

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND RESPONSES TO SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES IN IMO STATE

by

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ABSTRACT

Local government plays an important role in promoting sustainable tourism development. Federal government and state governments are responsible for providing infrastructure and amenities the sector requires. As major tourism activities occur at the local level, local government is also well situated to avoid, remedy or mitigate the sector's potential socio-economic and bio-physical effects. The purpose of this study was to examine how local governments are involved in tourism development in Nigeria, to determine the role local government can play to promote sustainable tourism development and to provide useful solutions to local governments authorities. The research methods used included initial review of related literature, interview and structured questionnaire administered on the local government chairmen and tourism committee members. The results revealed that the states government do not give the local councils autonomy to plan and develop within the domain, lack of information regarding tourism trends and development among the people, no strategic plans for the enablement of sustainable tourism development at the local government level, lack of adequate facilities to attract and provide for visitors were identified as their major problems. The researchers noted that there is an urgent need to involve the community members and local councils in tourism planning in Nigeria and recommended that a broad-based community participation through the local government as a corner-stone for such process, that there should be more effective partnership between the federal, state and local governments and the industry. The state government should not assume the role of planning and developing tourism alone without involving the local government authorities.

KEYWORDS

Local Government, Local Government Tourism Committee, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Policy

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Nigeria is endowed with both natural and cultural tourism resources which if researched, developed and promoted could improve the economic and living standard of its population. Most of these resources (70%) are located in the rural areas and are in the raw states. Local government areas, therefore, constitute the physical destination. The main activities of tourists take place in the rural areas where the attractions are (Da'Silva, 2001; Adejuwon, 1993).

Each local government in Nigeria and in Imo State in particular, has one or more tourism resources. For instance, these attractions are located in these local government areas: Okigwe sacred caves in Okigwe local government (Okpoko, 2006); Oguta lake in Oguta local government area; Abadaba lake in Obowo local government; monkey colony in Aboh Mbaise local government; Igwekala shrine in Mbaitoli local government; Mbari cultural centre in Owerri municipal council etc. The local government area are also places where most cultural festivals and ceremonies take place. It is in the local government areas that the chiefs, traditional rulers keep and preserve their traditional paraphernalia and objects which have cultural and religious significance to their communities (Eze-Uzoamaka, 2006).

Researchers have observed and predicted that tourists of the Western world origin now want to have romance with nature (the eco-system). The type of tourism which involves the local (rural) communities most are eco-tourism It is

in recognition of the above that the United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) declared the year 2002 as the International year of eco-tourism (Wall and Matheison, 2006). Eco-tourism resources are in abundance in Imo State. Rural areas in Imo State can therefore, provide experiences sought by eco-tourists.

Cultural tourism resources are also found in abundance in Imo State, for instance, masquerades, arts and crafts, local museums, shrines, festivals, dances etc. Of all of the tourism resources found in Nigeria, the cultural heritage of the country has continued to stand as the country's most viable product because of its richness and ability to compete favourably in the international tourism market. Hence, cultural tourism has been identified as the main thrust of the country's tourism industry. Culture resides in the rural (local government) areas in Imo State. Tourism experts have observed that some tourists are motivated by the interest to study and know the life style and culture of other people (Medlik, 1995).

Sustainable development of tourism in rural areas has posed enormous challenges, particularly on issues relating to recognition and involvement of the community people and other stakeholders. According to Eze-Uzoamaka (2006), Butler (1975) observed that tourism depends on two major factors: (a) the host community and its population and (b) the tourists themselves and their activities. Burunakitti et al (2012) observed the importance of community-based eco-tourism in Thailand. These authors recognize that community people as stakeholders are at the heart of tourism management. Tourism researchers have observed that locals will generally accept and back tourism if it yields socio-cultural and socio-economic benefits and the environment is protected (Ghaderi and Henderson, (2012). Therefore, in tourism development involvement of the community members in decision making and implementation is critical (Peterson, 2012; Ghaderi and Henderson, 2012; Da'Silva, 2001; Eze-Uzoamaka, 2006). According to Ghaderi and Henderson (2012) , rural tourism has become a priority in national tourism policies and highlighted in Iran's Tourism Development and Management Master plan (1998 – 2020). As tourist traffic is normally towards hospitable destination, people who live around a site and venue of events must be hospitable. Community members are the people who live closet to sites and venues of events. In Nigeria, the local government council is the third tier of government and the closet to the people.

