. On the other hand, some community members say they have never been involved in tourism development and are unsure what they want from it. The above sentiments are expressed in the excerpt below:

GCM 1: It is very painful for us. It would be better if the talks about development were true, because we really want to be employed and operate our businesses. There are people who do crafts, they can sell their products to tourists, but not here; we are being played. What you are talking about is very painful; you are reopening wounds, doctor. I'm saying this to you.

GCM 3: The researcher asked what we want/expect from the development, but we have never been part of such a development before, so we do not know what we want or what to expect. I would suggest that we be advised on what is possible because you may find that what we want or the kind of businesses we want there are not feasible.

GCM 4: All these things you are asking us, we wrote them down and submitted them, but nothing has happened since. This development was destroyed by the people in leadership; they destroyed it, and now it's at a standstill, and now we are going around in circles. All we want is for development to proceed as before, since it started before but was not completed.

Finding: Expected economic gain from tourism development reflects the state of unemployment in rural communities, and it drives support for development. In line with several studies in the literature, economic benefits are a major driver of support for rural tourism development (Jaafar et al., 2013; Lenao, Mbaiwa, & Saarinen, 2014; Sun et al., 2013). Among the environmental, socio-cultural, and educational benefits of tourism development, economic benefits are the most significant for rural communities (Liu, Chiang & Ko, 2023). Based on this finding, rural tourism development is often used as a poverty-alleviation tool among communities. Contrary to the findings of this study and other studies in the literature, Vyhnánková and Hruška (2026) focus on the non-material expectations of the community connected to wellbeing, such as belonging, responsibility for a place, care and recognition. This necessitates that, although economic benefits are significant, other aspects of the social community fabric should be considered considering the community's hierarchy of needs.

Challenges

The development initiative was started but never completed, and community members expressed challenges that could have been the underlying cause of its failure. Firstly, GCM 2 views conflict among local leadership and exclusion of communities from the planning process as hindrances to development. In agreement, GCM 1 places the success of the development on traditional leadership, stating that they should be at the forefront of this development and provide feedback to the community. Another challenge is the lack of skills and education that may be required upon completion of development; community members may feel left out and sidelined from future opportunities due to insufficient qualifications. As expressed by GCM 4, constant changes in government leadership prevent development from moving forward, requiring that, upon the appointment of a new representative, the development process must start afresh, which is counterproductive. GCM 5, however, presented a different view, stating that conflicts and disagreements among community members were the major hindrance to development. Community members do not speak with one voice on development, which presents a challenge for the local government.

GR1 and GR2 strongly concur with GCM 5, evidently framing disunity and dishonesty among community members as the central factors contributing to the project's stalling. CL highlighted the exclusion of traditional leadership from decision-making and the lack of transparency about agreements made at the start of the development. In addition, the community Trust established to mediate the process on behalf of the community excludes the municipality from the development, which presents a dilemma regarding access to service delivery, such as road infrastructure, electricity, and water, when development commences. Lastly, demarcation by the municipality and traditional systems differ; it is difficult to reach common ground among communities under different traditional demarcation systems, yet they are grouped as one under municipal demarcations. GCM 7 alludes to communication breakdown between leadership and developers as well as between leadership and the community. Leadership ought to be at the forefront, rallying community support for development, and the community should not be left out of any stage of the development.

GCM 2: Some of the challenges are that the municipality and traditional leadership are lacking somehow because you find that they have disagreements among themselves, and that holds us back from opportunities for development. The chief mentioned that people from other villages cannot have a say on what happens in our village, but the chief has the final say, so other people should not matter. The municipality doesn't want to work; I mean, that place is a wealth for young people like us. It's not that we don't want to work; we do, but we are also looking after our parents. A lack of jobs can lead to youth turning to crime.

GCM 1: I agree with the last speaker; the chief is supposed to lead this development, not the ward councillor. The councillor will bring development ideas to them, and they fight among each other as local leadership, and now he wouldn't know what to do/how to proceed. So, this lies with the chief as he has the final say. The chief should follow up on the development progress, not the ward councillor.

The development can then continue when the chief holds people who make promises accountable to the promises. Leadership fights aren't right. We have our representative that we choose, and they should bring the issues to us for discussion. Thank you.

GCM 4: You see now, they will tell you that the director for tourism development is so and so, then three months later, leadership has changed, and it's now a different person. All we want is for development to proceed as before, since it started before but was not completed.

GCM 7: For me, the biggest challenge is here locally. If there is communication between developers and local leadership, leadership should lead in selling this development idea to the people so that there are no opposition parties that may seek to sabotage it. Before, there was an opposition party that opposed developing Bawa Falls due to disagreements. Number two, the communication between the developers and leadership should involve the community; they should not be left behind. They should be updated stage by stage. What I am telling leadership is that we need to ensure the entire Bawa community speaks with one voice on this development. And the chief leads them and ensures that no one is excluded, because those who feel excluded may sabotage the development. I think if we can do that, we will be done.

Finding: Therefore, this study finds that in terms of challenges, conflict and lack of community involvement in the rural tourism development process were at the top of the list. The importance of community participation and involvement in rural tourism development initiatives has been overly emphasised in the literature, with some authors placing it at the core of their success. Litheko and Potgieter (2021) emphasise the importance of community involvement in the success of rural tourism development, yet their findings, in line with this study, show that communities are not actively involved as decision-makers in the rural tourism development process. Alexander, Ramotadima, and Sanderson (2018) highlight the importance of community involvement and consensus in tourism development planning, especially regarding land use, as some communities may depend on activities such as farming and fishing, which can lead to conflict. A lack of community involvement throughout the process could stir resentment and resistance to supporting development initiatives. This highlights the community's involvement and participation in rural tourism development initiatives as integral to the success and sustainability of rural tourism.

Finding: Conflict is divided into two perspectives: first, conflict among leadership, and second, conflict among community members, thus putting development in a deadlock. Several studies have examined conflict in the context of rural tourism development. Guo and Jordan (2021) find that most conflicts among community members stem from the breakdown of relations and the uneven distribution of the economic benefits of tourism development, leading to competition among villagers for tourists. Focusing on rural tourism promotion, Musasa and Mago (2014) find that in communities where ownership of the land on which rural attractions are built is contested, conflict arises, thereby hindering the promotion and success of rural tourism. Contrary to the literature, this study did not mention infrastructure- or funding-related challenges, suggesting that rural tourism development challenges are not confined to these factors, as is often portrayed in several studies.

Conclusions

The study concludes that, given the perceived economic benefits of rural tourism development, community members are keen to support development initiatives. However, when the process of rural tourism development takes a long time with no visible progress, community members become frustrated. Excluding communities from decision-making can be detrimental to the progress of rural tourism development initiatives; therefore, communities should be treated as central stakeholders in these initiatives. Conflict in leadership and among community members is the main challenge stalling rural tourism development, and unless communities and community leadership speak with one voice, rural tourism development remains a distant dream. There is also a lack of transparency regarding agreements between developers and responsible local authorities to the community, thus hindering the progression of the process. The constant changes in responsible authority representatives are counterproductive, as they necessitate restarting the process when a new representative is appointed. There is a need for skills development to equip community members for active participation in rural tourism, as well as for awareness campaigns that educate the community about tourism, its benefits, and potential challenges. Not all challenges affecting rural tourism development relate solely to governance and infrastructure; they also include community-related issues; therefore, community involvement and discussion are critical at every stage of development to ensure continued community support and community-focused development strategies.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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