

## Empowerment through friendship: A process view of community-based tourism

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## **Empowerment through friendship: A process view of community-based tourism**

**Key words:** Community-based tourism, sustainable development, empowerment, catalyst, facilitator, ally, advocate, friend

### **Introduction**

It has been argued that “empowerment and community development are irrevocably connected” (Toomey, 2011: 183), although empowerment remains a highly contested and malleable concept (Page & Czuba, 1999; Rappaport, 1987; Speer & Hughey, 1995; Toomey, 2011). Rowlands (1995, p. 103) argued that empowerment is “the process by which people become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context”. Placing empowerment in such a process perspective, reveals it to be something obtained by the less empowered, rather than granted by the more powerful (see Taliaferro, 1991). A significant aspect of this view is understanding the importance of the concept of power and of citizen involvement or participation as praxis within different contexts (Mayaka, Croy & Cox, 2018). This paper conceptualises empowerment as contextually embedded relationships in which the community and community members exercise control over their own affairs, and in which self-esteem and community pride are enhanced and mutual respect with external actors is upheld (see also Craig, 2002; Toomey, 2011). Arguably, such relationships can be achieved through a combination of shared power and trust. This notion expands the discussion of empowerment to community-based strategies to empower communities that have previously been disregarded (Corbett & Fikkertt, 2012). Such community-based initiatives aim to build relationships and capacities rather than just the completion of community-based projects. However, apart from Toomey’s (2001) analysis of ‘equal’ ‘horizontal relationships’, there is little scholarship in this field of development studies, particularly in relation to community-based tourism (CBT). In taking just such a process view of empowerment, this study uncovers what appears to be a complex relationship of “friend” or “neighbour”, combining notions of power and trust in four community-based tourism case settings in the Republic of Kenya.

### **Empowerment and community-based tourism**

There is no shortage of studies on the connection between empowerment and development through community-based tourism (Akama, 1996; Panta & Thapa, 2018; Scheyvens, 1999, 2000, 2007; Sofield, 2003). It has been suggested that there is inevitable conflict between ‘tradition’ which defines communities, and change that is represented by sustainable tourism

development (Sofield, 2003). The failure of institutions to support or enhance the empowerment aspirations of communities has also been noted (e.g., Akama, 1996). We argue that dominant views in this sustainable tourism development and empowerment nexus, to a large extent, have focused on determined strategic outcomes while possibly neglecting important social processes. It is stressed that there is a need to examine empowerment as a process if (and when) it takes place in natural settings in a less deterministic manner (Mayaka et al., 2018). There is a need to incorporate understanding of empowerment as a praxis, capturing the complexity of the phenomenon. This represents a departure, for example, from calls to include empowerment in policy documents (see for example, Ferguson, 2011).

Toomey (2011) presented a list of possible community empowerment roles that included traditional categories of rescuer, provider, modernizer, and liberator, augmented by alternative roles of catalyst, facilitator, ally and advocate. It is within the framework of these ‘alternative’ roles that we seek to make a contribution. These roles have been, hitherto, largely defined by the organisations involved in development work within the given community (Toomey, 2011). We apply the empowerment lens to examine emic accounts of the nuances of these roles as assumed by different actors in the development of community-based tourism enterprises (CBTEs) in CBT settings in a rural Kenyan environment.

## **Context and method**

### *Context*

The empirical research involved four Kenyan CBT case studies, namely Il Ngwesi, Lumo, Mwaluganje and Mackinder distributed at different locations throughout Kenya. These cases are all interwoven with the context of Kenya’s tenuous land tenure system, which to some extent is still encumbered by legacies from the colonial past (see Kayat, 2009; Wily, 2018). The Il Ngwesi Group ranch is an initiative of the Laikipiak/Il Ngwesi Maasai community, living in a semi-arid part of the country. The Kenya constitution promulgated in 2010 seeks to address perceived historical injustices that affect land distribution and use among some communities (National Council for Law Reporting, 2013; Wily, 2018). Lumo Community Wildlife Sanctuary is the second case study. The area is located in a wildlife migration corridor in Taita Taveta County about 160 kilometres from the coastal city of Mombasa. Lumo lies within the Tsavo ecosystem including Kenya’s largest wildlife parks, (Tsavo East and Tsavo West National Parks). The third case study is of Mackinder Eagle Owl Sanctuary which is a

