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Exploring the best practices of women-centred ecotourism enterprises in Bunyoro, Uganda

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Abstract

As the millennium development goals (MDGs) were concluded at the end of 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a new development agenda—codenamed ‘the strategic development goals (SDGs)’, which among others seek to strengthen the socio-economic concerns of women globally. The less developing countries of Africa, especially those in the East African Community, have already adopted the SDGs in the development agenda where women, the youths and persons with disabilities are prioritised. Uganda has committed more resources towards strengthening and consolidating women’s welfare. Women in the countryside are expected to double their effort in initiating feasible enterprises that can help them move upwards from their current socio-economic condition; by so doing women’s vulnerability status will reduce and the rural society will prosper proportionately. This study is timely as it contributes to the women’s development agenda by specifically seeking strategies through which women can consolidate their economic prosperity through using the potential of ecotourism enterprise development.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Enterprises, women-centred, socio-economic transformation,

Introduction

Ecotourism enterprises are being established in South Africa so as to enhance the socio-economic status of local communities, and thus to improve the status of formerly marginalized sections of our society. Sadly, little has been done to explore the best practices that can be adopted at community level to enhance such enterprises. This concern is particularly noticeable in the ecotourism sector where attention to women-empowerment remains largely, a mere principle position of government. Remarkably the idea of preparation and development of women-centred ecotourism enterprises (WCEEs) seems to be lagging behind in many sub-Saharan African countries, Uganda included (Scheyvens, 2000: 233). By failing to deal with the intricacies involved in establishing and managing WCEEs, which could be one of the key strategic entry points for women, our society directly marginalizes the most important actors in socio-economic transformation its women (Solomon, 2006: 419).

This study deals with practices that are considered critical to WCEEs’ functioning with the view that by dealing with the issues that inform the best practices to WCEEs, as a key conduit to the socio-economic empowerment of women, the potential of WCEEs for women’s welfare will be

demystified. Once we get to grips with one of the most important actors in ecotourism—the women we will have scope for greater societal advancement (Scheyvens, 2000: 233), and we will be able to develop a reliable model for ecotourism sustainability. Such a consideration can be used to facilitate the potential realities as well as the interrelatedness between women livelihoods and ecotourism. For purposes of this paper, a WCEE is basically defined as “any business that caters primarily to tourists’ wants and that is exclusively initiated and operated by women so as to enhance their socio-economic welfare” (Koutsou, et al., 2009:193).

With the confirmation of billions of barrels of oil and gas in the Albertine region of Uganda (Kasimbazi, 2012; 187), the number of related socio-economic projects currently underway is insurmountable. Such projects include tree planting, hotels, transport, tours and travel, fruit and vegetable production. Why is this the case? Over the past decade, different oil and infrastructural companies have been tirelessly working on the exploration area, the oil refinery and putting tarmac on the road from Hoima town to the exploration grounds at the shores of Mwitanzige (Lake Albert) in western Uganda (Bybee and Johannes, 2014: 139). The oil resource is appealing to local and foreign investors interested in the ecotourism sector too, and it is expected that more people will move to the region as ‘experts’, workers, or tourists and thus the possibility of maximally engaging women in socio-economic transformation activities becomes prudent. Ecotourism has been recognized as a central outlet from abject poverty as it provides a long-term source of livelihood for communities and other established tourist companies in the country (Afenyo and Amuquandoh, 2014: 180).

Available literature reveals that ecotourism is the most likely industry to generate revenues to local women, and as such, women’s involvement cannot be underestimated (Walter, 2011: 161). For instance, it is estimated that through ecotourism, Tanzania generates 17.2% of her gross domestic product (GDP) annually (Pasape, Anderson and Lindi, 2015: 73); this is immense compared to other sectors in that country. Despite the fact that the oil industry is expected to bring enormous contributions to Uganda’s GDP, studies to understand women’s ecotourism potential are still scanty. Ecotourism, therefore, becomes a special interest venture that generates minimal impact to the environment while promoting sustainable socio-economic development (Moswete and Lacey, 2015: 602).

Prior studies show that ecotourism facilitates natural conservation, local participation, and sustainability and as a result, it ought to be implemented and promoted as one of the central alternatives to women empowerment (Butcher, 2005: 115). Ecotourism “minimises impacts; increases awareness, contributes to conservation; allows local people to make their decisions; directs economic benefits to local people; and provides for local people to enjoy natural areas” (Fennell, 2001: 405). In a systematic economic climate, ecotourism can be promoted as an exceptional tourism or a special tourism product appealing to both local and international visitors.

Given the adoption and sustainability of ecotourism principles, women become one of the key stakeholders providing quality ecotourism experience for customers (Scheyvens, 2000: 233). Accessible current literature indicates that ecotourism is primarily dominated by general issues such as visitors’ safety, ecological and social issues, sustainable development, learning and culture and researchers are yet to fully establish the other side of the often neglected stakeholders, namely women. Understanding the potential of ecotourism should contribute to current socio-economic sustainable development strategies of the east African region. In view of the increasing importance of women involvement in ecotourism business, especially in the east African context, this study aims to explore the best practices to WCEEs in Bunyoro region of Uganda.