The federal government of Nigeria in recognition of the importance of local government authorities (LGAs) in sustainable tourism development, included the responsibilities of the LGAs in the national tourism policy of 1990 and in the federal government Decree 81 of 1992. In the tourism policy, the LGAs were mandated to set up tourism committees charged with the responsibilities of identifying potential tourist attractions in their areas, serve as information centres, preserve and maintain local museums (Babangida, 1990; Eze-Uzoamaka, 2006). The Local Government Tourism Committee shall consist of: LGA chairman, traditional ruler, police officer, tourism expert, a council member, and any other stakeholder. Collaboration among stakeholders has been found to be an important requirement for sustainable tourism development. It has been observed that tourism development in the rural areas in Imo state and in Nigeria in general, is still low despite the abundant tourism resources.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Although tourism today is generally a private-sector driven industry, a reasonable level of government involvement particularly the LGAs in terms of infrastructural development, investment, regulation and marketing is necessary. In some countries rural tourism is accorded priority attention by policy makers as an important rural development strategy. In some others, particularly in the developing countries and Africa, support for rural tourism development may be limited by inconsistencies in policies, political and institutional obstacles, and administrative complexities (Holland et al, 2003; Peterson, 2010). It has been observed that infrastructural development in rural areas in developing countries is still a significant barrier to tourism development (Peterson, 2010).

Success in rural tourism development without considerable involvement of the LGAs and community members is unlikely. Tourism planning requires strong local government support. Community people must be willing to cater to tourists and provide setting and experiences that are attractive to the visitors (Stevenson, 2002). Besides, community people claim ownership of the resources and the land on which the resources situate. Therefore, any plan without the involvement of the community members is likely to fail.

The LGAs being the third tier of government and being the closest to the people is expected to mobilize the locals towards harnessing the natural resources within their domain, and putting in place the necessary infrastructures. In Imo State, infrastructural development and rural tourism are still at low level despite the fact that tourism resources are in abundance. Involvement of the local communities in tourism planning is yet to be witnessed. Appropriate environment has not been created to stimulate tourism growth in the rural areas. We, therefore, strongly assume that the LGAs are

lagging behind in carrying out their expected roles. It is against this backdrop that the researchers embarked on this study.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objectives of the study were to determine the extent and type of local government authorities' involvement in tourism development, and the extent of their compliance with the trade and tourism policy and Decree 81 of 1992. Specific objectives of the study included the following:

- i. To examine the tourism policy objectives of the LGAs
- ii. To evaluate the level of investment in tourism infrastructure by the LGAs
- iii. To examine the LGAs tourism activities within their domain. Tourism activities in this regard include the following: marketing and promotion, land allocation for recreation and tourism, provision of visitors' information, development and management of attractions and events, budgetary allocation for tourism development, sensitization and mobilization of community members.
- iv. To determine the level of collaboration between the LGAs and other stakeholders particularly the private investors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

One basic assumption of the researchers in this study was that the local government authorities are not effectively carrying out their expected roles as provided in the national tourism policy. Also, it was assumed that the level of LGAs involvement in tourism development is not commendable. Based on the objectives of the study and these assumptions, the following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. To what extent have the local government authorities in Imo State complied with the provision of the national tourism policy;
2. What is the extent of involvement of the local government authorities in the following tourism activities:
 - i. Tourism policy objectives,
 - ii Tourism infrastructural development
 - iii Marketing and promotion
 - iv Land allocation for recreation and tourism
 - v Provision of visitors' information
 - vi Management of attractions and events
 - vii Budgetary allocation for tourism development
 - viii Sensitization and mobilization of community members;
3. What is the extent of collaboration between the LGAs and the private investors?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Rural tourism is now thought to be one of the most effective strategies to stimulate rural economic development. Tourism creates employment and generates income (Egbali, 2010; Eze-Uzoamaka, 2006). Community-based tourism development benefits the local community members. A clear understanding of current situation in the LGAs will help policy makers and tourism planners to initiate appropriate development strategies that will maximise the intended benefits of tourism projects.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study was carried out in Imo State, Nigeria. Imo State has twenty seven (27) local government areas. Out of the 27 local government areas, three (3) are urban while the rest are rural. In the course of the study the researchers sought views of the local government area chairmen with a view to ascertaining the existence of local government tourism committee, administrative complexities and issues that can influence tourism development in their domain. The researchers also looked for tourism policy documents with a view to evaluating activities of the LGAs in tourism development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Survey method was adopted. Both primary and secondary data were sourced to satisfy the study objectives. Secondary data were obtained from published and unpublished reports, seminar and workshop's documents from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and Imo State Tourism Corporation and other sources.

