

## Tourism Product Innovation and Sustainable Rural Community Wellbeing

Wanyera Francis and Samie Chombo

Department of Travel & Management Tourism, Rwanda Tourism University College, Kigali

\***Corresponding author:** Wanyera Francis, Department of Travel & Management Tourism, Rwanda Tourism University College, Kigali, E-mail: [eracis2006@yahoo.com](mailto:eracis2006@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

Generally most destinations try different methods to be competitive and as a result they get involved in innovation activities. Within the tourism industry innovation tends to be driven mostly by external forces like changing demographic factor, government policies, and environmental changes let alone climate changes or social issues as well as internal factors. The main aim of this paper was to investigate the different innovations a destination can employ to achieve sustainable tourism development. The study area was Kingi sector in Musanze District where Volcanoes National Park is located. The methodologies involve use of descriptive research design and both primary and secondary data were analyzed. The sampling techniques included both random and purposive sampling. The major results showed that the local community carried out innovative activities to come up with new products which generate income for their well-being and this expands the destination with new products to be competitive. The study therefore concluded that the destination area of Volcanoes National Park and Kingi sector has become competitive as a result of innovation and development of new products even though there are still bottlenecks to overcome. It was also recommended that the park management and the local community should collaborate to innovate the tourism products to attract more visitors.

**Keywords:** *Innovation; Tourism products; Sustainable tourism development; Rural community well being*

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### Introduction and Background

In the past two decades, community participation in the development trajectory of tourism has received increased attention from many scholars [1-7]. The arguments presented by most of these scholars to date have enunciated on the need for communities to be involved in the planning and decision making processes in tourism development initiatives. The rationale provided for such inclusion is to ensure that communities gain ownership and hold a positive view of tourism, so as to make it sustainable. Moreover, as Zamani-Farahani and Musa [8] posit, the tourism industry relies on the local community's hospitality, explaining that if a host community is happy, it creates a positive image of the destination which in turn generates positive word of mouth. Ambroz M [9] adds that tourism can expand when host residents have a positive attitude towards it and when they feel and see that they have a role in the process of the tourism development taking place in their communities.

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Additionally the tourism industry has been one of the industries attempting to introduce more sustainable practices into the delivery of visitor experiences [10-14]. Some of the more macro approaches that have been used include (a) the development of certification programs to allow businesses to differentiate their products to consumers and (b) the development of sustainability task forces to influence policy development [10,15]. However, at the micro or business level, all sorts of practices have been introduced, including the introduction of alternative energy sources and the contribution of staff time to volunteer at community events [10]. While the industry collectively wants to move forward, there is currently little empirical evidence about how businesses pursue sustainability practices. This implies that more knowledge is needed about what types of practices are being adopted, by whom, and with what level of success.

Liburd *et al.* [16] argue that there are a significant number of destinations which are dependent on tourism for their livelihood and tourism's contribution to national economies has grown year over year. Although many positive factors such as income, employment and overall economic development can be gained from tourism, many destinations have experienced significant degradation and there is no longer debate about the need to move towards more sustainable tourism in destinations [17]. Although there is no shortage of literature about sustainable tourism, however, it seems that the global tourism industry still struggles to share this concept globally. Examining innovation on the most basic level, a consensus has been reached that an innovation consists of a creative new idea that is brought forth and applied to provide some type of business value [18,19]. According to Carlsen *et al.* [16], innovation can be described as "a catalytic development process that activates a number of processes according to a new situation". It can take the form of a product, process, management, logistics or institutional innovation [20] and can be disruptive or an incremental process [21]. Although much interest and research has been invested into the field of innovation due to its wide scope and significance in every industry, especially tourism, a standard definition of the term has yet to become accepted by the academic community [18,19,22,23].