small CBTE situated in the village of Kiawara in Kenya's Central Highlands. The sanctuary was the brainchild of a farmer Paul Muriithi who turned part of his land over to the preservation of an endangered owl species. The final case study is that of Golini-Mwaluganje Community Wildlife Conservation Limited, commonly known as Mwaluganje Elephant Sanctuary which is located in the impoverished Kwale County on Kenya's coast, 45 kilometres southwest of Mombasa (Kenya Wildlife Service, 2014). Mwaluganje is a CBTE consisting of land that local Digo and Duruma farmers donated to the project.

### *Methods*

An ethnographic approach was adopted, consisting of 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with organisational members, private investors and community members, conducted by the lead author. In addition, the research involved participant (researcher) observation, and analysis of pertinent documents.

### *Limitations*

Being deeply qualitative this research is not intended to be broadly generalizable. Indeed, the nature of ethnographic research means that the researcher's own habitus necessarily influences the interpretation of results. The researcher and lead author is an ethnic African, born and raised in rural Kenya. In addition, one co-author is an ethnic *Mzungu* (European) also born in Kenya. Accordingly, their interpretations might be limited to a Kenyan perspective. In addition, accounts by participants represent constructed truths which should not be read uncritically.

### **Findings**

The core findings reveal that many agents of community development fit into multiple and overlapping alternative empowerment roles (catalyst, facilitator, ally and advocate) in the establishment and development of CBTEs. Although most actors come from outside the community, empowerment roles can be played by members from within the community itself. Moreover, the roles may apply in what would arguably be vertical and horizontal relationships. Some actors switched between roles at different stages of the development in a way that demonstrates relationships shaped by an interplay between power and trust.

### *Catalyst*

A catalyst shares new ideas and experiences in a horizontal learning situation but can also be a vertical relationship where the empowered and the empowering are in different levels of power (cf. Vail, 2007). In the case of Il Ngwesi, a neighbouring white man, Ian Craig, shared his ideas with the community on how to start a tourism business based on his own Lewa Downs Ranch. The interviewees used the words “neighbour” and “friend” interchangeably when referring to Craig who encouraged the community to follow his example to create a tourism enterprise in order to generate ongoing income in the face of drought-related livestock losses. Tourism was alien to the traditions of the Il Ngwesi Maasai and thus marked a significant shift in the Maasai self-image which is tied to cattle ownership. Following discussions with Craig, a delegation of Il Ngwesi Maasai travelled south to Narok, to study the impacts of community-owned tourism enterprises on their fellow Maasais.

A similar catalytic influence of other communities with tourism experience was observed in the cases of Lumo and Mwaluganje. The elders, through visiting other areas, were able to use their own knowledge and draw on the knowledge of others in ways that improved their understanding of their situation. In the case of the Mackinder Owl Sanctuary, the catalytic agent was internal to the community. Paul Muriithi, a local farmer converted his affection for the eagle owl into a sanctuary and tourism attraction. By sharing the income from his sanctuary with the community, and handing control of the use of such benefits to the community, he turned the Kikuyu distrust of the owl into a desire to preserve it.

### *Facilitator*

The facilitator role is characterised by a number of elements, including decision making, resource mobilisation, management, communication, coordination or even conflict resolution in a way that builds community capacity (Datta, 2007). Interviewees with the founding members at Il Ngwesi, explained how their white neighbour, Ian Craig, helped to build capacity by facilitating visits to other communities. Craig also facilitated partnerships with funders of the project. Importantly, Craig was trusted by his friends and neighbours in the Maasai community, despite being a white man and thereby connected to the colonial past that had taken prime agricultural land from the Maasai people.

In the Lumo case an official with African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), a community outsider, John Kiio, assumed a facilitator role by brokering relationships between the community and

other organisations. So significant was the relationship with Kiio that at one time the community considered having him sit on the Lumo board, which would translate to him being considered a part of the Lumo community.