A questionnaire addressed to the chairmen of local government authorities covering a range of issues relating to their role in tourism policy making and planning and implementation was used. Their opinions were also sought on issues relating to their involvement in budgetary allocation to tourism, promotion and marketing, community involvement and other issues stated under the research question (Section 1.4). Through oral interviews where necessary, the respondents were asked to elaborate on their views after filling the questionnaire. The questionnaire was validated. The methodology adopted in this study had been used by Stevenson (2002) and Johnathan (1994) and similar issues were investigated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data and information extracted from the questionnaire and interview are presented in this section of this presentation. Questionnaire return rate was 77.8 % ; 21 out of the 27 local government areas responded. As at the time of this study, each of the respondents (chairmen) had spent only nine months in office, while their predecessors spent less than two years in office. Information available revealed that as at 1992 when Decree 81 was promulgated, only two (2) LGAs had tourism committee. However, as at the time of this study, none of the LGAs has a tourism committee as provided in the national tourism policy and Decree 81 Of 1992.

Other data obtained from the study were summarized and presented in Table 3.1. The data provide a clear understanding of the current situation in the LGAs with regards to tourism development activities of the local government authorities. The three local government areas that responded yes to question numbers 4, 6(i) and 6(iv) are those located in the urban areas. The respondents were asked to elaborate on those responses. From the interview, it was observed that they referred to as tourism officers were officers charged with the responsibilities of collecting taxes from hotels and restaurants. The LGAs have been involved in general infrastructural development but not specifically provided for tourism. Some of the communities have been involved in self-help projects in infrastructural development. The LGAs have no strategic plans and policies of their own but depend on the state government for directives. The chairmen of the LGAs are guided the local government administrative legislation. The implication is that the state government does not give the LGAs the autonomy to make their own plans and policies particularly on issues concerning funding of projects. The state sets priorities for the LGAs. The LGA chairmen were not elected by the people rather they were appointed by the state governor. Hence, the chairmen owe allegiance to the state government. Such administrative complexities constitute obstacles to sustainable tourism development (Holland et al, 2003; Peterson, 2010). Institutional arrangement of this nature is not appropriate for tourism development.

TABLE 1
DATA EXTRACTED FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE REFLECTING THE VIEWS OF THE RESPONDENTS

Question items	Responses			
	Yes		No	
	No	%	No	%
1. Awareness of tourism policy			21	100
2. Awareness of decree No. 81 of 1992			21	100
3. Existence of LGA tourism committee			21	100
4. Existence of LGA tourism officer	3	14.3	18	85.7
5. Existence of LGA tourism policy objectives			21	100
6. Involvement of LGAs in the following:			21	100
i. Infrastructural development for tourism	3	14.3	18	85.7
ii. Tourism marketing and promotion			21	100
iii. Provision of visitors' information			21	100
iv. Land allocation for recreation/tourism	3	14.3	18	85.7
v. Management of attractions			21	100
vi. Management of tourism events			21	100
vii. Allocation of fund for tourism development			21	100
viii. Sensitization and mobilization of community members			21	100

7. Any collaboration between the LGA and the state government			21	100
8. Any collaboration between the LGA and private sector.			21	100

Source: survey data 2012

There was no collaboration between the LGAs and the stakeholders including the community members. Researchers have observed that involvement of community members is critical to sustainable tourism development (Burunakitti et al, 2012; Eze-Uzoamaka, 2006; Ghadari and Henderson, 2012). The literature has also revealed that the locals will generally accept and back tourism if they are involved in decision-making and implementation. The importance of community-based tourism cannot be over-emphasized. Involvement of community members builds some degree of trust. Some level of inconsistency and lack of continuity in policy formulation and implementation were revealed. LGA chairmen were replaced in quick succession. This compounded the problems of tourism development at the local level.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The LGAs in Nigeria and Imo State in particular are not adequately playing their expected roles towards sustainable tourism development. Tourism development at the local level has not become a priority. There are administrative and institutional complexities limiting tourism development at the local level. The LGAs are incapacitated due to inadequacy of fund. Although the chairmen of the LGAs are aware of tourism and economic potentials of the resources available in their domain, they lack the political will to make policies towards their development.

Government has not created appropriate environment capable of removing barriers and lure private sector and community members into participating in tourism development. The government has not put in place the necessary infrastructure required for sustainable development.

Based on the above findings, it is recommended that there should be some collaboration between the state and the LGAs. The LGAs and the community members should be involved in decision-making and implementation of tourism development strategies. It is imperative that the LGAs be given some degree of autonomy in choosing development projects for their constituencies.

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