ERRCDF

Research Article

Community Participation in Rural Tourism Development Initiatives. The Case of Mnqesha Great Place, South Africa

Nomsa Matyile[1*] iD

Takalani Ramukumba[2] iD

AFFILIATIONS

[1&2]Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Walter Sisulu University, Butterworth, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: nmatyile@wsu.ac.za*

Abstract: The challenge in rural tourism development lies in ensuring the active participation of local communities. Without their involvement, achieving sustainability, improving community welfare, and fostering a sense of ownership becomes difficult. Community participation has been in the spotlight in tourism academia as a tool to induce sustainable tourism development. However, despite the profound commendations in the literature, destinations often fail to adequately operationalise effective community participation. This study aims to explore community participation in rural tourism development at Mnqesha Great Place, South Africa. A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Data was collected through focus groups, and purposive sampling—a non-probability technique—was used to select community leaders involved in tourism in the area. The results of the study highlight the community's limited role in planning, the lack of resources, and internal conflicts that hinder tourism development, which ultimately impedes the community's progress. The study recommends increased communication with the village leadership, the necessity of inclusive decision-making processes, and the establishment of local champions to enhance community-led tourism initiatives, offering a framework for successful rural tourism development.

Keywords: Community participation, rural tourism, sustainable development, capacity building, inclusive planning.

1. Introduction

Community participation in rural tourism development has been recognised as crucial for achieving sustainable and inclusive growth in rural areas (Juma & Khademi-Vidra, 2019; Muresan et al., 2016). Theories such as Community-Based Tourism (CBT) advocate for initiatives that involve local communities, ensuring that tourism projects reflect the needs and aspirations of the people while also fostering a sense of ownership that can contribute to long-term success (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2023; Ulus & Hatipoglu, 2016). Since 2003, the South African government has initiated several interventions to enhance community participation in rural tourism, including the introduction of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act (Republic of South Africa, 2004). These policies promoting community-driven development have encouraged local communities to participate more actively in tourism-related decisions and activities. Although rural development has been one of the key priorities, in many areas, transformation in the tourism sector in the marginalised areas of South Africa still needs to catch up (Department of Tourism, 2012; Abrahams, 2019).

Host communities' support is crucial for developing and sustaining tourism in rural areas (Hasani et al., 2016; Eslami et al., 2018). They play an important role by providing tourist services, attractions, and accommodations. This contributes to improving the standard of living for rural people in host communities through economic development and social regeneration (Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012; Campon-Cerro et al., 2017). A tourism planning hierarchy starts locally and progresses to regional and national levels (Llupart, 2022). Consequently, the discourse of community participation in

tourism is not new. Its placement within the concept of sustainable tourism, developed in the 1990s (Butler, 1999), reinforces what was agreed internationally in the 1980s. Community support refers to the positive intention and willingness of individuals residing near tourist destinations to engage in tourism development (Spencer & Nsiah, 2013; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). Thus, tourism operators and their associated stakeholders should pay more attention to finding functional and inspiring ways to attain and enhance host communities' support for the meaningful development of tourism in rural areas. It is evident that host communities' perceived positive and negative impacts of tourism development significantly contribute to their support for such development (Chuang, 2013; Brida et al., 2011; Muresan et al., 2016; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017; Gursoy et al., 2019). Previous studies in tourism literature on rural community support have shown that positive perceptions of tourism impacts encourage rural host communities to support tourism development (Muresan et al., 2016; Nunkoo & So, 2016; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). However, negative perceptions discourage the community from supporting such development (Muresan et al., 2016; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Additionally, studies have explored how community participation in tourism decision-making influences support for tourism development (Pavlic et al., 2015; Alim et al., 2021), particularly in fostering responsible tourism behaviour (Cheng et al., 2019). Conversely, the exclusion of community participation discourages them from supporting such development within their rural communities (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). This study aims to explore community participation in rural tourism development at Mnqesha Great Place, South Africa.

1.1 Research problem statement

Poor community participation is a global concern in tourism (Bello et al., 2016), and its extent varies between developed and developing nations (Kebete & Wondirad, 2019). In the context of developing countries, several factors influence community participation in the planning, decision-making, and benefit-sharing schemes of tourism development (Shoo & Songorwa, 2013). Poor stakeholder interaction, weak community organisation, lack of community expertise due to low literacy levels, limited financial access, and insufficient support from other actors inhibit effective community participation (Kebede et al., 2014). However, despite substantial commendations in the literature, destinations often fail to adequately operationalise effective community participation (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). Wondirad and Ewnetu (2019) acknowledged the importance of community participation in tourism development initiatives but noted that engaging with the community also involves managing conflicting vested interests and power relations, as well as varying needs and values, where the capacity of local community members is often insufficient. The necessity to further investigate the global concern of poor community participation in tourism underpins the need for the current study. It is estimated that almost a quarter of the South African population, numbering about 12 million people, live in poverty in rural areas of South Africa (South Africa Rural Development and Land Reform, 2019: 1), with the population in Mngqesha Great Place also living in poverty. The Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (2019) noted that Mngqesha Great Place has many tourist attractions that could help alleviate poverty in the area, but the challenge lies in the lack of community participation in tourism development to realise the benefits of tourism. The main objective of this study is to explore community participation in rural tourism development at Mngqesha Great Place, South Africa. Additionally, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How does government support active participation of community members in rural tourism development?
- What are the factors limiting community participation in tourism initiatives in Mngqesha Great Place?
- Are there any tourism plans in place to drive tourism initiatives in Mngqesha Great Place?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Rural tourism development and community participation

Rural tourism development provides employment opportunities, increases local prosperity, and preserves the environment and cultural assets, ensuring greater benefits for tourism stakeholders (McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011). Community knowledge and awareness about tourism are essential for local communities to actively participate in and control tourism development and practices, enabling them to recognise the benefits of tourism. Local people are familiar with tourists and their local cultural activities; therefore, their involvement and support are critical to the success and growth of rural tourism (Thongma et al., 2011).