The issues associated with innovation research are amplified in the tourism industry as the ambiguous definitions make it difficult to know which new ideas and concepts can be classified as innovations. For example, what some may classify as innovation, others may dismiss as an adaption of an existing idea or a recreation of something long past. This issue has lead Hjalager [24] to claim that only large tourism corporations are capable of innovation because they are the only entities with enough power to alter the functionality of the industry as a whole. This claim would then exclude seemingly innovative developments in niche or tourism made by smaller businesses due to their size, however, smaller sized tourism entities can make revolutionary changes due to the nature of their development and ability to share knowledge through partnerships and education and should not be overlooked [23,25]. Since innovative creative developments have many significant costs and benefits, it is important to understand both these aspects of the innovative process. Once benefits have been identified, they can then be classified in two ways. First, by their strategic importance into four categories of benefits: (1) implementation; (2) human partnership dynamics; (3) operational effectiveness; and (4) economic performance [17,26] or second, into one of three categories based on whether they provide direct, indirect or relationship benefits [17]. Within tourism, innovation tends to be driven by external forces such as changing demographics, government policy, environmental changes or social issues, however, this is not always the case and innovation in tourism can be artistic or designs based and improve the quality of service or visitor experience and are described as value innovations. Hjalager [20] argues that there is a tendency to associate innovation only with invention or the creation of new products and this limits our understanding of the potential for innovation in a sector. Hjalager [20] goes on to argue that this product innovation is only one of several types of innovation. Other types include classic process innovations (where the production process is altered), information handling innovations (where new

forms of knowledge management are adopted), management innovations (where the way in which a business is managed is changed) and institutional innovations (where the structure of the organization is altered) [20].

Also marketing synergies are ways of using tourism to create a broader awareness of other aspects of the region [27]. These marketing synergies can involve the joint use of marketing distribution systems, the use of tourists themselves as a promotion tool for regional products and the joint development of regional brands. Hall and Mitchell [28] provide evidence of the use of tourism distribution and promotional opportunities to establish awareness of products such as fruit and wine. For example Good Food Kangaroo Island provides a limited example of this type of activity. Tour operators and accommodation establishments on the island are encouraged to use local produce as part of their services and to advertise this use of local produce in their promotional activities in rural areas. In addition local produce suppliers are listed on tourism websites and in tourism brochures. Thus local food producers are taking advantage of existing tourism distribution systems. There is, however, potential to expand on this, for example with online opportunities to buy produce connected to tourism websites and the development of tourist data bases that could be exploited by the local food producers in rural areas.

The development of regional brands has not been given much attention in the rural tourism development literature despite the growing emphasis of tourism promotion organizations on the concept of regional or destination branding [29]. Once again most of the discussion within the tourism literature is about developing a destination brand that is attractive to the tourist markets chosen by external agents rather than about developing a brand that supports other activities conducted in the destination as well as support rural community improve their wellbeing.

The problems for tourism, rural and regional development are that Tourism is an option chosen by many governments as a key tool for regional development [30]. Despite a relatively long history of use as a regional development tool and substantial investments of resources, there is considerable debate about the value of tourism for communities in rural and peripheral areas. Numerous evaluations have highlighted many negative consequences from tourism development including;

- Modest or no economic returns from tourism for locals [31],
- Negative impacts on local culture and social structure [30],
- Restriction of access to resources for traditional activities [32],
- Disruption of traditional subsistence and other activities [33], and
- Damage to natural and cultural heritage.

In response to these critical assessments of tourism development in rural and peripheral regions many researchers and governments have argued for the use of alternative forms of tourism such as ecotourism and community based tourism (CBT) [34]. Such options are claimed to have better outcomes because they are smaller in scale which is typically associated with more limited environmental and social impacts and greater opportunities for local businesses to get involved [35]. Community based approaches to tourism are particularly popular as they explicitly describe processes for involving local stakeholders in decisions about the types and locations of proposed tourism developments [34,36].

These community based approaches to tourism are not however, universally hailed as positive options for the development of peripheral and rural regions. Okech [37], for example, notes that the effective involvement of local residents and stakeholders in decision making requires them to have sufficient understanding of tourism and their rights to be able to contribute meaningfully to the discussions of tourism. Johnson and Wilson also note that the proponents of community

involvement in decision making often make naive assumptions about the existing political structures in a destination community and that in many cultures and places it cannot be assumed that all stakeholders will be able to speak openly about their attitudes towards a proposed development. In practice this means that development decisions are often dominated by external agents such as consultants and NGO staff.

Despite the best of intentions these external agents tend to limit community participation to choosing between tourism options developed by people outside the community. Moscardo [38] provides an analysis of the social representations of tourism planning held by many professionals and academics in which locals are seen as lacking the knowledge and skills to participate in tourism and are therefore excluded from many marketing decisions. In essence tourism development becomes almost completely market driven which Collins notes limits the capacity for tourism to contribute to sustainable development.

