



International Journal of Development and Sustainability

ISSN: 2168-8662 – www.isdsnet.com/ijds

Volume 3 Number 2 (2014): Pages 306-314

ISDS Article ID: IJDS13111801



Socio-political and macro-economic factors influencing ecotourism competitiveness in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This research assessed the overall socio-political and macro-economic factors that influence the competitiveness of Zimbabwe as an ecotourism destination. The research embarked on an in-depth analysis of the Mahenye ecotourism venture located in Chipinge District, Manicaland Province in south-eastern Zimbabwe. Research methods included key informant interviews. In addition tourism statistics were used to analyze the overall performance of Zimbabwe as an ecotourism destination. The study noted that the critical success factors for the sustainability of the Zimbabwean ecotourism ventures are national political and macro-economic stability and the quality of relations with eco-tourist generating regions. Ecotourism ventures such as Mahenye have largely degenerated due to political and macro-economic instability in the country. There is therefore need to positively address this unfavourable political and macro-economic environment if ecotourism ventures such as Mahenye are to be revived and effectively contribute to biophysical conservation and communities' development.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainability; Development

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Cite this article as: Mudzengi, B.K. and Chiutsi, S. (2014), "Socio-political and macro-economic factors influencing ecotourism competitiveness in Zimbabwe", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 306-314.

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1. Introduction

The definition of ecotourism has been heavily contested and consequently multiple definitions, often contradictory have been proffered. However, one of the widely embraced definitions of ecotourism is one developed by Ceballos-Lascuran (1993) who unbundled ecotourism as travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, enjoying the scenery, wildlife and any existing cultural manifestations. However, this definition falls short as it only focuses on the motives of the eco-tourist traveller and not on the environmental impacts on the setting. Schachtschneider (2002) notes that in eco-tourist sites business benefits from the sustainable resource approach, visitors' experience a unique encounter with nature and the environment is utilized efficiently and sustainably. Ecotourism occupies a tourism niche which caters for a clientele that is more aware and where environmental business ethics are part and parcel of marketing. Ecotourism in all its forms is often proposed as being able to ensure biophysical environmental conservation while enabling socio-economic benefits to accrue to the local communities. The most common denominator with respect to ecotourism is that it is nature-based (Cater, 2006). Arguably, community based approaches to tourism development have been advanced as a prerequisite to sustainability. Admittedly, ecotourism has been subject to shifting representations of meaning and the absence of general theoretical and practical consensus (Fennel and Nowaczek, 2010). The main objective of this paper therefore is to assess the overall socio-political and macro-economic factors influencing the competitiveness of Zimbabwe as an ecotourism destination. The research embarks on an in-depth analysis of the Mahenye ecotourism venture located in Chipinge District, Manicaland Province in south-eastern Zimbabwe. The once thriving Mahenye ecotourism venture has largely degenerated as a model example of Zimbabwe's Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) due to a sharp decline in visitor numbers. Thus, the ecotourism development case history of success at Mahenye described by Murphree in 2001 is no longer evident. In general the success stories of CAMPFIRE projects (Bond, 2001; Murombedzi, 2001; Taylor, 2001) are mostly no longer evident throughout Zimbabwe. There is therefore need to positively address the factors that are making Zimbabwe a less competitive ecotourism destination so as to revive ventures such as Mahenye.

The tourism industry involves people on holidaymaking visiting places of interest along the way. The industry is an ever-evolving one, with new developments and trends continually taking place. Worldwide, but particularly in Southern Africa, where wildlife and wilderness are often the major products and attractions, tourism goes hand-in-hand with conservation initiatives (Botswana Tourism Board, 2009). The realization that the tourism industry is largely environment dependent and resource based rendering it capable of disrupting ecosystems and having significant impacts on tourist destinations has contributed to how recent definitions of ecotourism have been conceptualized. Recent developments in ecotourism have included conservation, education, ethics, sustainability, impacts and local benefits as the main variables. The concept of ecotourism as supportive of local community livelihood goals is further reiterated by Reichel and Uriely (2008) who define it as tourism with a low impact on the environment which assist in habitat maintenance either directly through a contribution to conservation or indirectly by providing revenue to the local community which is adequate for local people to value and therefore protect their wildlife heritage as

source of livelihood. It is further reiterated that ecotourism is managed in accordance with industry best practice to attain environmentally, politically and socio-culturally sustainable outcomes as well as financial viability (Weaver, 2008). The activities that have emerged through ecotourism initiatives include village cultural tours, sport hunting, photographic safaris, fishing and a lot of other downstream activities which support the eco-tourist during the communal tours.