Host communities' support for tourism development in rural areas is contingent upon their genuine involvement in the tourism decision-making process (Mak et al., 2017). This suggests that opportunities for community participation in decision-making can foster interest among community members, such as providing assurances of employment, protecting cultural identity, and preserving the natural environment (Mubanga & Umar, 2016). Several studies in tourism literature acknowledge that rural communities' participation in the tourism decision-making process encourages their support for tourism development (Cheng et al., 2019; Mak et al., 2017). Additionally, the perceived impacts of tourism development, particularly positive ones, are linked to host communities' participation in the decision-making process and tourism-related services (Dadvar-Khani, 2012). The communal benefits of tourism help convince rural host communities that tourism development may not benefit every individual member (Lekaota, 2015); thus, they view participation in tourism projects as equivalent to economic involvement (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Consequently, rural host communities are eager to participate in tourism management to enhance the positive impacts of tourism development within their community (Jaafar et al., 2017). Previous studies have also found that positive perceptions among host communities encourage their participation in tourism decision-making (Jaafar et al., 2017; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). However, there is minimal participation from rural host communities in the decision-making processes in the developing world (Latkova & Vogt, 2012). The exclusion of host communities' opinions during the planning stages, along with poorly planned and managed tourism development, are key factors that adversely affect rural communities. This undesirable situation fails to meet the expectations of host communities and leads to misunderstandings regarding how tourism development should occur in their areas (Jaafar et al., 2017). It is also evident that conflicts often arise between tourists and rural host communities in developing countries (Lekaota, 2015; Wang & Yotsumoto, 2019). Lekaota (2015) suggests that involving host communities in the decision-making process may help alleviate these conflicts. Therefore, tourism policymakers and associated stakeholders should actively engage with host communities and consider their perspectives in policymaking to secure their support for tourism development (Cheng et al., 2019). The indirect effect of community participation on perceived positive impacts and support for tourism development may strengthen communities' backing for such initiatives (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019).

Muresan et al. (2016: 3) claim that rural residents view tourism positively, particularly its economic and socio-cultural benefits, such as job creation, improved infrastructure, and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, concerns have been raised regarding environmental impacts, such as increased litter and resource consumption, which could affect long-term sustainability. Community support for tourism development is strongly linked to perceived personal benefits, indicating that effective community participation requires a delicate balance between economic opportunities and environmental concerns. Ulus and Hatipoglu (2016) highlighted community capacity, good tourism knowledge, and the existence of skills as essential drivers that enhance the ability of local people to actively participate in sustainable tourism planning and development.

Community capacity building (CCB) maximises opportunities for communities to benefit from tourism development (Ghaderi et al., 2024). CCB is crucial in improving the organisational and individual capacity of the local community, enabling them to manage tourism resources more effectively. For instance, external support and training have empowered local communities to manage tourism resources effectively (Kusuma, 2020: 50). Additionally, Chambwe and Saayman (2024: 7) confirm that offering financial assistance, capacity-building programmes, and infrastructure development is essential for empowering communities to take ownership of tourism ventures. Rural areas often lack participation in tourism and require greater access to empowerment initiatives, with a necessity for community-based structures promoting fair tourism involvement. Several factors prevent rural communities from fully participating in tourism, including power imbalances, lack of resources, and limited access to decision-making processes. These barriers must be addressed through policy frameworks and support systems that encourage equitable participation (Chambwe & Saayman, 2024: 5).

Muresan et al. (2016) also determine that local authorities should support tourism development by setting strategic plans and clear actions for managing tourism growth. Since 2003, the national government of South Africa has initiated various interventions to enhance inclusive community participation in rural tourism development. For instance, the transformation of South Africa's tourism sector began in 2003 when the government introduced the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act No. 53 (Republic of South Africa, 2004), followed by other projects such as the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) committee, which was formed to employ a local community involvement approach to rebrand, reposition, and renew tourism in South Africa for the development of rural areas (Business Tech, 2020). Central to the CRDP is community-driven development, which prioritises local knowledge and participation, ensuring that rural people are not mere beneficiaries but active participants in the decision-making process, shaping the direction of projects based on their needs and local knowledge (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, 2009). The CRDP underscores the importance of community involvement in shaping tourism initiatives (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, 2009).

Subsequently, the National Department of Tourism developed a Rural Tourism Strategy in 2012 to promote tourism benefits for the community (Department of Tourism, 2012). There are examples of successful cases in South Africa that could serve as models for community participation, such as Bulungula Lodge in Nqileni Village, Eastern Cape Province, where a community-based tourism enterprise is owned and managed by the local community. It has successfully integrated tourism with local development initiatives in education, health, and infrastructure (Setokoe & Ramukumba, 2019). The lodge employs residents and reinvests profits into community projects, making it a model for sustainable rural tourism (Setokoe & Ramukumba, 2019). The involvement of the local community ensures that tourism benefits are shared equitably among residents (Setokoe & Ramukumba, 2019). The Makuleke people provide another successful example of community participation in rural tourism development. After reclaiming their ancestral land in the Pafuri area of Kruger National Park post-apartheid, they negotiated commercial rights and established two luxury eco-lodges. The income from these lodges has been used to electrify villages, build schools, and provide ongoing economic benefits through a share in the profits. This case demonstrates how granting ownership and rights in tourism ventures can empower rural communities, foster sustainable development, and improve living standards while preserving cultural heritage (South African Tourism, 2024).