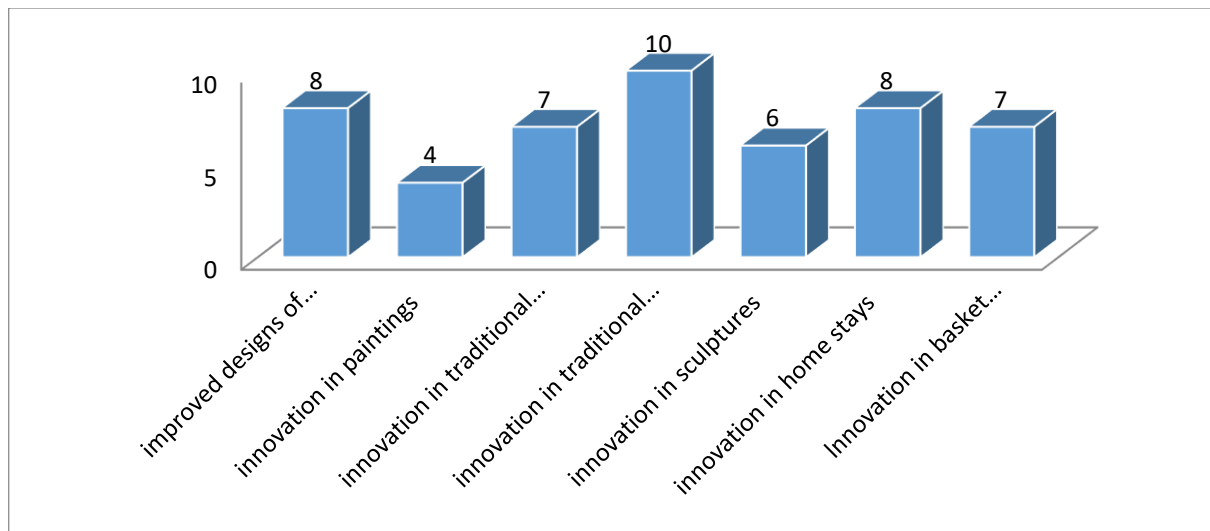
This study was undertaken in the context of rural community in Kinigi sector, Musanze district. The purpose of this study was to:

1. Establish the type of tourism product innovations adopted by SACOLA rural communities;
2. Determine the challenges encountered by SACOLA rural communities;
3. Suggest strategies that can be adopted to overcome the constraints that affect innovation among the SACOLA group.

## **Materials and Methods**

In order to achieve the study objectives, the research team utilized a mixed methods (MM) approach, including a literature review, and field survey, and interviews with a sample of 50 rural communities who have adopted innovations for sustainable tourism practices. Descriptive research design was used and both qualitative and quantitative approaches were utilized. The study also used primary data which comprised of data that was obtained directly from respondents in the field by the researcher and secondary data that involved obtaining data from the already existing documents or literature. Rwanda is one of the smallest countries in Africa, geographically located in the highlands of the Albertine Rift, It lies between 1°04' and 2°51' south latitude and 28°45' and 31°15' east longitude. The country has a surface area of 26,338 km<sup>2</sup> with a population estimated at around 12.1 million people (Population Reference Bureau, 2014). The Northern Province in Rwanda is the most densely populated, with an average of 480 people per km. The study area was in the northern part of the country particularly SACOLA cooperative in Kinigi sector. It covered adjacent areas surrounding Volcanoes National Park. Particularly the rural community who engage in tourism related activities to sustain their livelihood.

In this study the sample was obtained through purposive sampling particularly workers from the departments mentioned using Slovin's formula;  $n = N/(1+Ne^2)$ . Where "N" is the target population, "n" refers to the sample and "e" is the estimated error which was 5% or 0.05. The study used the self-administered questionnaire with open ended questions to obtain data from the respondents. The pre-testing of the questionnaire was done early in time to verify the validity of the questionnaire to avoid errors in the data that was to be collected. In order to obtain detailed data the study also used the interview schedule especially in cases where the respondents who had limited time and those that needed clear and simple straight forward interpretation of the question. Analysis of data involved deriving meaning from the findings by editing, coding, processing and in this study the used statistical methods as well as the computer packages such as excel and SPSS to obtain frequencies and percentages.



**Figure 1:** Key tourism products innovated

## Results

### Key tourism products Innovated

The results indicated that tourism product innovation played a big role amongst the local community. The findings suggested that the majority of respondents 20% agreed that innovations done in traditional dances were ranked highest compared to innovation in paintings which was ranked at 8%. This was followed by innovations in handicrafts and homestays respectively at 16% each as compared to innovation in sculptures that was ranked 12%. Finally innovations in basket weaving and traditional food were both ranked at 14%. This therefore suggested that innovations in traditional dances were highest and so more attention is put in it Figure1.