Given its connection to the United Nations Millennium Development Goal three (promoting gender equality and empowering women) (UNICEF, 2014:1) as well as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number five (achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls), this study uses the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) developed by the International fund for agricultural development (IFAD) to determine the best practices to WCEEs among the rural women in Uganda. The approach assumes that in order to understand the livelihoods of poor people, greater focus should be put to the factors that affect their livelihoods and the relationships between those factors (Morse, McNamara and Acholo, 2009: 4). SLA puts the rural poor at the centre of the livelihoods strategies such as available natural resources, technologies, skills, knowledge and capacity plus social support networks, which would, in this case, be essential for WCEEs' success. It builds on the view of facilitating the rural people to deal with the present constraints in order to take advantage of available opportunities.

Understanding ecotourism enterprises and how women can maximally be involved helps to enhance the prospects of enterprise success (Scheyvens, 2000: 233). Successful ecotourism enterprise makes for a stronger tourism sector, which can, hopefully, facilitate women in obtaining greater benefits from ecotourism. This article contributes to the existing literature on ecotourism and widens the understanding of WCEEs in Uganda. It is hoped that this contribution will yield useful propositions for Uganda's ecotourism, as a sector, to develop effective programs that are beneficial to women.

The Ecotourism phenomenon

The term ecotourism remains an issue of 'contestation' among scholars in different spheres. As a result, several definitions of the term have been provided with levels of convergence being noted. According to Yamada (2011: 139) ecotourism involves a wide range of resources mainly natural and cultural artefacts, events and natural environment, and aims to realize ecologically and socially sustainable development. Ecotourism presupposes a small-scale activity undertaken in relatively undisturbed natural sites within high order protected areas and other rural settings (Weaver, 2005: 19). It involves the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people (Burns, 2005: 158). It is a form of environmental tourism conducted in natural areas (Dowling, 2000: 12). This suggests that ecotourism seeks to promote a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that should focus primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which should ethically be managed in order to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and local oriented in terms of its control, benefits and scale.

Generally, the descriptions seem to agree with the definition put forth by the International Ecotourism Society noting that 'it's the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people' (Eshun and Tagoe-Darko, 2015: 392) and further echoed by (Lepp, 2002: 62). Interestingly, Lepp provides us a more emphatic guide to ecotourism – it should involve; travel to natural areas that is low impact, sustainable and fosters environmental awareness in the tourist; travel that provides direct financial benefits for conservation, and travel that sustains the wellbeing of local people.

The tourism industry has for some time been the fastest growing in Uganda's overall growth thus contributing to the expansion of several ecotourism opportunities (Tukamushaba and Xiao, 2012: 336; Tancau, 2011: 467). Since ecotourism focuses on responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people, it has been growing locally and internationally three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole in recent

years. Owing to the constant growth, it is likely that ecotourism will grow more rapidly than former types of tourism over the future epochs. Recent surveys on ecotourism indicate that many of the holiday makers in Europe, for instance, are conscious of the requirements and value of sustainable tourism (Sangpikul, 2010: 109). And that the number of international tourists travelling across different regions of the world is expected to double from about 800 million to more than 1.5 billion by 2020.

Although the growth in the number of international tourists is projected to be greater in China, India and parts of south-east Asia, sub-Saharan African countries, Uganda inclusive, are equally expected to be newer tourist destinations in the world over the same period. Looking at the circumstances of global tourism, currently several international tourists are expected to be more worried about responsible tourism together with ecotourism. This means that, with the constant increase in international tourism and the varying attitudes of tourists, ecotourism emerges as one of the key tourism interests for this century (Eshun and Tagoe-Darko, 2015: 392). There is thus growing demand in ecotourism though WCEEs have not been given any attention among practitioners, researchers and policy makers. Growing triumphant WCEEs is a multifaceted undertaking because there are many issues involved in ecotourism. Though multifaceted, WCEEs are still a possible undertaking expected to transform millions of women across Uganda.

The East African experience

It has been noted that for many of the world's poorest countries, ecotourism is treated as a way of gaining income for the family and thus developing the means to improved livelihoods (Zhang, Ding and Bao, 2008: 554). And for a less-developing country, such as those in east Africa, ecotourism may lead to better incomes and other related trickledown effects such as better health and education for children. By implication therefore, the relationship between ecotourism and socioeconomic development has been acknowledged among many scholars (Fawaz, Rahnema and Stout, 2014: 354). In east Africa, for example, Kenya and Tanzania have well-recorded statistics on ecotourism industries than their counterparts in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. Having started with merely a small number of tourists in 2001, the ecotourism industry in Tanzania has grown, considerably, by 500, 000 tourists (Mgonja, et al., 2015: 379). Presently, 90% of the tourism industry is generated from ecotourism, which contributes 17.2% of gross domestic product and created around 400,000 jobs directly (Pasape, Anderson and Lindi, 2015: 73).