The tourism industry is widely environment dependent, rendering it capable of disrupting ecosystems and having significant impacts on the tourist destinations. Thus, concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism have been gaining prominence since the mid-1980s as a panacea for the destructive impacts of conventional mass tourism. Ecotourism is considered to be small-scale with limited ecological and socio-cultural impacts when compared to mass tourism. Ecotourism limits the number of guests who visit a destination as there is adherence to the carrying capacity of the tourist resource base. Ecotourism is associated with the emergence of the sustainable development paradigm which advocated a measured growth approach that takes into consideration a destination's environmental and socio-cultural carrying capacity (Weaver, 2008). Harris et al. (2002) argues that sustainable development is the new conventional wisdom which encourages business to move away from a sole focus on profit but the triple bottom line that is financial, social and environmental performance. The key features of sustainable development that have largely underpinned sustainable tourism development and ecotourism in particular are the precautionary principle, inter-generational and intra-generational equity and ecological integrity (McNamara, 2008).

The sustainability criterion of ecotourism includes economic and socio-cultural dimensions further to the ecological dimension. Notable is the emphasis that the tourism industry can only be sustainable if local communities derive revenue through tourism. Weaver (2008) makes reference to Northern Tanzania, where a case study of three villages revealed that support of wildlife conservation is positively related to the benefits that village residents obtain from ecotourism. In Namibia the Ongava Eco-tourist Lodge has resulted in a win-win solution for guests in the form of an unspoilt holiday destination, for the company in the form of profitability, and for the environment in the form of sustainable resource use (Schachtschneider, 2002). Against this backdrop ecotourism has been embraced as a key development strategy for developing countries as it is widely recognized as a key generator of foreign currency and employment. A key attribute of ecotourism is that it is managed in accordance with industry best practice to attain environmentally, socio-culturally and financially sustainable outcomes (Weaver, 2008). The importance of an ecotourism operation's financial sustainability cannot be underestimated in promoting sustainable development. It is critical for the destination to have attractions capable of sustaining the ecotourism sector so as to achieve financial viability. Proximity to a large national park could be a huge advantage for wildlife based ecotourism ventures. The other factor crucial to the financial viability of ecotourism and overall sustainability of tourism development is skills and capacity acquisition. Kiss (2004) cited in Weaver (2008) argues that tourism is a complex industry which may be an inappropriate entry level activity for communities with few business competencies, even when they possess local skills and knowledge that confer competitive advantage through their ability to convey a destination's unique sense of place and authentic culture to visitors. Therefore, there is need to train local residents in customer care and in appreciating the service dynamics of tourism so that communities are able to create and sustain demand by providing high levels of visitor satisfaction. Fennel

(2008) thus argues that joint ventures with experienced private businesses is an effective way of introducing and maintaining quality standards appropriate for high value visitors from the more developed international core states. However, in terms of attracting tourists to community based tourism projects, the first requirement is political and economic stability. Spenceley (2006) argues that tourism is a very fickle industry and the occurrence or even threat of political unrest or violence in a given country usually leads to a sharp fall in tourist arrivals.

2. Research methods and materials

This research is based on an extensive literature review of the ecotourism discourse in Southern Africa. It also embarks on an in-depth analysis of the Mahenye ecotourism venture in south-eastern Zimbabwe. The Mahenye ecotourism venture was selected as it strategically represent Zimbabwe's peripheral border regions possessing huge ecotourism potential due to its proximity to the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Park. Research methods included key informant interviews. Key informants used in the study included the Director of the CAMPFIRE Association and the Market Research and Product Development Officer of the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority. These key informants were interviewed on the performance of tourism and the factors influencing the development of ecotourism in the country. The CAMPFIRE Association Coordinator at Chipinge Rural District Council was also interviewed on the development and performance of the Mahenye ecotourism venture. In addition, tourism statistics from the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority were used to analyze the overall performance of Zimbabwe as an ecotourism destination. The statistics were for the period from 1989 to 2013 with the decade 1989-1999 characterized by a general growth in the tourism industry, the period 2000-2009 characterized by a general decline and the period from 2010-2013 characterized by a general revival in the industry (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2013).