In the Mwaluganje case a similar facilitation role was played by a community outsider. Kamau, who was at the time the Kwale District Warden, made a proposal for the formation the Golini-Mwaluganje Community Conservation Ltd (Cocheba & Ndriangu, 1998; Mburu & Birner, 2007). Upon retirement from the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) he was approached to become the first manager of the sanctuary.

Another powerful actor, the British High Commissioner, Sir Jeffrey James, exhibited a facilitation role at Mackinder in its earliest days of operation. After visiting the site, the high commissioner used his position to promote the owl sanctuary. He thus acted as a facilitator from a position of power in what might be interpreted as a productive application of power. It is significant that the high commissioner did not have, or attempt to wield, any direct power over the Mackinder project.

### *Ally*

The ally fulfils a friendship/supporter/helping role that shows compassion, respect and mutuality in a more or less horizontal relationship with the community and its members (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Ian Craig's Il Ngwesi activities of sharing and exchange of ideas, as well as the support given to the community in getting partners, fit within this role. The same can be said of Kiio's help to Lumo to secure funding, and Kamau's role at Mwaluganje, which continued even after he ceased to be the manager of the project. Sir Jeffrey James also exhibited a friendship role at MacKinder. His visit to Paul's home was later reciprocated by a visit from Paul to Sir Jeffrey's office where he was received without the normal formalities and where the high commissioner was presented with a gift.

### *Advocate*

The activities that may be associated with the advocate role were evidenced only in the two cases of Il Ngwesi and Lumo. At Il Ngwesi this is illustrated by Craig's instigation of the community to act against the exploitative business activities of safari tour operators. Interestingly, while a Maasai elder referred to the white safari entrepreneurs as *Wazungu* (an ostensibly non-pejorative term for white people, which is nonetheless suggestive of an unequal

power relationship), Craig was only referred to as friend or neighbour. Kiio's commitment and passion for Lumo is similarly characteristic of the advocate role. One interviewee, who in this context can be regarded as an outsider and observer in the events, noted the enthusiasm exhibited by Kiio, then a community-based enterprise expert with AWF, in whipping up enthusiasm and support for the project.

## **Discussion**

### *A Process View of Empowerment*

Craig at Il Ngwesi, Kiio at Lumo, Kamau at Mwaluganje and both Paul and Sir Jeffrey in the case of Mackinder, assumed different empowerment roles, albeit with obvious overlaps in the development of the CBTEs. Arguably, these roles can be considered as part of a continuum of a friendship relationship. This friend relationship and the nuances of its manifestation across the four cases as uncovered by this research is fulfilled by an individual rather than by an organisation. The individual may be an outsider, or a member of the community, who acts out of a commitment either to the community (representing one end of the continuum) or a cause, (representing the other end). The friend may move between the roles at different stages of the development, as shaped by shifts of trust and power. However, this is not a strictly linear process. An authentic friendship relationship may be misinterpreted at some point in the earlier stages of development as disempowering because of the friend's more prominent involvement as catalyst or facilitator (see Geheb & Mapedza, 2008; Manyara & Jones, 2007). Nevertheless, over time these roles are replaced in prominence with ally and advocate.

## **Conclusion**

While researchers such as Toomey (2011) have identified specific roles of actors in the development and empowerment processes, the present study reveals that they are not clearly delineated in practice. Instead, there appear to be considerable overlaps between them. Moreover, individuals displaying the complex relationship of a friend can adopt more than one role in any given project, sometimes simultaneously. The relationship may flow to the community at large (as seen in the Il Ngwesi case) or through one or more individuals within that community (as seen in the Mackinder case). The friend ultimately acts to empower or advantage the community or individual and never to disempower. The friend can be a potent agent of community empowerment as well as a trusted catalyst of community development

through enhancing agency and solidarity (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Although this study informs the application of power in CBT settings, further research is needed into the role of trust in this context. While the friend relationship in community empowerment in CBTE settings might be unique to Kenya, there is no reason to believe that it would not exist in other sub-Saharan countries and even beyond the African continent.

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