However, in many areas, transformation in the tourism sector in the marginalised regions of South Africa has been lagging, even though rural development has been a key priority (Department of Tourism, 2012; Abrahams, 2019). Despite efforts to prioritise rural development, including tourism, the sector's transformation in these areas could progress more rapidly. Exclusion from full participation in the tourism economy remains a significant barrier to development (Abrahams, 2019).

The lack of community involvement in rural areas has contributed to the slow progress in transforming the tourism sector. One of the primary reasons for this lagging transformation is the exclusion of local communities from meaningful participation in tourism planning and decision-making (Khambule & Mtapuri, 2020). Limited access to resources, such as funding and skills training, restricts the ability of rural populations to participate fully in tourism enterprises, leaving them reliant on external investors who control tourism operations (Manyara & Jones, 2009). Ghaderi et al. (2024: 1) highlight the significance of local leadership and access to resources in strengthening community capacity for sustainable tourism development. Additionally, the concentration of tourism infrastructure and services in urban or more accessible regions exacerbates the marginalisation of rural areas (Castillo et al., 2023). Tourism development in rural South Africa is still predominantly characterised by top-down approaches, where external entities, including private investors and government bodies, often dictate the agenda. This undermines local ownership and inhibits communities' ability to reap the full economic and social benefits of tourism initiatives (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2020). As a result, communities often struggle to enter the tourism economy due to limited technical knowledge, a lack of marketing expertise, and difficulties in accessing capital (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). These barriers not only hinder rural development but also contribute to the slow progress in transforming the tourism sector in marginalised regions of South Africa.

2.2 Challenges of community participation in tourism development

Although poor community participation is a global concern in tourism (Bello et al., 2016; Yitbarek et al., 2013), its extent varies between developed and developing nations (Kebete & Wondirad, 2019; Pasape et al., 2015). In developing countries, several factors influence community participation in tourism development planning, decision-making, and benefit-sharing schemes (Aref, 2011; Shoo & Songorwa, 2013; Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Poor stakeholder interaction, weak community organisation, lack of community expertise due to low literacy levels, limited financial access, and insufficient support from other actors inhibit effective community participation (Kebede et al., 2014; Kibicho, 2008). According to Tosun (2000), elite domination, a lack of an appropriate legal system, lack of awareness, and inappropriate management approaches preclude community participation in most developing countries.

Scholars suggest various strategies to enhance community participation and thereby ensure equitable benefit sharing, fostering a sense of belonging and altering detrimental traditional economic activities in fragile ecosystems (Cobbinah et al., 2015; Li, 2006; Su & Wall, 2015). The first proposed strategy to enhance community participation is empowerment and power redistribution, enabling communities to take control of tourism development (Bien, 2010; Chan & Bhatta, 2013). Empowerment encompasses economic, psychological, social, and political dimensions (Okazaki, 2008). The second significant tool is establishing a reliable partnership between communities and other tourism stakeholders (Okazaki, 2008). Finally, strengthening communities' social capital—through revitalising traditional knowledge, cultivating local entrepreneurial skills, fostering networks, and promoting community self-organisation—plays a pivotal role (Sato, 2001). In doing so, communities can ascend from manipulation (Arnstein, 1969) — a form of uninformed, insincere participation — to self-mobilisation (Pretty, 1995; Tosun, 1999; Tosun & Timothy, 2003) or citizen control (Arnstein, 1969), where communities take charge of tourism development to meaningfully influence management decisions that may affect their livelihoods. The following section discusses the types of community participation in tourism development.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is embedded in Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation model in a setting where multiple actors retain diverse and competing interests. Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation acknowledges the need for local communities' participation in the planning, development and management of tourism initiatives and developments in their areas (Jamal &

Stronza, 2009; Stone & Stone, 2011; van Niekerk, 2014). Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation explains the extant level of community participation and provides suggestions. The model plots participation on a ladder where every phase corresponds to the extent of citizens' power in determining the plan and/or programme that impacts their well-being. Arnstein (1969) highlighted that participation is a cornerstone of a democratic and transparent system that redistributes power to excluded citizens from the political and economic process. Based on Arnstein's (1969) description, community participation refers to the redistribution of power that enables poor communities, currently excluded from the political and economic spheres, to be included in the future so that they can influence decisions and induce significant social and economic reforms which enable them to share benefits that accrue in their localities equitably.

Arnstein's (1969) participation model comprises eight distinct levels. The eight steps of the model, in ascending order, are manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control (see Fig. 1). These eight phases are reclassified into three major categories: non-participation (corresponding to manipulation and therapy), degrees of tokenism (comprising informing, consultation, and placation), and degrees of citizen power (consisting of partnership, delegated power, and citizen control). Non-participation represents manipulative involvement, where citizens are misled by pseudo-participation. At this stage, citizens or community members are not involved in planning and development. Policymakers have no mechanism to seek input from communities to inform tourism development, and tourism administrators often believe that community members lack the expertise to contribute to the development process. The middle rung, represented by degrees of citizens' tokenism, is a level where authorities inform communities about their rights, responsibilities, and options. They encourage them to express their views on issues but do not grant them the power to influence decisions. The final stage, classified as degrees of citizen power, represents the most desirable form of community participation, where participants decide on issues that matter to them and influence decisions that affect their livelihoods. In this stage, communities receive maximum feasible involvement and substantial control over the issues that determine their future (Arnstein, 1969).