### Challenges of tourism product innovation

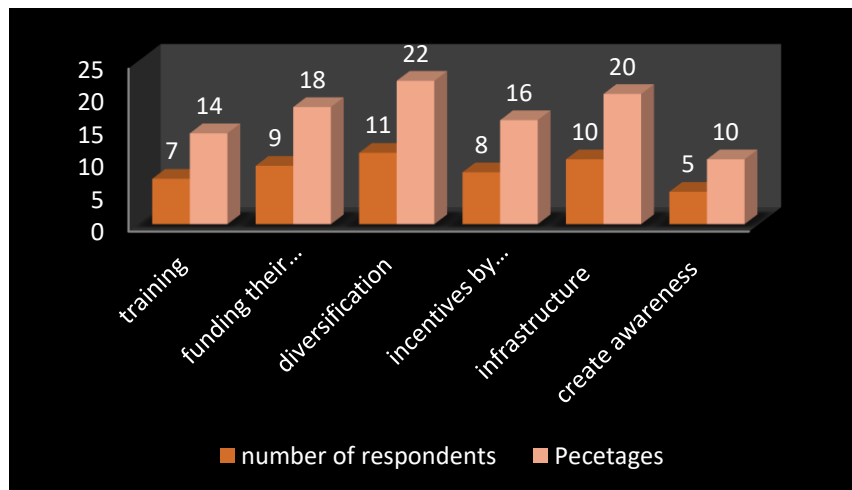
Results revealed that apart from the key product innovation areas in tourism as indicated in Figure 1, it however, faces a number of challenges. According to the majority of respondents (20%) agreed that poverty amongst the local community was the highest limiting factor compared to luck of funds that was ranked at 10%. Additionally luck of skills and high imitations were ranked second highest at 16% compared to illiteracy and government policies were both ranked at 12% since they play a role in limiting innovations and the local community. Finally the local community perception about innovation of tourism products was rated at 12% as Table 1 shows.

Respondents' opinions	Frequencies	Ratings (percentages)
Poverty	10	20
Illiteracy	6	12
Luck of skills	8	16
High imitations	8	16
Policies	6	12
Local community perception	7	14
Luck of funds	5	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 1.** Challenges facing promotion of innovation of tourism products.

### Strategies in place to reduce on the challenges

Findings indicated that as much as there were challenges hindering rapid growth of tourism product innovations, the respondents suggested a number of measures to counter the problems. The results revealed that majority 22% of the respondents agreed that diversification of the products through innovation is the only way out. The second biggest number of respondents suggested that infrastructure development with 20% was still a limiting factor to tourism product development so government and other stake holders should improve the infrastructure to enable the local community make innovations. Funding of the projects involving tourism product innovations was the other suggested solution 18% as compared to training which was ranked with 14%. Furthermore some of the respondents suggested that government should provide incentives such as low taxes, low interest loans and grace period of at-least two years to enable them to be in position to come up with innovated tourism products. While 10% of respondents suggested that there was need for more sensitization of the local community about tourism product innovation and benefits to gain so that majority can pick interest and get involved so that it can improve their wellbeing as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Measures to reduce challenges faced in tourism product innovation.

### Conclusion

In conclusion inclusive tourism has contributed to improving wellbeing of local community by involving the stakeholders in tourism activities and thus economic development of the country particularly the poor local community around the protected area. Also it can concluded that the numbers of local community associations that are used to channel the funds for economic activities are growing every year which in turn has resulted into increased income, employment and infrastructure development which are some of the indicators of economic development in an area. Further it was concluded that apart from the positive contribution, challenges still existed that affect inclusive tourism activities in the country that included poverty among the local community, population pressure, land shortage and illiteracy among others. Finally in conclusion government and other stake holders have put some mitigation measures in place to minimize the challenges faced such as involving them in tourism activities, and funding the cooperatives.

### Recommendation

This paper therefore recommends that to exploit the full potential of inclusive tourism the government should aggressively create awareness among the local community about the benefit of getting involved in tourism activities. Another

recommendation is that all stake holders should be involved in the management and decision making in tourism activities as a concern. Finally government should put policies and implement inclusive strategies to achieve sustainable tourism for economic development local community wellbeing.

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