Kenya's ecotourism popularity and potential has become so substantial that it generated over US\$3.5million in revenues by 2002 (Southgate, 2006:94). In Kenya and Tanzania, ecotourism has been directly linked to global structures in (some of) the more developed tourist destinations of China, India and Europe. In Kenya, the amount of foreign exchange revenue from ecotourism over the past decade (2000 to 2010) occasionally surpassed that of agriculture, which is vital a source of revenue (Honey 2009:54). Therefore, for part of east Africa, ecotourism is an extremely gainful sector. Kenya has, for instance, been thriving in ecotourism industries due to the country's thorough constitution, policy forecast and supervision of sites in spite of high levels of corruption. While the success of ecotourism, as an industry, is reliant upon the value and biodiversity of the environment, authorities in Kenya believe that ecotourism can boost the quality of conservation as long as environmental awareness is prioritised (Eshun and Tagoe-Darko 2015: 393).

A range of issues have been hampering the development attempts of ecotourism in the region such as top-down management approaches, since the industry's development strategy mainly

begins with the central government, or the western European organizations backing the central governments' actions – a matter that perpetuates direct segregation of the local citizens from several centrally planned schemes that are often perceived as promoting the central governments' interests rather than of the local peoples (Lepp 2002:66). Comparing the administration of ecotourism in East Africa to that of West Africa, even with major natural reserves in West Africa, the tourism ranks are still lower than those of East Africa. The *raison d'être* for the inferior ranks, reliance on global energies, and marginalisation of local environmental information (Eshun and Tagoe-Darko 2015: 403).

In Uganda, it is still unclear when the idea of ecotourism was initiated however its recognition dates to about two decades ago when a United Nations and World Bank project, the global environmental facility (GEF), set the standard by funding a US\$4million ecotourism project in the country (Uganda, n.d: 1). Before then, earlier projects, certainly had no clear-cut ecotourism elements. Ecotourism is gradually growing and Uganda, with diverse, even if rare natural species, is slowly acknowledging that it is desirable to cherish ecotourism since conservation efforts have to be fortified. But also, while ecotourism is one of the few products with which the country can become more visible in the global market. Uganda is, in addition, getting generous support to hold these efforts from international non- governmental organizations and a few financial bodies. No wonder, the National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP), was developed. A taskforce was approved by government in 1994 through which the GEF ecotourism project has been able to finance Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park Conservation projects.

Recognising Uganda's receptiveness to sustainable ecotourism, the United Nations Environmental program (UNEP)'s Caribbean environment programme, prepared six proposals (Uganda, n.d: 4):

- a) Accountable management of protected areas that are attractive to ecotourists.
- b) Entry fees for protected areas to be collected so as to cover not only operating costs, but to preserve the worth of the areas' rich biodiversity, biotic areas, and ecological formations, as agreed upon as a result of the relative shortage or exclusivity of the resource which are the major attractions.
- c) The state needs to run the entire or part of the management of protected areas and tourist-industry's related services be left to the private sector.
- d) Non-protected areas which could be converted into ecotourism sites need to be identified by both government and the private sector.
- e) Industry agents and tourist guides should be trained in the principles of ecotourism project design and management.
- f) Ecotourism should not be regulated except the use of protected natural resources in ecotourism.

Since executable standards have gradually been advancing, it is the responsibility of tour operators, ecotourists, and local communities, to maintain the low-impact environment of ecotourism in respect to budding industrialization, natural resource exploitation, tourism, and other development choices accessible to the developing countries.

Although the concept of ecotourism was initially a western philosophy, Uganda, in partnership with the private sector, has incorporated the 'local tourism view'. They jointly present ecotourism in terms of travel that entails travelling to natural vicinities with the goal of finding out or partaking in actions that aim to reduce harmful environmental consequences along with protecting and giving socio-economic power to the host community. To present a supply for the

national strategy, tourism mapping and progress, Uganda underscores the five critical elements to sustainable ecotourism expansion, including; (a) touring, (b) studying, (c) learning, (d) protecting and (e) empowering. Those aspects, collectively, are related to the major components of ecotourism development in the more developing world which present ecotourism in terms of protecting nature and advancing the welfare of the adjacent communities (Chiutsi, et al 2011: 17). Therefore, recognizing ecotourism as a reasonable segment of the burgeoning tourism industry, calls for defining it to gratification of all stakeholders; tourism that is based on nature is critical but finding ways to lessen destructive outcomes and to advance conservatory strategies is also crucial.