A typology of eight participation levels may help analyse this confused issue. For illustrative purposes, the eight types are arranged in a ladder pattern, with each rung corresponding to the extent of citizens' power in determining the end products (See Figure 2). The ladder's bottom rungs are (1) Manipulation and (2) Therapy. These two rungs describe levels of "non-participation" that some have contrived to substitute for genuine participation. Their fundamental objective is not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programmes but to enable powerholders to "educate" or "cure" the participants. Rungs 3 and 4 progress to levels of "tokenism" that allow the disadvantaged to hear and have a voice: (3) Informing and (4) Consultation. When powerholders proffer these as the total extent of participation, citizens may hear and be heard. However, under these conditions, they lack the power to ensure that the powerful will heed their views. When participation is restricted to these levels, there is no flow-through, no "muscle," and hence no assurance of changing the status quo. Rung (5) Placation represents a higher-level tokenism because the ground rules allow the disadvantaged to advise while retaining the powerholders' continued right to decide.

Further up the ladder are levels of citizen power with increasing degrees of decision-making clout. Citizens can enter a (6) Partnership to negotiate and engage in trade-offs with traditional powerholders. At the topmost rungs, (7) Delegated Power and (8) Citizen Control, the disadvantaged obtain most decision-making seats or full managerial power. The eight-rung ladder is a simplification, but it helps to illustrate the point that many have missed: there are significant gradations of citizen participation. Understanding these gradations makes it possible to cut through the hyperbole to grasp the increasingly strident demands for participation from the disadvantaged and the gamut of confusing responses from the powerholders. The application of this model to the current study will facilitate an understanding of the participants' perceived levels of engagement on

the participation ladder. Additionally, it will aid in mapping their desired levels of involvement in tourism development within the area.
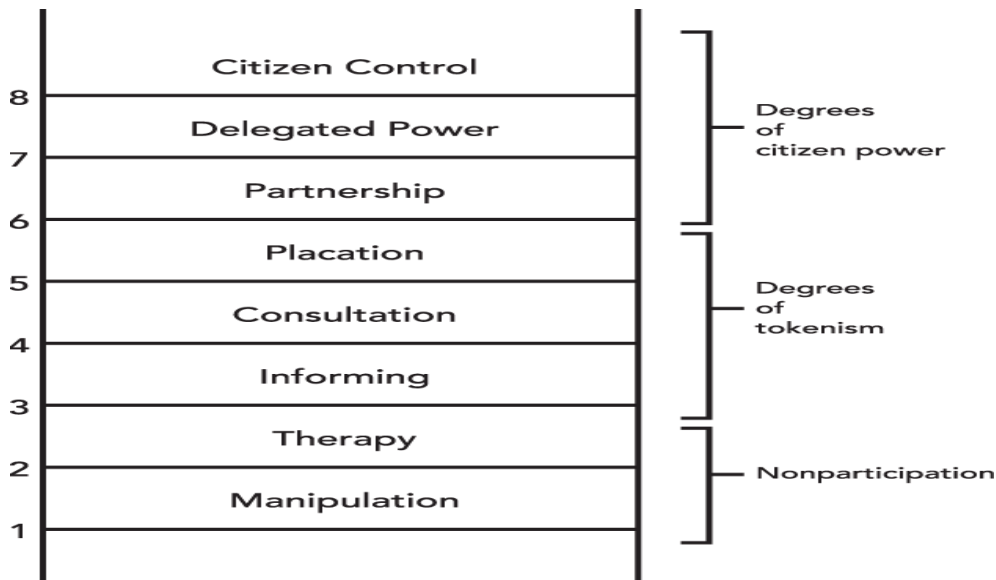

Figure 1: Arnstein (1969) citizen participation model

Literature also emphasises that community participation should not only strive to ensure equitable distribution of material resources but also guarantee substantial knowledge transfer to induce community transformation in the long run (Okazaki, 2008; Stone, 2015). According to Williams and Lawson (2001), evaluating the success of community participation by considering only a few aspects, such as job creation or learning about other cultures, is unjust. Instead, a critical analysis of how the tourism sector provides better facilities for local people, the extent to which it offers incentives to protect the natural environment, and the degree to which communities are empowered to influence decisions that potentially determine the course of their livelihoods is essential for achieving a holistic understanding (Aref & Redzuan, 2009; Okazaki, 2008; Williams & Lawson, 2001).

4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach to understand the meanings individuals or groups attach to social or human issues (Mametja et al., 2023). This method was chosen for its ability to explore human beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviours, and interactions relevant to rural tourism development. An exploratory research design was used to gain new insights into community participation in rural tourism, applying a cross-sectional approach where data was collected at a single point in time. Focus groups were the primary method for collecting data to explore participants' beliefs, perceptions, and experiences. A set of open-ended questions guided the discussions, and the flexibility of the focus group format allowed researchers to ask follow-up questions for more detailed responses. Purposive sampling, a non-probability technique, was used to select community leaders involved in tourism, intentionally selecting participants based on their knowledge and involvement in tourism-related matters. This ensured that only relevant individuals were included. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used, and the focus group community members were labelled "CFG."

The sample consisted of two groups, initially represented by 16 members, which was later refined to 11 active participants in tourism-related issues, providing insights into community participation factors. These 11 participants were divided into two CFGs, comprising six and five individuals, respectively, constituting the study sample. The roles of the community focus group (CFG) members

are recorded in Table 1. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, with informed consent obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity ensured throughout the study. Ethical clearance was granted by North-West University, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ethics number: NWU-00890-20-A4), and research permissions were obtained from DEDEAT, BCMM, and ECPTA.

To ensure the quality of the data, a pilot study was conducted for the focus group discussions (FGDs) prior to full implementation. The focus group instrument was pre-tested among seven community members from a neighbouring village to assess clarity, applicability, and potential sensitivities. Feedback from this pilot study confirmed that the instrument was well-structured and ready for use. The focus group discussions were transcribed word-for-word by a third-party transcriber, and the transcriptions were carefully reviewed against audio recordings to maintain accuracy. The study employed thematic analysis to examine qualitative data collected through focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was chosen because it enables researchers to systematically identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data. This approach provides a structured and flexible method for interpreting participants' perspectives and uncovering key themes relevant to rural tourism development.

