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The Politics of Community-Based Tourism in Uganda: Perspectives on Power and Local Governance in Bigodi Wetland Sanctuary

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Title: The Politics of Community-Based Tourism in Uganda: Perspectives on Power and Local Governance in Bigodi Wetland Sanctuary

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Abstract:

Over the last few decades, there has been a significant push from various scholars, and development and environmental agencies, to encourage greater participation by local people in the governance of tourism in their areas (Ashley, 2007; Roe et al., 2009; Giampiccoli & Mtapuli, 2015; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2016). Proponents of tourism as a viable tool for community development have long suggested that when communities are in charge of tourism development, it could lead to alternative livelihoods and social, educational, and cultural benefits (Murphy, 2013; Scheyvens, 1999, 2002; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). Local governance has been promoted as an essential element of development in rural remote areas, particularly those adjacent to National Parks in developing countries. The literature highlights the merits and importance of the concept of participation in tourism management and planning (Muganda et al., 2013; Brokaj, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2014). However, issues of power and how participation is defined by the local residents and the individuals who lead the governance of the local tourism enterprise are rarely understood and conceptualised.

This paper examines power negotiations by local residents in a community-based tourism enterprise in Bigodi, Uganda. It highlights the political dimensions of development practices by emphasising the role of power in the negotiations of who participates and their level of participation in the community-based tourism enterprises. The concept of power is used in this paper to mean the application of knowledge and resources to effect decisions, resolve problems, and further one's interest. Drawing on an ethnographic study, a community tourism lens is used to understand how power engenders or distorts governance.

The data on which this paper is based encompass a decade of interactions with the residents of Bigodi, revisiting the study area several times. The study started with the perspective of understanding how community-based tourism can contribute to poverty alleviation in rural communities in Uganda. However, in the process of collecting data and spending more time in the Bigodi, I also picked up interest in power and governance of the tourism resources and how benefits are distributed within the community. The study relied on in-depth interviews. Kvale (1996) identified two positions (metaphors) of in-depth interviews: the researcher is both a miner and a traveller. Kvale (1996) referred to the qualitative researcher as a miner who, through in-depth interviews, unearths the valuable metal (knowledge). He also recognised that knowledge is not given, but instead created and negotiated; therefore, the researcher is a traveller on a journey with the interviewees. Through conversations, the interviewees lead the researcher to new insights that he/she interprets to get meanings (Kvale, 1996). The narratives for this study were developed from these two perspectives, where, as a researcher, I was both a miner and a traveller. I collected data through participant observation and informal conversations from both the residents of Bigodi and the leaders of Kibale Association for Rural and Environmental and Development (KAFRED). Through interactions with the community, questions were raised about whether the western type of governance is the right model to use in the community-based tourism enterprises of the South, particularly in light of the failure of previous organising efforts

that tried to apply democratic governance in local communities of the developing world.

KAFRED in Bigodi presented a good case study on how local people negotiate issues of power, and how this in turn influences governance. The natural area of tourism in Bigodi is directly owned by the community, and tourism is developed and managed by the local people. Naturally, one would assume that the leadership being made up of local people would encourage wide community involvement in the decision-making process and equitable sharing of the benefits. However, as this study discovered, there is a strategic relationship between the politico-economic interests of the people in power, the knowledge of tourism management which at any time dominates the discourse on power, and the models of leadership which are adopted. Community-based governance in tourism does represent any radical structural deviation from the governance is practiced in Sub-Saharan Africa; rather, it could be understood as a non-coercive instrument of power, through which the development interests of dominant actors are achieved. The nature of KAFRED membership, and its limitation to a few people in the community, make this an interesting, but atypical example of elite-dominated organisation mixed with traditional values. Though there are benefits derived from the good governance of the community tourism enterprise, there are also power constraints that hinder community involvement and equity in a locally owned tourism project. However, the success of the community-based tourism enterprise on the socio-economic and environmental perspectives also raises questions about whether the control of power by a few individuals could be the most suitable governance model in this rural area of Uganda.

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