The potential of ecotourism in Bunyoro

Bunyoro encompasses the five districts of Buliisa, Hoima, Kibaale, Kiryandongo and Masindi, with each having comparable socio-cultural and natural tourism style with minor disparities between them. The region also has diverse physical and ecological features that are currently significant; two forests-Budongo in Masindi and Bugoma across Hoima and Kibaale, a national park-Murchison Falls in Buliisa and wildlife reserves-Kaiso-Tonya in Hoima, Kabalye in Masindi and Wanseko in Buliisa, a lake-Mwitanzige, swamps and rivers, situated across the region. The unique national park and wildlife reserves attract many domestic and foreign tourists to the region annually. This segment has exposed the ecotourism potential of Bunyoro since mid-1990s due to the expansion in both the local and global tourism markets. Special ecotourism enterprises include birdwatching, game viewing, spot fishing, nature-guided walks, viewing the top of the falls plus boat cruising (Moyimi, 2006: 9-13).

From 2000 to 2010, the number of brokers in ecotourism developed due to awareness drives led by civil society and as a result of the budding oil industry in the Albertine Graben. These dealings include specialized wildlife operators, nature-based tour operators, and eco-lodges offering a broad array of ecotourism associated products and services such as nature and wildlife watching, cave visiting (Katasihha), canoeing, and camping. Between 2009 and 2014 the marginal tour companies have exposed the ecotourism worth and the necessity for a system to maintain the region's ecotourism sector. For instance, some of the tour companies have developed collaboration with intent to advance sustainable ecotourism; this has created its own structure for marketing and advancing nature-based tourism specifically ecotourism. The tour companies' collaboration is the single association which has marketed the region's ecotourism potential.

The region's tourism sector mirrors the amazing variety of the country: it is home to lakes, swamps, dense grasslands, and woodlands, rolling plains, forests and mountainous areas. Due to its diversity, Bunyoro sustains an exceptionally immense biodiversity; it is gifted with organic soils supporting agricultural production as the backbone of Uganda's economy (Niringiye, n.d: 7). Agriculture has, since 1962, contributed 60% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and 99% of her exports; it is estimated that the industry supports over 90% of the populace, mainly in food production for survival or local markets. Niringiye's study indicates that by 2007, agriculture alone contributed 31.1% to GDP with an average growth of 3.5% between 1997 and 2007. Bunyoro's land area is only 60% while the remaining is covered wetlands, water bodies, rocks, hilly areas, forests, national parks and wildlife reserves-controlled by the central government. In spite of that, the region is among the few regions that were for so long self-reliant in food, its economy almost collapsed during the civil war and its now shrinking downwards. Gross cropping land is about 0.6 hectares per inhabitant yet, just about 27% of its land area is presently under farming even if over three-quarters of the overall land area receives enough rainfall for productive agriculture (Buyinza, 2008:8).

Presently, ecotourism is important to Uganda's development with key contributions to sustainable tourism (Tancau, 2011: 467). As ecotourism continues to grow along the increasing number of tourists and ecotourism enterprises, it is important for the Ugandan government to maintain the balance between the growing demand and the existing supply in terms of ecotourism sites. It seems that the demand for ecotourism is increasing much greater than its supply particularly during the current decade; however, ecotourism is primarily based on natural environment which is a fragile area (Buckley, 2000: 34). The growth in demand is demonstrated by an increase in tourism revenues which is largely attributed to the rise in ecotourism. Operating in natural settings, the potential for harm exists; in particular, most ecotourism destinations in Uganda are located in protected areas such as national parks, forest parks, wildlife sanctuaries and national forest reserves. A primary concern for the country's tourism industry is to ensure that ecotourism is well managed in a sustainable way so that there is minimal impact to protected areas. To develop successful sustainable ecotourism, cooperation is needed from various stakeholders including the line ministry, private sector, and local communities. Given the complexity of the tourism industry, ensuring that ecotourism is sustained and contributes to environmental, economic, and socio-cultural benefits would be challenging to all stakeholders.

Respondents, data collection and data quality control

The study was conducted among purposely selected key informants aged between 20 and 58 drawn from the three districts of Masindi, Kibaale and Hoima. One sub county was reached in each of the three districts; Pakanyi in Masindi, Mpeefu in Kibaale and Buseruka in Hoima, respectively. The majority of the informants (32.6%) fell between 35 and 44 years. Other respondents' age was spread as follows: between 25 and 34 years, 29.8%; between 45 and 54 years, 21.0%; below 25 years, 9.6%; and more than 54 years, 7.0%. The outcome suggested that about 70% of all respondents were aged between 25 and 44 years, perhaps because this group involves the mainstream of the labour force in the country which participates aggressively in diverse socio-economic activities.

Considering the level of education, most respondents (73.8%) fell within the primary school education range; 22.5% of overall respondents had attained at least secondary education, while those with tertiary qualification were 3.7%. This skewed variation in levels of education is largely a consequence of patriarchy most of the rural areas in Uganda, in spite of universal primary and secondary education programs, had higher girl-child dropouts. Concerning the informants' responsibilities, the majority (53.6%) involved members from the farming community while small businesswomen and actors from community-based organizations formed 10.5% and 7.1% respectively. On the other side, service providers comprising tour operators, and hotel and restaurants formed 28.8% of the total respondents. The respondents' responsibilities embody the main cluster of ecotourism stakeholders in the society as evidenced in the conservation action plan for Uganda's Chimpanzees 2003-2008 (Plumptre, Arnold and Nkuutu 2003: 22).

