

Sustainable Tourism Development as Determinant of Economic Transformation in Rural Communities of South Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined sustainable tourism development as determinant of economic transformation in rural communities of South eastern Nigeria, using Imo state as a case study. 300 respondents were purposively selected for the study. A validated 10-item self-developed questionnaire tagged “STDETRCS” (Sustainable Tourism Development and Economic Transformation in Rural Communities Scale) with reliability of 0.91 was used for data collection. Two research questions were formulated and data were analyzed using weighted mean rating. Results showed that the most outstanding way by which sustainable tourism development can improve the livelihood of the people in rural communities is seeing tourism as one of the most important industries that support the rural economy in terms of poverty alleviation, job creation and income generation as the weighted mean scores (3.0, 3.0 and 3.1) are greater than criterion and grand means (2.5 and 2.9) respectively. Therefore, the study recommends that there should be improvement in the quality and efficiency of the basic tourism-related infrastructures and services such as hotels, roads, shopping malls, public amenities, transportation systems and communication to provide world class services to visitors and tourists.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism Development, Economic Transformation, Rural Communities

Introduction

Nigeria as a nation is endowed with both natural and material resources that can be harnessed to aid economic transformation of the country by providing revenue and foreign exchange. Tourism plays significant roles in economic transformation of many nations such as Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Australia, United States of America, Emirate of Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Aruba, and South Korea (Hall and Jenkins, 1995; Sharpley, 2002; Vanegas and Croes, 2003; Oh, 2005; Herb, 2009). This is because it contributes towards alleviating the major political, social and economic problems that characterize the rural areas. Thus, tourism has been discovered to be a very important instrument to poverty alleviation, attainment of the millennium development goals (MDGs) and sustainable development (Olorunfemi and Raheem, 2008; Olajide and Nwogu, 2012).

According to Olapade (2012) not all destinations are fascinating; however, most are able to attract visits due to ‘genuine stories, infrastructure, events and beautifications the custodians invented and invested’ and indirectly creates an enabling environment that attracts local and foreign investors, which in the long run are able to create avenue for employment, boost international patronage as well as generate huge revenue. In spite of the various tourism resources available in Nigeria, there is still the lack of infrastructure and investments in the tourism sector and Nigeria so far has recorded little or no revenue from tourism. Furthermore, many of the destinations lack the ambience found in developed tourist destinations (Ayeni, 2010). Furthermore, the main stay of the Nigerian economy as noted by Akpan (2012) has been the oil and gas sector. However, it has been observed that transforming the economy through tourism has several benefits and Nigeria has so much to gain from developing the tourism sector as asserted by Ayeni and Ebohon (2012).

Also noting the importance of tourism in economic transformation, Othman and Karlberg (2007) said that apart from the physical inflow of tourist foreign currency, it also provides direct ancillary industries for souvenirs, handicraft, food and garment manufacturing. According to them, these industries are labour intensive and afford huge opportunities for employment creation. Although tourism does not only bring economic gains and should not be judged as such, thus Budeanu (2007) observed that it has wider implications encompassing not only economic benefits but also social and cultural benefits and brings about infrastructural improvement and regional growth.

Economically, tourism has been encouraged and supported by international organizations to facilitate growth around the world (WTTC, 2004; WTO, 2008; Nwogu, 2013). However, this myopic view of tourism’s economic impact has generated a flood of literature about the side effects of this impact (Gunn and Var, 2002; Hall, 2008). Despite the potential of tourism as a development tool, and the worldwide mushrooming interest in tourism-based economic transformation initiatives, the relationship between tourism and economic transformation largely remains *terra incognita* among tourism academics (Zhao and Ritchie, 2007). These concerns regarding sustainability have led to the question, is the ‘business as usual’ approach to tourism development sustainable? The answer to this question lies at the core of this study, which aims at examining sustainable tourism development as determinant of economic

transformation in rural communities of South Eastern Nigeria, using Imo state as a case study.

Statement of the Problem

The beautiful tourist sites which hitherto should have served as attraction for tourists thereby helping to generate income in the tourism industry have either been left undeveloped or mismanaged due largely to corruption, poor management, dilapidated and non-availability of tourism-related infrastructural facilities. Therefore, given these circumstances, the need to generate income, create jobs, and alleviate poverty becomes imperative through sustainable tourism development, a silent but veritable economic transformation tool needed to cushion the economic growth and development in rural communities of South Eastern Nigeria, using Imo state as a case study.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. Find out how sustainable tourism development can improve the livelihood of the people in rural communities of Southeastern Nigeria.
- ii. Investigate the extent to which revenue generated by tourism can be used to finance infrastructure development and support local enterprises in the rural communities of Southeastern Nigeria.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, answers will be provided to the following research questions.

1. How can sustainable tourism development improve the livelihood of the people in rural communities of South Eastern Nigeria?
2. To what extent is revenue generated by tourism used to finance infrastructure development and support local enterprises in the rural communities of South Eastern Nigeria?