3. Area of study

The Mahenye ecotourism venture is a joint venture agreement between the local Shangaan-speaking peoples and African Sun Limited (formerly Zimbabwe Sun Limited), which owns a chain of hotels in Zimbabwe. Mahenye Ward lies at the extreme southern end of Chipinge District, covering about 210 square kilometers in the Ndowoyo Communal Land. Average rainfall is low (450–500mm per annum) and does not viably support dryland crop cultivation making ecotourism an important non-agricultural source of livelihood. Most of the ward is covered by mixed mopane and combretum woodland but a dense riverine forest is found along the Save River supporting a broad range of floral and avian species, some of them rare in Zimbabwe. Up until the establishment of the ecotourism venture, the Shangaan have poached extensively from the neighbouring Gonarezhou National Park, from which many of them were evicted when the park was created in 1966 (Murphree, 2001). The villagers poached as means of survival and in the hope that if they killed wildlife no more tourists would come and the National Park would be eventually closed (Scheyvens, 2000). The ecotourism venture has seen the development of Chilo Gorge Lodge and Mahenye Safari Lodge on Shangaan

land to accommodate visitors. The lodges provide access to Gonarezhou National Park and are part of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Park. The main attraction in this ecotourism venture is bird photography and identification in the evergreen riverine woodland. Other additional tourist activities include game drives, fishing and boat cruises in Save and Runde Rivers. The local people are heavily involved through cultural tourism and are employed as tour guides in the village tours. Notable is that the operation is largely small-scale causing serious viability problems. Therefore, the challenge is to sustain this operation against the backdrop that in order to succeed an ecotourism venture must be economically sustainable as a business (Chiutsi et al. 2011).

4. Results and discussions

The Mahenye ecotourism venture has so far provided some tangible benefits in the form of training and employment opportunities for local people in tour guiding, service arena and cultural tours. The local people staff 63% of posts. However, employment has been highly skewed in favour of men. At one time at Mahenye Safari Lodge, only three out of fifteen positions were filled by women while at Chilo Gorge Lodge, four out of thirty-eight positions were filled by females (Scheyvens, 2000). Such gender disparity threatens the overall sustainability of the ecotourism venture. Furthermore, local employment is skewed towards lower paid categories. Infrastructural improvements to the area including road improvements, electricity supply, telephone connections and water reticulation have also been benefits to the community. Lease payments by African Sun Limited also provided direct economic benefits to the local people. There are also costs as the lodges bring in outsiders and cases of petty thievery have increased. The behaviour and forms of dress of lodge visitors are also regarded by some as inappropriate. There are also worries that wage structures giving younger workers higher salaries than their elders may upset traditional hierarchies of respect. Further, there are complaints that the lodges have restricted community access to bathing and fishing points on the Save River. The lodges also disturbed livestock grazing and watering patterns. However, the agreement between the local community and African Sun Limited bound the latter to ensure that its presence is as unobtrusive and beneficial to the Mahenye Ward Community as possible (Murphree, 2001). Overall, the Mahenye initiative was very positive in terms of promoting development in an economically marginalized communal area, encouraging sustainable use of natural resources and enhancing the control of local people over development in the surrounding areas.

However, the macro-economic and political instability in Zimbabwe from around 2000 has been a major threat to ecotourism. This is exacerbated by sanctions imposed by some international core states which have resulted in important sources of foreign exchange and foreign direct and portfolio investment drying up (Ferreira, 2004). The subdued macro-economic environment has negatively affected the tourism sector in the country and ecotourism ventures like Mahenye have not been spared. As a result African Sun Limited pulled out of the joint initiative citing viability concerns due to the subdued performance of the Zimbabwean tourist industry triggered by the economic and political crisis which peaked from 2007 to 2008. Consequently, the conservation project in Mahenye has degenerated as a model example of Zimbabwe's

CAMPFIRE. The socio-economic benefits to the local community have deteriorated sharply from conditions described in earlier studies (Balint and Mashinya, 2006). The local failure of leadership combined with the withdrawal of African Sun Limited contributed to the poor performance of the ecotourism venture (Wolmer, 2003). Zimbabwe has experienced an 11% drop in tourist arrivals and 38% drop in tourism receipts during 1999-2000. This is in contrast to the decade 1989-1999 in which tourist arrivals grew at an average growth rate of 17.5% whilst tourism receipts increased at an average annual growth rate of 18% (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2013). During the period January-December 2004, a total of 1 854 488 visitors visited Zimbabwe, representing an 18% decrease when compared to 2 256 205 visitors during the same period in 2003. The year 2005 again registered a 16% decrease in arrivals compared to 2004. Tourist arrivals from Europe declined by 14% in 2006. Further, the year 2008 recorded a 22% decline in tourist arrivals and the average room occupancy rate in lodges fell to 29% from 33% in 2007 while the average bed occupancy fell from 30% to 25% (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2013).