Data was collected through in-depth structured interviews using an interview guide. A total of 46 respondents was met in the sub-counties per districts; Pakanyi (10/21.7%), Buseruka (21/46.7%), and Mpeefu (15/32.6%). Pakanyi had the least number of interviews because the community has mixed tribes with languages which could not easily be understood. Each interview lasted between 5 and 7 minutes including all probing questions.

The in-depth interview guide was tested twice during the second week of December in Kasenyilyato (Buseruka) among 6 randomly selected respondents and the outcomes indicated that it

was reliable. It was then administered to the respondents after making necessary changes made on the original instrument. Secondly, individual sit-down interview situations were used and all instruments were administered the same way across all respondents. Thirdly, problems were incorporated in the instruments as checks for measuring validity and eventual interpretation of the data. The study questions were explored across the different sets of data and tallied for reliability across space, between very rural villages and less-rural villages, and over time through comparison.

Women-based ecotourism potential

Women-based ecotourism is gradually becoming fashionable as women organisations are seeking means to deepen women empowerment through income creation from the budding ecotourism sector in the Bunyoro. Most noticeably, Kabonesa noted:

WCEEs can be seen as hope for local women living in the oil extraction environs to obtain positive gains from the ecotourism potential. The ecotourism enterprises, on the other hand, have for some time, been largely male-dominated, and so women's involvement has seldom been considered a priority. And so, women empowerment, global changes in attitudes towards women, and the women's movement, are playing a key role in women liberation. Organisations such as; National association for women of Uganda, Federation of women lawyers of Uganda, and Democratic governance facility, have been instrumental in Uganda. (Key Informant, Buseruka)

This suggests that WCEEs, as a key component of the broad ecotourism industry, should be appreciated as a significant element within the tourism sector but not merely a cross-cutting issue. Moreover, Magambo argued;

The third millennium development goal sought to address gender equality and empower women as a way to guarantee equality between men and women and as an affirmative action measure to increase women's role in decision-making and participation in the development process. (Key Informant, Buseruka)

Atuhairwe complemented;

Uganda's gender policy is one of the many frameworks to gender responsive development and thus, the notion of WCEE is a deliberate framework to women's socio-economic empowerment in the country and the region as a whole. On the contrary, she emphasised, if women are only treated as a cross-cutting group, one will not be able to assess the degree of achievement they will register over a period within a specific program intervention. (Key Informant, Kibaale)

During the study, WCEEs were broadly categorised into two types: first, male entrepreneurs on women, and secondly, women entrepreneurs on women. According to Buletwenda;

The first category considers the ecotourism product of male entrepreneurs on women and issues that concern them, while the second category likewise deals with ecotourism by women entrepreneurs on women and women's explicit interests. She stresses that the first category ordinarily constitutes women as passive consumers or *behind-the-scenes* complementary to the male-dominated enterprises. And that the enterprises of ecotourism in this category of Uganda on women are hitherto usually understood as

innovative efforts aimed to recognise the reality of women interests and suspected remote values. (Key Informant, Buseruka)

In addition, Asimwe pointed out;

Activities are presumably structured to address the upsetting socio-economic women's ecotourism curiosities such as music, oral narratives, game viewing, scenery viewing, boat cruise, or bird watching and even the entrepreneurs will fall into this category too. (Key Informant, Masindi)

However, according to Balyesiima;

The second category is basically a result of recent feminist activism perpetuated by critical analysis of the enterprises of male entrepreneurs, which has come to the conclusion that the reflection of women in their works is unmerited and negative. This perception of female misrepresentation in male-oriented ecotourism perhaps does justify the sharp division that has come to underscore the vitality and resolve with which the Ugandan female ecotourism entrepreneurs also now seek to address men and men-centred enterprises with damning remarks, whilst projecting an optimistic picture of women. (Key Informant, Masindi)

In WCEEs' innovation, Asaba underlined;

As women, we do not wish to exaggerate by depicting men as egoistic nor do they totally eliminate anything good in their male counterparts. We opt instead to make more pictures of ourselves as a decisive reflection of these enterprises put up to contest the practical exploits against us given our true mode of organisation, patience, reception and kindness, and stress us as a normal being aware of the equal prospects as much as the male do. (Key Informant, Kibaale)

The inferences suggested that women ecotourism entrepreneurs, in their attempt to challenge patriarchy, have ended up having to deal with several other questions of women's underdevelopment in their economic war with men. Clearly therefore, in WCEEs' potential, female entrepreneurs have to make constructive contributions. If most male enterprises are perceived by women as cruel on the image of women, there are still many enterprises by male entrepreneurs that empower women and put great value to womanhood.