Area of Study

The area known as Imo state today, which is located in south-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria, was originally part of the defunct East Central State which was one of the twelve states initially created in 1967 by General Yakubu Gowon's regime. The old Imo state which originally included Abia province was later created in 1976 before Abia state was carved out of the state in 1991 by General Ibrahim Babangida. Imo state derived its name from Imo River, which takes its course from the Okigwe/Akwa upland. The state is divided into twenty seven local government areas which include Aboh-Mbaise, Ahizau-Mbaise, Ehime-Mbano, Ezinihitte, Ideato-North, Ideato-South, Ihitte/Uboma, Ikeduru, Isiala-Mbano, Isu, Mbaitoli, Ngor-Okpala, Njaba, Nkwere, Nkwangele, Obowo, Oguta, Ohaji-Egbema, Okigwe, Onuimo, Orlu, Orsu, Oru-East, Oru-West, Owerri -Municipal, Owerri-North and Owerri-West.

Imo state has an estimated population of about 4.8 million and the population density varies from 230-1,400 people per square kilometre. The state is culturally homogeneous as it is a

predominantly Igbo speaking state with minor differences in dialects. Imo state has a very rich cultural heritage and this is manifested in dressing, music, dance, festivals, arts and crafts, and the traditional hospitality of the people. The population of Imo State is predominantly rural. Some of the most densely settled areas of Nigeria are found in Imo State, where a direct relationship exists between population density and the degree of dispersal of rural settlement.

Covering an area of about 5,100sq km, Imo State lies within latitudes 4° 45'N and 7° 15'N and longitude 6°50'E and 7°25'E. It occupies the area between the lower River Niger and the upper and middle Imo River. The state is bounded on the east by Abia State, on the west by the River Niger and Delta state; and on the north by Anambra state, while Rivers state lies to the south. Temperatures are similar all over the state with hottest months between January and March. The mean annual temperature above 20°C with an average annual relative humidity of 75 per cent which is highest during the rainy season, when it rises to about 90 per cent. The high temperature and humidity experienced in the state favour luxuriant plant growth, which produce the Imo state's rich and beautiful vegetation of the tropical rain forest.

Literature Review

As an engine for economic growth, tourism has been found to be resilient and associated with positive impacts in terms of generating foreign exchange earnings, creating employment and income, and stimulating domestic consumption (Modeste, 1995; Durbarry, 2002; Steiner, 2006). Several studies in various developing countries around the world have found a positive and significant relationship between tourism and economic growth (Shan & Wilson, 2001; Durbarry, 2002; Croes & Vanegas, 2008). Studies of the relationship between tourism specialization and economic growth rates have found that small states are faster growing especially when they are highly specialized in tourism (Lanza & Pigliaru, 2000). Tourism has also been described as having a snowball effect in contributing to economic growth, since the development of new tourism destinations is often accompanied by the arrival of new businesses and NGOs (Western, 2008; Honey & Gilpin, 2009).

Consequently, tourism is widely acknowledged as an effective tool for socio-economic development, because of the possible backward and forward linkages with the rest sectors of the economy, which allows it to facilitate employment opportunities, income, local economic development, and enhance the quality of life (Hall, 2007). However, Hall (2007) argues that the extent to which these benefits accrue to a nation crucially depends on local conditions. Furthermore, Manwa (2012) argue that for tourism to be sustainable the community has to benefit directly from it, this will enable them to protect and conserve the resources upon which it is based. This is further emphasized by Smith and Duffy (2003) that apart from the type of tourism, the extent to which tourism confers economic benefits on any country also depends on the expectations of the tourists and the host country's ability to provide appropriate and adequate facilities. And unless economic policies to promote tourism remain a focus in developing countries, tourism will not be a potential source of economic growth (Ekanayake and Long, 2012).

Methodology

The descriptive survey research design of ex post facto type was adopted for this study. Three hundred (300) respondents comprised of residents of the host communities in Imo state of Southeastern Nigeria were screened and used for the study. The purposive sampling method was applied. A 10-item structured questionnaire tagged “Sustainable Tourism Development and Economic Transformation in Rural Communities Scale” (STDETRCS) ($r = 0.91$) was the research instrument that was used in gleaning the field data. Data were analysed using weighted mean.

Results

The results of the data analysed are presented below.

Research Question One

How can sustainable tourism development improve the livelihood of the people in rural communities of Southeastern Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean Score Analysis Showing How Sustainable Tourism Development Can Improve the Livelihood of the People in Rural Communities of Southeastern Nigeria

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remarks
1.	Our standard of living has increased considerably due to tourism development	83(332)	94(282)	60(120)	61(61)	2.7	Accepted
2.	Sustainability of tourism development will attract more investors and this will improve employment opportunities in my community	123(492)	87(261)	48(96)	42(42)	3.0	Accepted
3.	The quality of public services in the village would be better due to tourism investment	115(460)	99(297)	56(112)	30(30)	3.0	Accepted
4.	Tourism is one of the most important industries that support the rural economy in terms of poverty alleviation and income generation	130(520)	112(336)	28(56)	30(30)	3.1	Accepted
5.	Owing to tourism development, rural people will have more recreational opportunities	100(400)	95(285)	55(110)	50(50)	2.8	Accepted
	Grand Mean					2.9	

The table 1 above revealed that the respondents perceived all items as how sustainable tourism development can improve the livelihood of the people in rural communities of Southeastern Nigeria. Such items and their weighted mean scores are: our standard of living has increased considerably due to tourism development (2.7); sustainability of tourism development will attract more investors and this will improve employment opportunities in my community (3.0); the quality of public services in the village would be better due to tourism investment (3.0); tourism is one of the most important industries that support the rural economy in terms of poverty alleviation and otherwise (3.1); and owing to tourism development, rural people will have more recreational opportunities (2.8). Item number 2, 3 and 4 constitute major ways by which sustainable tourism development can improve the livelihood of the people in rural communities as evidenced by their weighted means being above the criterion and grand mean of 2.5 and 2.9 respectively.