Table 1: *Participants identities*

PARTICIPANT ID	PORTFOLIO
CFG1	Village committee chairperson
CFG2	Secretary
CFG3	Deputy Secretary
CFG4	Deputy chairperson
CFG5	Treasurer
CFG6	Deputy treasurer
CFG7	Committee additional member
CFG8	Active community member
CFG9	Active community member
CFG10	Active community member
CFG11	Active community member

5. Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section presents the data and discusses the findings. The data and results are presented and discussed in relation to the research questions outlined in the research problem statement section. The data generated three themes: government support for locals to participate in tourism initiatives, the lack of community participation, and the absence of tourism plans and power dynamics.

5.1 Research question 1, theme 1: Government support for locals to participate in tourism initiatives

The respondents' views on the initiatives carried out by the government to support tourism development in MGP indicate that some participants believe the government has supported certain infrastructural development projects in the community. This is reflected in CFG1, who stated that:

> "*There is a place where people make beads, others sew, the finished product (from sewing)*
> *is a project of one lady, who is a politician. They started by giving them funds.*"

The views of CFG1 are further supported by those of respondents CFG2 and CFG8, both of whom noted that:

> *"Government has sponsored some establishments such as accommodation and museums."*

The government also previously committed to maintain existing infrastrustucture though there is no conviction of the progress of the project according to the view of CFG7.

> *"We once had a project in which Amatole was willing to assist with fixing the route to there. There is even Amathole train. There are routes which were previously used for traveling, which could make the route shorter for those traveling by foot, If they could fix them, it will be better."*

This denotes uncertainty resulting from a lack of involvement on the respondents' part. To provide effective services and address issues, local government should manage tourism practices and coordinate with businesses and residents (Liu et al., 2020). The absence of community involvement and inclusive planning represents a critical oversight in tourism development, particularly within the South African context (Lo & Janta, 2020). This deficiency, as highlighted by the Department of Tourism (Department of Tourism, 2012, p. 36), underscores the imperative for governmental bodies to prioritise community engagement in tourism initiatives. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation highlights the varying levels of community involvement, stressing that meaningful participation—beyond mere consultation—is crucial for successful tourism development. Such deficiencies hinder the effective implementation of community projects (Vujović et al., 2021). In the case of MGP, the lack of knowledge among community leadership about government support indicates a communication gap between the government and the community regarding community projects. Lines of communication should be established to enhance community participation in tourism development initiatives.

5.2 Research question 2, theme 2: Lack of community participation

It was reported that despite profound commendations in the literature, destinations often fail to adequately operationalise effective community participation (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). Wondirad and Ewnetu (2019) acknowledged the importance of community participation in tourism development initiatives, but engaging with the community also involves navigating conflicting vested interests, diverse power relations, and varying needs and values, where the capacity of local community members is often insufficient. Respondents (CFG1 and CFG11) indicated that, at present, there is limited community participation in tourism development initiatives occurring within the community. Participants CFG1, CFG9, and CFG11 mentioned a proposed plan for the formation of a community foundation, with CFG9 notably stating that meetings have recently commenced to facilitate community involvement. Warren (2017, p. 39) advocates for associations, noting that they encourage collective agendas and provide the capacity to make collective decisions. This suggests that the MGP community is on a positive path by establishing a foundation for the village. This will also serve as a platform for representing the community to external stakeholders, such as the government and funders. The following statements from the participants support the arguments above:

> CFG1 – *"Currently, we are not involved. That is why we were correcting that, but it got disrupted, but we have not stopped. We are busy with some projects where we want to deal with matters relating specifically to Sandile and not Rharhabe, so we are still dealing with that. We have found the disconnect, so we only deal with the Sandile family. When we do that, we will have progress."*
>
> CFG4 – *"We have the royal council, which forms part of the community and communicates with the royal council. When we formed the committee, we were ostracised. They overtook us, yet those people are not even local community people. They are not privy to the challenges faced by the community. What is important is that within the committee, there must be locals who understand the challenges faced by the community.*

> *People are self-enriching. After they have enriched themselves, they sabotage us, and we are left helpless."*
>
> CFG9 – *"Well, it is a new thing that we are involved in discussions like that since we were disappointed by what happened there. We had a few meetings already to start our trust as Mngqesha, so the participation you are talking about has recently started."*
>
> CFG11 – *"The only thing we are engaging in as a community is forming a cooperative called Amambombo Foundation, which will be used to carry out all our projects. Tourism initiatives also will fall under this foundation."*

The respondents CFG1 and CFG11 indicated that, at present, no tourism development participation is taking place in the community. This lack of community participation in tourism development initiatives reflects the lower rungs of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, specifically manipulation and therapy. These two rungs describe levels of "non-participation" that some have contrived to substitute for genuine participation. Their fundamental objective is not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programmes, but to empower powerholders to "educate" or "cure" the participants. The ideal situation would be for community members to feel that they are at the partnership rung, where they can negotiate and engage in trade-offs with traditional powerholders, as well as at the delegated power and citizen control rungs of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, where the disadvantaged citizens obtain most decision-making seats or full managerial power. CFG1, CFG9, and CFG11 indicate that plans are being developed to form a community foundation, and CFG9 stated that meetings have recently commenced to facilitate community involvement. Warren (2017, p. 39) advocates for associations, stating that they encourage collective agendas and offer the capacity to make collective decisions. This implies that the MGP community is on a positive path by starting a foundation for the village, which will also serve as a platform for representing the community to external stakeholders.