The projected benefits of WCEEs

The growth of WCEEs can generally be linked to several benefits; A total of 38 (82.6%) noted that WCEEs can enhance the development of education infrastructure as well as improve standards thereof. Majority of the members proposed that WCEEs would lead to increased availability of markets for handicrafts as a direct supplement to their incomes. A few of the respondents (30.4%) suggested the view that WCEEs can change the international community's perception of the women's competencies to plan for and manage the local resources sustainably. This is mainly deepened, they noted, by the level of training the tour guides have on the critical issues of natural resource conservation. Yet most visitors, especially Europeans, do not usually expect to find such knowledgeable rural women when it comes to understanding global and local resource conservation issues.

Some of the respondents (32.6%) further proposed that WCEEs would present an accessible forum through which conflict resolution can be realised between women and the department of forestry, an issue which goes a long way in expanding the process of collaborative forest management even to other sectors. If these collaborations can be expanded in the future, we might witness a transformed natural resources women management approach. In addition, slightly more than half the respondents (54.3%) suggested that natural resource projects are likely to provide practical training to local women on some crucial issues such as income generating activities through credible micro entrepreneurship projects such as bee keeping, fishing, and tree planting. This, they emphasised, would help deal with the long-term impact of climatic change within the region and beyond.

Majority of the subjects (69.6%) further emphasised that through WCEEs, the local primary and secondary schools would get the opportunity to learn from trained female nature walk guides, bird watching guides, or even game viewing guides, on the key issues of conservation, analysis and facilities that allow the free flow of environmental education in the region. Moreover, half of the total respondents (58.7%) thought that practical strategies that essentially translate into rural women's empowerment opportunities to take part in the protection of the natural resources, such as curtailing illegal exploitation of the forestry resources which has a direct negative impact on the potential of forestry resources and ecotourism as well, would easily be tapped by women in the area as a result of participating in different WCEEs. One quarter of the respondents (26.1%) believe that women have the potential to showcase the local cultural behaviour to tourists visiting their destinations. Although some members may not see any direct outcome from tourists, it is envisaged that direct exposure can translate into direct partnerships between some tourist destination countries and women-based organisations.

The outcomes on the benefits of WCEEs demonstrate that about half of all natural tourism (48%), especially national parks, is gaining ground in the Albertine region circuit (covering Murchison falls national park, Queen Elizabeth National Park and Bwindi impenetrable forest) as compared with 25% in the remaining circuits. And while cultural tourism is common in the central region circuit (54%) mainly in Kampala and Wakiso as compared with 28% in the western region circuit; only 9% of natural tourism has been exploited in the western region circuit of which about 35% takes place in Bunyoro and Tooro. This finding may be true because in the Bunyoro and Tooro, there have growing concentration of national parks, game reserves, and mountains such as Lake Albert Conservation Area, Mount Rwenzori as well as the Murchison falls National Park which are wonderful for nature attraction.

Besides, the significance of ecotourism to Bunyoro's socioeconomic development as examined from all respondents and the outcomes illustrated that about 58% of the overall respondents believed that WCEEs has a high value; 21% were not certain; 13 don't know about it, and 8% think that the WCEEs has very low value. In order to raise the women's success in WCEEs, women in Bunyoro are currently looking at developing and promoting tourism, wildlife and Heritage resources for the enhancement of their region as a competitive and preferred ecotourism destination. This will provide an accelerated sector contribution to the national economy as put by the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities (2012:iv). That is possibly Uganda is concentrating on three subsectors mainly of tourism, wildlife conservation and heritage as the key drivers.

Moreover, the outcome on the consequence of WCEEs in the enhancement of women's livelihoods reveals that WCEEs have the capacity to positively impact on the rural women of Uganda. Moreover, the study outcomes relating to the connection between WCEEs and the advancement of local women's livelihood were that: 30.1% of all respondents raised the view

that WCEEs can have a positive contribution in the improvement of women's livelihoods; 38.9% of the respondents were not sure whether WCEEs would contribute in the improvement of women's livelihood; and 31.0% did not support the prospect that WCEEs can help to raise women's livelihoods. The motives behind those who supported the affirmative side could be the fact that most of the areas within the vicinity of ecotourism attraction, women envisage direct employment opportunities by proprietors of campsites, tour companies, restaurants, and lodges. Similarly, some of the financially able women can get attracted to invest in some small hotels, tented camps and tour guiding services as noted by Balyesiima:

There are some women who are engaged in the improvement of social facilities such as supplying water, healthcare services, education and training and other requisite facilities. Besides, she pointed, some women involved in ecotourism obtain revenue as concrete gain from selling art and handicraft, fruits, or cultural activities such as music dance and drama. (Key Informant, Buseruka)

Therefore, there is a prospect of reducing poverty and developing of women as an upshot of WCEEs; this confirms earlier findings by Barry (2012:7).