The lessons to be learnt from the Mahenye ecotourism venture as it relates to Zimbabwe is that local communities alone without technical support, business marketing and promotion assistance from established tourism enterprises cannot facilitate economic viability and overall sustainability of ecotourism ventures. Even in apparently successful conservation and development projects, local participatory decision making institutions are fragile and require continuous external support and capacity development in managing and marketing the ecotourism ventures (Balint and Mashinya, 2006). The collaboration between the Mahenye local community and African Sun Limited had bound both parties to jointly endeavour to administer the ecotourism venture to ensure that activities are rendered as efficient and as profitable as possible so as to ensure the proper and efficient preservation, management and protection of the natural habitat and wildlife. Further, African Sun Limited was willing to support the local community because as a company in an industry where environmental image is important, its involvement in a community-based natural resource management enterprise enhances its image of being an environmentally responsible business. The tourism company has a mission statement which asserts its commitment to participate responsibly in the controlled social and environmental development of the regions where it operates (Murphree, 2001). Within Zimbabwe CAMPFIRE is also largely seen as an initiative for rural African empowerment and development and any tourism enterprise which associates itself with this does its political image no harm.

Another important lesson emanating from the Mahenye case study is the significance of the market from international core nations mainly in Western Europe and North America in sustaining the ecotourism industry. Zimbabwe's tourism woes are closely related to the anti-Western stance taken by the political leadership leading to the broader international market boycotting the country as a tourist destination. Zimbabwe has been largely perceived as an unsafe tourist destination by the international market resultantly undermining the ecotourism sector. In addition to the possession of attractive natural areas there is need for Zimbabwe to boost its security image and improve relations with the international core states of the West. Indeed at the peak of the political and macro-economic instability in the country major tourist source nations such as the United States of America, Britain and Japan issued travel warnings to their nationals against travelling to Zimbabwe. These travel warnings were lifted with the stabilizing of the political and macro-

economic situation following the formation of the Government of National Unity in 2009 and tourist arrivals started to increase. Statistics show that in 2011 Zimbabwe recorded an 8% increase in tourist arrivals, having risen from 2 239 165 in 2010 to 2 423 280. Further, in 2011 average lodge room occupancy level experienced a 2% growth from 32% to 34% and average bed occupancy level also rose by 3% from 26% to 29% (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2013). Tourist arrivals by air and road increased by 17% in 2012 to 404 282 from 346 299 in 2011. Air travellers into the country increased from 36 373 in 2010 to 54 097 in 2013. The 2013 arrivals are for three months to March (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2013). The United Nations World Tourism Organization Assembly which Zimbabwe co-hosted with Zambia in August 2013 also presented an opportunity to work on the perception the international community has on the country and further improve tourist arrivals. Thus one factor which could promote or work against the viability of ecotourism in Zimbabwe in the long run is the general political and macro-economic conditions in the country and how the international community responds. Tourist markets are highly sensitive to international and national factors and events that are highly outside the control of tourist sites and host communities (Ferreira, 2004). Therefore, the macro-economic and political challenges in Zimbabwe need a long lasting resolution as the continued uncertainty may eventually affect its destination competitiveness with the ultimate effect of undermining the sustainability and economic viability of ecotourism ventures that have been initiated by the local communities.

5. Conclusion

This discussion has reflected through the case study of the Mahenye ecotourism venture that ecotourism provides a sustainable way to earn income through the conservation of environmental resources by communities that own them. It is also noted that the critical success factors for the economic sustainability of the ecotourism ventures in Zimbabwe are macro-economic and political stability and the quality of relations with the major eco-tourist generating regions. Good governance, macro-economic stability, positive international relations and policies that are not confrontational with the international core states remain major factors in determining the overall viability of the ecotourism sector, hence facilitating sustainable development. Thus the perceptions of macro-economic and political instability have had a negative impact on Zimbabwe's ecotourism sector. Apartheid South Africa also suffered a similar tourism downturn due to the international condemnation of its discriminative policies and its role as an instigator of conflict in Southern Africa (Van Ameron, 2004). Therefore, sanctions imposed by some international core states can restrain the growth of ecotourism as has been evidenced by the slump in tourist arrivals to Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2009. The ultimate effect of the decline in arrivals is to cripple the ecotourism ventures run by the local communities. Apart from the challenges outlined in this research, ecotourism in Zimbabwe has been hailed as a promising strategy for achieving sustainable development. The main benefit of ecotourism as reflected in the case study being its potential for providing needed capital investments without exceeding ecological and cultural carrying capacities. However, in order to succeed an ecotourism venture must be viable as a financial business, conserve the biophysical environment and provide tangible social benefits to the local people. It is hoped that if Zimbabwe positively address the socio-political and macro-economic factors outlined in this

research ecotourism ventures such as Mahenye will be revived and thereby effectively contribute to biophysical conservation and communities' development.

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