Nevertheless, one respondent (CFG11) laments the community's lack of representation, particularly in the royal council structure. This represents a lack of participation in decision-making structures. One respondent states:

> (CFG11) *"Well, it is not a new thing that we are not involved in discussions like that (referring to community decision-making) since we were disappointed by what happens up there. We had a few meetings already to start our trust as Mngqesha, so the participation you are talking about has recently started."*

Chili and Ngxongo (2017) argue that community leaders are the best candidates for managing rural tourism development. When South Africa attained democracy in 1994, traditional leaders were included in government structures to contribute to the development of their areas (Mnguni, 2014). However, in the case of the MGP, the community is still not represented in the council of traditional leaders, which limits their involvement in decision-making regarding local issues. Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation highlights that true community involvement goes beyond symbolic representation; it requires active participation and shared decision-making power. The absence of such engagement hinders the potential for inclusive and effective rural tourism development.

5.3 Research question 3, theme 3: Lack of tourism plans and power dynamics

The participants were asked to provide information about who is involved in tourism planning in the area and whether planning authorities have documented their plans. This was another critical primary theme, as it collectively addresses the lack of tourism plans and the power dynamics within community structures. Respondents feel that there are currently no plans for tourism development in the area. Some respondents (CFG5) elaborated on reasons they believed were limiting their community's ability to engage in tourism planning, primarily due to being excluded from the group of stakeholders responsible for planning. Khosravi-Haftkhani, Mohamed, and Nair (2016) identified

the lack of tourism planning as the most common factor limiting community capacity, which should be addressed. The respondents' views regarding this matter are presented below:

> CFG3 – "*There are currently no plans to develop tourism in our area.*"

> CFG4 – "*Well, we have not written down any plans yet. We have just started meetings to discuss projects we can start in the village.*"

> CFG5 – "*Plans on such projects are initiated in this platform, yet we are ousted, so we cannot form part of the current royal council as we did with the previous one because they threw us out. The challenge is that all those who form part of the royal council are not local community members; they are traditional leaders of other areas.*"

> CFG8 – "*To add to that, maybe we can get people to come together and contribute towards a project we agree on as the community to kick-start tourism. Some may be interested, and maybe we will find ourselves making it in the future.*"

> CFG10 – "*We discovered that people are always looking at what they will get in return, so if there is no benefit to them, they end up sabotaging the project, so there is no movement. We want the development, but others have sinister motives. What is important is for everyone to engage, as we are rich in tourism.*"

> CFG11 – "*As I mentioned, there are no plans. We are beginning a process to have all those things. The only concern is whether we can pull through all these different plans from tourism and agriculture. Hopefully, we will get people to assist, even outside this village.*"

Respondents lament that the Royal Council is currently composed of traditional leaders from different areas who are outside the local community platform for planning in the village. Moscardo (2011) argues that incorporating the community into tourism planning strengthens the alignment between tourism businesses and local needs, counterbalancing external influences on development. Similarly, Sarr, Sene-Harper, and Gonzalez-Hernandez (2021) advocate for considering community members' perspectives on rural tourism development to create more inclusive planning processes. Although CFG8 is optimistic that community involvement could encourage participation in tourism development, CFG11 raises concerns about whether the community has the capacity to facilitate the planning and implementation of tourism projects. According to Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, meaningful participation goes beyond mere consultation; it requires empowerment and decision-making authority. Lee and Jan (2019) assert that communities with positive perceptions of tourism become significant stakeholders in planning and management. However, as Ulus and Hatipoglu (2016) highlight, community capacity, tourism knowledge, and relevant skills are essential for active participation in sustainable tourism planning and development. This suggests that the MGP community requires capacity-building initiatives to strengthen their role in tourism planning and ensure effective engagement in decision-making processes.

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore community participation in rural tourism development at Mnqesha Great Place, South Africa. The study intended to illuminate the nature, extent, and dynamics of community participation in tourism development initiatives. The government appears to support local community members in participating in tourism initiatives in the area, which is reflected in its provision of the necessary infrastructure to assist community members in manufacturing products that could be sold to tourists, such as bead-making and sewing. However, there are communication challenges between the various stakeholders involved in the tourism development initiatives. There is a perception that certain information only reaches a select few individuals within the community structures, which is attributed to the royal council. Concerns have been raised about the community's lack of representation, especially within the royal council structure and other decision-making

bodies, which impedes community participation. Although there are structures in place, they are not representative of the community and lack the capacity and skills required to develop plans for tourism initiatives in the area.

The study exhibits certain limitations, particularly in its use of a purposive sampling method to select participants. While the focus on community leadership was judicious, including ordinary community members who are directly impacted by the absence of tourism development initiatives could have enriched the study. Such initiatives have the potential to significantly alleviate poverty and create employment opportunities. Engaging a broader spectrum of the community would likely provide a more holistic understanding of the socio-economic benefits and challenges associated with community participation in tourism development initiatives. The study recommends that, to avoid challenges related to limited community participation in tourism development initiatives, it is crucial to establish clear communication channels between the government and community leaders, ensuring all stakeholders are well-informed about any tourism development initiatives in the area. Inclusive planning should actively involve community members in decision-making processes, addressing their needs and perspectives. Transparency and accountability measures should be put in place to prevent issues such as self-enrichment and ostracism, thereby building trust.

7. Declarations

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and ethical restrictions imposed by the Institutional Review Board. However, de-identified data can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval by the ethics committee.