On the other hand, Jacintha Irumba highlighted:

Uncertainty in sharing the benefits could have been the motive why some respondents did not support the link between WCEEs and enhancement in women's livelihoods. Similarly, she explained, the inconsistent concern with business companies in ecotourism shrinks the probability that we the women will gain from WCEEs given the growing number of unsuspecting women joining partnerships with clandestine companies to expand ecotourism enterprises on their marital land. (Key Informant, Kibaale)

Nyanjura expressed her anguish by noting that:

Those partnerships would present better opportunities for women's economic growth if most of them were not from speculators of the budding oil industry. As a result, the probability of for us to gain from them is being highly compromised by intermediaries who are hoping to make short-term gains from hoodwinking of rural-based women. (Key Informant, Masindi)

Case one: Tukorehamu Nyakabingo women's group in Buseruka-Hoima

The group was founded and registered on April 20, 2005, although the group initially had 25 members, there were only 13 members at the time of this study. It is located in Nyakabingo Parish, Buseruka sub-county, Hoima district. The group activities spread across four villages (Bisenyi, Kamugole, Bigando and Kicunga-Jembe). It has a constitution that guides its members' group activities. It has an executive that monitors the day-to-day activities of the group. And that they work with the district credit officer who offers training and advice plus any necessary interventions. The group runs a current bank account and collaborates with other groups within and outside the district that deal with women's welfare issues especially rural women. The group is involved in several enterprises which include farming, fishing, small-scale businesses, bee-keeping, art and handicrafts, restaurant/food service, mobile tent services, although most of these enterprises are operated at an individual level. The enterprises have helped members to advance economically and most of all this has enhanced women empowerment amongst its members.

The members who are relatively more energetic were sometimes slowly engaging with other activities such as nature guided walks, scenery viewing, bird viewing, and sport fishing. She added that through those additional activities, members were slowly meeting new faces outside their vicinity and that this was producing several advantages such as education by teaching visitors about local plants, animals and birds; opening up new ideas through their interaction with different visitors; it is spiritually uplifting and brings members closer to the beauty of nature thus giving a deeper understanding of the local culture to the visitors who did not know much about it at the outset. It also helps the younger ladies to remain fit by losing some unwanted body weight as they walk around the wildlife reserve, hills and the lake shores.

The nearby lake Mwitanzige, Kaiso-Tonya wildlife reserve, Wambabya falls, the western rift valley, and Bugoma forest, are seen as great asset for great innovation among the group members. There are several good practices which are envy to many people; they have clearly laid down strategies/structures for obtaining resources required/for members, generating revenues for our group's continuity, record keeping of all our activities and projects in an orderly way, regular group members twice a month, counselling members who are facing peculiar social challenges, mobilising new members to join the group, and encouraging existing members to maintain their membership. If these practices can be enhanced through more training, exposure visits, benchmarking and more learning, the group is bound to become more successful in the field of ecotourism.

Case two: Tweimukye women's group in Kyatiri, Pakanyi-Masindi

The group was formed and registered in 2002; there are 18 members although it initially had 25 members. It operates in Kyatiri parish and covers six villages (Kyamboga, Kyababyara, Kibibira, Kisekura, Kyatiri centre, and Katugo). There are both joint projects for the whole group as well as individual projects for group members such as fruit growing, tree planting, advocacy for girl-child education, girl-child social support and capacity building among women. In addition, members of the group engage in nature guided walks, sport fishing, viewing the tops of the hills, game viewing and scenery enjoyment. They attributed these activities to the existence of Budongo forest, Murchison Falls National Park, and Kabalye Wildlife Reserve.

Budongo forest for instance, is a very significant part of Bunyoro's ecotourism industry. The group gave two key reasons for this view: Firstly, it aims to promote conservation of the Forest catchment at a local level by; (a) raising the socio-economic position of the neighbourhood communities by capitalizing on their incomes from ecotourism; (b) increasing the neighbourhood communities' interest in managing the forest reserve; (c) Discouraging unlawful use of the forest by growing the visibility of lawful involvement; and (d) Increasing the information and consciousness of neighbourhood communities on forest conservation. Secondly, Budongo forest aims to promote conservation of the forest resource at a national level by; (a) growing the revenues to the treasury by creating sustainable tourism; (b) Lifting up the country's profile by raising the number of circuits for tourism in Uganda; and (c) Encouraging tourists to tour the Forest Reserves among other destinations.

Case three: Akatagyenda women's group in Kitemuzi, Mpeefu-Kibaale district

The group started in 2003 with 34 members though it had 22 by the time of this study. It operates within Kitemuzi parish and covers five villages (Kinogora, Kiyunga, Kamuyange, Kirongo, and Buhanga). The group looks at ecotourism as a very important venture to women as; It brings long-term benefits that can be shared fairly in the host communities and regular maintenance of the community's infrastructure. It emotionally empowers the local people by boosting their self-esteem and pleasure for their cultural and natural tradition. Ecotourism may therefore reinforce friendships within society by promoting teamwork amongst members, and it

creates a platform for expression of peoples' voices on issues of local development. In addition, the group started a few projects mainly selling handicraft products, singing, drama and dancing, sport fishing, storytelling about the areas visited, food services, game viewing guides and nature guided walks whenever visitors come and they need such services.