Research Question 2

To what extent is revenue generated by tourism used to finance infrastructure development and support local enterprises in the rural communities of Southeastern Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean Score Analysis Showing the Extent to which Revenue Generated by Tourism is Used to Finance Infrastructure Development and Support Local Enterprises in the Rural Communities of Southeastern Nigeria

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remarks
6.	Tourism creates new business opportunities for rural residents	95(380)	87(261)	60(120)	58(58)	2.7	Accepted
7.	Tourism has improved the quality of infrastructure such as roads, transportation, shops, and hotels in the community	71(284)	64(192)	96(129)	60(60)	2.4	Rejected
8.	Tourism provides incentives for the restoration of historic buildings	131(524)	117(351)	31(62)	21(21)	3.2	Accepted
9.	Tourism development will increase residents' pride in the local culture of the community	97(388)	87(261)	64(128)	52(52)	2.8	Accepted
10.	When tourism development is sustained, there will be more development in the communities	117(468)	132(396)	31(62)	20(20)	3.2	Accepted
	Grand Mean					2.8	

Table 2 above shows the mean scores of the extent to which revenue generated by tourism can be used to finance infrastructure development and support local enterprises in the rural communities of Southeastern Nigeria as follows: tourism creates new business opportunities for rural residents (2.7); tourism has improved the quality of products and services of tourism infrastructure such as roads, transportation systems, restaurants, shops, and guest houses in my community (2.4); tourism provides incentives for the restoration of historic buildings (3.2); tourism development will increase residents' pride in the local culture of the community (2.8); and when tourism development is sustained, there will be more development in the communities with tourism destinations (3.2). However, all the items agreed that revenue generated by tourism can be used to finance infrastructure development and support local enterprises in the rural communities except item-7 (tourism has improved the quality of products and services of tourism infrastructure such as roads, transportation systems, restaurants, shops, and guest houses in my community) which weighted mean is 2.4 and was not accepted.

Discussion of Findings

From the analysis of data, a lot of ways by which sustainable tourism development can improve the livelihood of the people in rural communities of Southeastern Nigeria was identified. The most outstanding ways are seeing tourism as one of the most important industries that support the rural economy in terms of poverty alleviation and income generation, sustainability of tourism development attracting more investors and thereby improving employment opportunities in the community and having better quality of public services in the villages due to tourism investment. This finding corroborates Othman and Karlberg (2007) who said that apart from the physical inflow of tourist foreign currency, it also provides direct ancillary industries for souvenirs, handicraft, food and garment manufacturing. According to them, these industries are labour intensive and afford huge opportunities for employment creation.

Nevertheless, the extent to which revenue generated by tourism can be used to finance infrastructure development and support local enterprises in the rural communities of Southeastern Nigeria are creation of new business opportunities for rural residents, improved quality of products and services of tourism infrastructure such as roads, transportation systems, restaurants, shops, and guest houses in my community, provision of incentives for the restoration of historic buildings, increasing residents' pride in the local culture of the community and developing the communities with tourism destinations. This finding supported Budeanu (2007) who observed that it has wider implications encompassing not only economic benefits but also social and cultural benefits and brings about infrastructural improvement and regional growth. On the other hand, Stock (2004) argued that tourism is a venture which requires upfront investment especially in hotels, roads and other types of infrastructures if it is to be considered as an attractive avenue for economic transformation.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are made.

- i. There should be improvement on the quality and efficiency of the basic tourism-related infrastructures and services such as hotels, roads, public amenities, transportation and communication to provide world class services to visitors and tourists.
- ii. There should be tourism-oriented community/adult education through mass media and other promotional facilities to publicise and promote existing attractions and available resources.
- iii. There should be diversification of tourism products (tourism supply) by the inclusion of socio-cultural programmes and traditional activities involving local communities.

Conclusion

Tourism can only be developed and sustained if socially responsible adjustments are made at an institutional and policy level so that the priority is shifted towards developing tourism as an instrument for economic transformation and not only as a catalyst for development. ‘Top-down’ mechanisms should be replaced by ‘bottom-up’ ones; tokenistic participation, should be replaced by real participation, where the voices heard are of the indigenous people at the grass-roots level, and not of those representing exogenous interests and elite classes. Developing socially responsible, sustainable tourism that can contribute towards economic transformation requires formation of partnerships among all the stakeholders concerned in order to share knowledge and also assess the risks involved in the process of developing tourism.

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