References

Abrahams, D. (2019). Transforming the South African tourism sector for inclusive growth. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences, 22*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v22i1.2732

Alim, M. A., Khan, M. J., & Saha, M. (2021). Community participation and support for sustainable tourism development in Bangladesh. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites, 36*(2), 370–376. https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.362spl02-681

Aref, F. (2011). Barriers to community capacity building for tourism development in communities in Shiraz, Iran. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 19*(3), 347–359. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2010.517314

Aref, F., & Redzuan, M. (2009). Community leaders' perceptions toward tourism impacts and level of community capacity building in tourism development. *Journal of Sustainable Development, 2*(3), 208–213. https://doi.org/10.5539/jsd.v2n3p208

Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35*(4), 216–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225

Bello, F. G., Lovelock, B., & Carr, N. (2016). Constraints of community participation in protected area-based tourism planning: The case of Malawi. *Journal of Ecotourism, 15*(3), 245–265. https://doi.org/10.1080/14724049.2016.1188819

Bien, A. (2010). *Sustainable tourism: Principles and practices*. Earthscan.

Brida, J. G., Osti, L., & Faccioli, M. (2011). Residents' perception and attitudes towards tourism impacts: A case study of the small rural community of Folgaria (Trentino, Italy). *Benchmarking: An International Journal, 18*(3), 359–385. https://doi.org/10.1108/14635771111137769

Business Tech. (2020, August 20). Government plans to transform rural areas into economic hubs. https://businesstech.co.za

Butler, R. W. (1999). Sustainable tourism: A state-of-the-art review. *Tourism Geographies, 1*(1), 7–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616689908721291

Campon-Cerro, A. M., Hernández-Mogollón, J. M., & Alves, H. M. B. (2017). Sustainable improvement of competitiveness in rural tourism destinations: The quest for tourist loyalty in Spain. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 6*(3), 252–266. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2016.04.005

Castillo, M., Amoah, A., & Mensah, I. (2023). Bridging rural–urban gaps in tourism infrastructure: The African experience. *Tourism Planning & Development, 20*(2), 135–153. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2022.2036791

Chambwe, M., & Saayman, M. (2024). Community capacity building in tourism: An African perspective. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 13*(1), 1–11.

Chan, C. S., & Bhatta, K. D. (2013). Participatory tourism planning in Nepal: A comparative case study of two mountain villages. *Tourism Planning & Development, 10*(3), 353–370. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2012.747984

Cheng, T. M., Wu, H. C., & Huang, L. M. (2019). Community participation and quality of life: The mediating role of community support in tourism development. *Sustainability, 11*(17), 4858. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11174858

Chuang, S. T. (2013). Residents' attitudes toward rural tourism in Taiwan: A comparative viewpoint. *International Journal of Tourism Research, 15*(2), 152–170. https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.875

Cobbinah, P. B., Black, R., & Thwaites, R. (2015). Ecotourism implementation in the Kakum Conservation Area, Ghana: Administrative framework and local community experiences. *Journal of Ecotourism, 14*(2–3), 223–242. https://doi.org/10.1080/14724049.2015.1023305

Dadvar-Khani, F. (2012). Participation of rural community and tourism development in Iran. *Community Development, 43*(2), 259–277. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2011.604423

Department of Rural Development and Land Reform. (2009). *Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) framework*. Government of South Africa.

Department of Tourism. (2012). *Rural Tourism Strategy*. Pretoria: Department of Tourism.

Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency. (2019). *Annual report 2018/2019.* https://www.visiteasterncape.co.za

Eslami, S., Khalifah, Z., Mardani, A., & Streimikiene, D. (2018). Community attachment, tourism impacts, quality of life and residents' support for sustainable tourism development. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, 35*(6), 786–798. https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2017.1422457

Ghaderi, Z., Hatamifar, P., & Henderson, J. (2024). Local leadership and community capacity in sustainable rural tourism development. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 32*(4), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2024.1001003

Giampiccoli, A., & Mtapuri, O. (2020). Community-based tourism and pro-poor tourism: Discourse similarities and differences. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 9*(1), 1–17.

Gursoy, D., Ouyang, Z., Nunkoo, R., & Wei, W. (2019). Residents' impact perceptions of and attitudes towards tourism development: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management, 28*(3), 306–333. https://doi.org/10.1080/19368623.2018.1516589

Hasani, A., Moghavvemi, S., & Hamzah, A. (2016). The impact of emotional solidarity on residents' attitudes and tourism development. *PLoS ONE, 11*(6), e0157624. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0157624

Haven-Tang, C., & Jones, E. (2012). Local leadership for rural tourism development: A case study of Adventa, Monmouthshire, UK. *Tourism Management Perspectives,* 4, 28–35. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2012.04.006

Jaafar, M., Rasoolimanesh, S. M., & Lonik, K. A. T. (2017). Tourism growth and entrepreneurship: Empirical analysis of development and sustainability. *Current Issues in Tourism, 20*(9), 882–895. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2016.1140683

Jamal, T., & Stronza, A. (2009). Collaboration theory and tourism practice in protected areas: Stakeholders, structuring and sustainability. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 17*(2), 169–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580802495741

Juma, L. O., & Khademi-Vidra, A. (2019). Community-based tourism and sustainable development of rural regions in Kenya: Perceptions of the citizenry. *Sustainability, 11*(17), 4733. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11174733

Kebede, A., Wondirad, A., & Mekonnen, A. (2014). Challenges of community participation in tourism development in Ethiopia. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 3*(2), 1–15.

Kebete, Y., & Wondirad, A. (2019). Residents' attitudes towards community-based ecotourism: Evidence from Ethiopia. *Tourism Review International, 23*(2), 135–150. https://doi.org/10.3727/154427219X15538530870844

Khambule, I., & Mtapuri, O. (2020). Strengthening community participation in South African tourism. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 9*(5), 1–15.

Kibicho, W. (2008). Community-based tourism: A factor-cluster segmentation approach. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 16*(2), 211–231. https://doi.org/10.2167/jost623.0

Kusuma, P. (2020). Community empowerment in managing rural tourism resources. *Journal of Tourism Research & Hospitality, 9*(2), 45–54.