The members received some training from the district and although it's not enough, they are better than they were before at attending the training sessions. They decided to start those activities because they thought that they could access some money for their families, child education and medical treatment; they also thought they would increase the market for their local handicraft products; it is thus also one way of being self-employed as a guide or even a restaurateur; they also thought that it would increase the knowledge and awareness of tourists of the value of culture and the natural environment.

Regarding the challenges faced by the group, they continue to face several challenges: sometimes they get too many visitors yet they cannot take care of all of them; sometimes they get visitors whose language they cannot easily understand such as French, south Sudanese or Somalis; the roads are sometimes so bad especially during the rainy seasons, that visitors cannot access their desired destinations; sometimes they are cheated by the so-called middlemen from the tour companies in Kampala; some male visitors think that those women are sex workers and they want to abuse them. There is also the problem with local government over-taxes as they believe that they get a lot of money from tourists. However because of the members' resilience, teamwork, commitment, encouraging one another, and effective project monitoring, they are able to deal with those challenges.

Analyzing the best practices to WCEEs Bunyoro

On the whole, the three cases of Buseruka, Pakanyi and Mpeefu, reveal several issues around the establishment of WCEEs in Bunyoro. there is a great range of biodiversity such as *inter alia* Budongo and Bugoma forests, Murchison-falls National Park, and Kabalye and Kaiso-Tonya wildlife reserves; There is also a strong cultural heritage since the region is home to one of the oldest cultural institutions in the country the Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom-in terms of handicrafts, music dance and drama, the unique people's lifestyles; the rich landscape given the impressive hills and swamps; and accessibility from both land and water are all important considerations. These would enhance the growth and sustainability of WCEEs within and outside the region and lead to several infrastructural, economic and social welfare benefits an issue which was confirmed Yogi (2010: 21)'s study in Nepal. Several best practices, of course, sprang from the study. WCEEs could be implemented in Bunyoro with ease since the target group is emotionally and practically prepared to start and see the enterprises grow and succeed. Their readiness and preparedness has been exemplified in this study by several indicators such as strategic location in areas that are fertile enough to allow ecotourism to flourish n, the availability of dependable organisational and leadership structures, effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, the existence of transparency and accountability mechanisms, and also the availability of mobilisation tools and frameworks, and last but not least, the accessibility of indigenous knowledge bases.

Therefore, academicians and policy-makers can boost WCEEs in terms of trainings, or review conferences, moreover, an encouraging atmosphere for nourishing WCEEs should be correlated to the benefits not only to attract ecotourists but also to make women realize the potential of WCEEs in their areas and as a result raise their energies to be involved.

Conclusion and implications of the study

The paper aimed at exploring the best practices towards establishing WCEEs in Uganda. The outcomes indicated that, WCEEs can be grouped into several groups depending on the location such as g, scenery viewing, game viewing, boat cruise, spot fishing, nature guided walks, viewing the top of the falls, and bird watching. Whereas the term WCEEs is not yet a popular thing to talk about amongst scholars in the field of ecotourism, they have a great future in Uganda and the women are already getting better prepared to accept them. Although some of the respondents did not concur on significance of ecotourism in Bunyoro's socio-economic development, perhaps since not all community members get sufficient information related to ecotourism and its benefits uniformly and it is at times tricky to considerably envisage development that will be brought about as a result of WCEEs from contribution from other segments of tourism.

Among the identified benefits of WCEEs is community's knowledge of environmental conservation gained through teaching members about local fauna and flora; access to clean and safe water, deeper understanding of the local culture; primary health care services; spiritual uplifting and bringing one closer to nature; enhancement of both primary and secondary education; opening up to new ideas, and helping one to lose weight in terms of physical fitness. The study findings have also revealed how good it is to travel closer to the ground rather flying in space or merely driving around the tourism cites as endangered habitats and biodiversity are easily conserved; money flows into the community directly rather than just ending up at the line ministry; both local communities, local investment provides financial incentives that encourages people to protect their environment and visitors become aware of the surrounding environmental wealth. However, the success critical success factors in Uganda will be positive relations with local governments and central government, good cooperation with traditional cultural leadership, sociable local communities, policies which allow free movement and women empowerment policies.

The findings of this survey underscore the significance of awareness and realistic embracing, establishing and operating WCEEs in Uganda in the near future by women at different stages and abilities. These outcomes shape the basis for additional field investigations on stakeholders' perception of WCEEs could be applied in several capacity building initiatives aimed to reinforce awareness and competences of women ecotourism entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, precise plans have to take into consideration given the consciousness and level of education for most rural women in Uganda. Scholars, in ecotourism, should guide the appropriate authorities on appropriate strategies to be undertaken such as; low impact travelling to natural areas that sustains and fosters environmental awareness so as to guarantee WCEEs' direct gains to women and contribute considerably to both local and national revenue. Finally, the success of WCEEs will be influenced by the devotion of all the key stakeholders to..... This study can act as a tool to reinforce or harmonize their endeavours in sustaining WCEEs, to the betterment of gender equality initiatives and towards more sustainable tourism.

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