Latkova, P., & Vogt, C. A. (2012). Residents' attitudes toward existing and future tourism development in rural communities. *Journal of Travel Research, 51*(1), 50–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287510394193

Lekaota, L. (2015). The importance of rural communities' participation in the management of tourism: A case study from Lesotho. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes, 7*(5), 453–462. https://doi.org/10.1108/WHATT-06-2015-0028

Li, W. (2006). Community decision-making: Participation in development. *Annals of Tourism Research, 33*(1), 132–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2005.07.003

Liu, C., Lin, W., & Lin, J. (2020). The role of government in tourism development: A case from Taiwan. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research, 25*(2), 144–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2019.1687538

Lo, M. C., & Janta, H. (2020). Government-community partnership for sustainable rural tourism. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events, 12*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2018.1556670

Llupard, M. R. N. (2022). Theoretical model for the analysis of community-based tourism: Contribution to sustainable development. Sustainability, 14(17), 10635.

Mak, A. H. N., Cheung, L. T. O., & Hui, D. L. H. (2017). Community participation in the decision-making process for sustainable tourism development in rural areas of Hong Kong, China. *Sustainability, 9*(10), 1695. https://doi.org/10.3390/su9101695

Manyara, G., & Jones, E. (2009). Community-based tourism enterprises development in Kenya: An exploration of their potential as avenues of poverty reduction. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 15*(6), 628–644. https://doi.org/10.2167/jost723.0

Mametja, D., du Plessis, E., & Slabbert, E. (2023). Qualitative approaches in tourism research: Understanding human experiences. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 12*(3), 1–14.

McAreavey, R., & McDonagh, J. (2011). Sustainable rural tourism: Lessons for rural development. *Sociologia Ruralis, 51*(2), 175–194. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2010.00529.x

Mtapuri, O., & Giampiccoli, A. (2019). A conceptual coalescence: Towards luxury community-based tourism. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 8*(5), 1–15.

Muresan, I. C., Oroian, C. F., Harun, R., Arion, F. H., Porutiu, A., Chiciudean, G. O., Todea, A., & Lile, R. (2016). Local residents' attitude toward sustainable rural tourism development. *Sustainability, 8*(1), 100. https://doi.org/10.3390/su8010100

Nunkoo, R., & So, K. K. F. (2016). Residents' support for tourism: Testing alternative structural models. *Journal of Travel Research, 55*(7), 847–861. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287515583351

Okazaki, E. (2008). A community-based tourism model: Its conception and use. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 16*(5), 511–529. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580802159594

Pasape, L., Anderson, W., & Lindi, G. (2015). Towards sustainable tourism in Tanzania: Stakeholders' perspectives in tourism planning. *Tourism Planning & Development, 12*(4), 467–484. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2015.1025990

Pavlic, I., Perucic, D., & Portolan, A. (2015). Residents' attitudes towards tourism impact in Dubrovnik. *Tourism in South East Europe, 3,* 67–81.

Pretty, J. N. (1995). Participatory learning for sustainable agriculture. *World Development, 23*(8), 1247–1263. https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(95)00046-F

Rasoolimanesh, S. M., Jaafar, M., & Kock, N. (2017). Residents' perceptions of community participation and support for tourism development: The mediating role of trust. *Tourism Management, 61,* 221–236. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017.02.002

Republic of South Africa. (2004). *Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act No. 53 of 2003.* Government Gazette.

Ruiz-Ballesteros, E. (2023). Community-based tourism and social sustainability: Lessons from rural areas. *Sustainability, 15*(1), 450. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010450

Sato, T. (2001). Social capital and community development: A Japanese case study. *Community Development Journal, 36*(4), 350–358.

Setokoe, M., & Ramukumba, T. (2019). Evaluating community participation at Bulungula Lodge, South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 8*(2), 1–12.

Shoo, R. A., & Songorwa, A. N. (2013). Contribution of eco-tourism to poverty alleviation in Tanzania. *Journal of Environmental Science and Water Resources, 2*(11), 370–380.

South African Tourism. (2024). *Makuleke community tourism case study.* https://www.southafrica.net

South Africa Rural Development and Land Reform. (2019). *Rural development report 2019.* Government of South Africa.

Spencer, D. M., & Nsiah, C. (2013). The economic consequences of community support for tourism: A case study of a heritage fishery. *Tourism Economics, 19*(3), 669–688. https://doi.org/10.5367/te.2013.0212

Stone, L. S. (2015). Community empowerment and tourism development: Case studies from Africa. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, 13*(3), 235–252.

Stone, M. T., & Stone, L. S. (2011). Community-based tourism enterprises: Challenges and prospects for community participation. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 1*(3), 1–12.

Su, M. M., & Wall, G. (2015). Community participation in tourism at a world heritage site: Mutianyu Great Wall, Beijing, China. *International Journal of Tourism Research, 17*(3), 303–312. https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.1991

Telfer, D. J., & Sharpley, R. (2008). *Tourism and development in the developing world*. Routledge.

Thongma, W., Leelapattana, W., & Hung, J. (2011). Sustainable rural tourism development and management in Laos. *Journal of Agricultural Science, 2*(3), 7–13.

Tosun, C. (1999). Towards a typology of community participation in the tourism development process. *Tourism Management, 20*(6), 615–630. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(99)00057-3

Tosun, C. (2000). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries. *Tourism Management, 21*(6), 613–633. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(00)00009-1

Tosun, C., & Timothy, D. J. (2003). Arguments for community participation in the tourism development process. *Journal of Tourism Studies, 14*(2), 2–15.

Ulus, M., & Hatipoglu, B. (2016). Community-based tourism in developing countries: Challenges and opportunities for local communities. *Tourism Planning & Development, 13*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316