

The Role of Ecotourism in Reducing Poverty and Unemployment: A Mixed Method Approach

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Abstract

Ecotourism is perceived as a promising initiative capable of poverty alleviation and job creation. This study investigated whether ecotourism helps to alleviate poverty and unemployment in relatively underdeveloped areas such as the UMkhanyakude district municipality. The study used a parallel, convergent research design comprising qualitative and quantitative research applications. Both random and purposive sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 204. In selecting respondents for the quantitative dimension, two types of databases obtained from each of the local municipalities were used. The first database comprised community registers, and the second included a list of companies registered with the municipality's supply chain or procurement unit. Specifically, the criteria used to select participants included expertise, understanding of ecotourism programme implementation processes, skills, and proximity to ecotourism projects. Four (n = 4) officials and four (n = 4) program managers, for a total of eight, were selected from each of the four local municipalities. This resulted in a combined purposive sample of 32 participants (8 x 4 = 32) for the interviews. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed to analyse quantitative data. The qualitative data were processed through the ATLAS TI application. From the results, it can be deduced that, to a greater extent, ecotourism is contributing towards the reduction of poverty and unemployment in UMkhanyakude District Municipality. Based on the results, it is concluded that ecotourism has the potential to reduce poverty and unemployment in rural communities in line with the dimensions of sustainable development goals.

Keywords: ecotourism; poverty alleviation; pro-poor tourism (PPT); rural development; sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Ecotourism is believed to have the potential to provide environmental, socio-economic, and cultural benefits (Guri et al., 2021; Salman et al., 2020). According to Agyeman et al. (2019), ecotourism is widely recognized for its positive impacts on poverty reduction. Ecotourism operators argue that the ecotourism industry has contributed to the socio-economic and cultural development of local communities through conserving and supporting protected areas. Adanlawo et al. (2023) argue that ecotourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism market. It is influenced primarily by public demand for more environmentally responsible tourism. Arguably, ecotourism can integrate the conservation of biodiversity with the socio-economic development of local communities if planned properly. For this reason, many governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are eager to develop ecotourism in protected areas in order to maximize these benefits (Serenari et al., 2020; Salman et al., 2020).

In developing countries such as South Africa, ecotourism is perceived as a promising initiative capable of poverty alleviation (Gumede & Nzama, 2021; Kumutha et al., 2021). Consequently, ecotourism has been incorporated into development, and conservation policies and strategies are being implemented at the local government level as part of local economic development (LED) initiatives (Guri et al., 2021; Serenari et al., 2020). As an alternative to mainstream tourism, ecotourism entails visiting natural areas in order to learn, study, or undertake environmentally friendly activities. Ecotourism focuses on the natural experience which, if harnessed well, can unlock the socio-economic development of local communities, thus helping to reduce poverty and unemployment (Adanlawo, 2017; Agyeman et al., 2019; Oladeji et al., 2022). The distinguishing

feature of ecotourism is that it focuses on experiencing and learning about nature, its landscape, flora and fauna and their habitats, as well as cultural artefacts found in the locality. Its primary objective is to conserve resources, including biological diversity, thus ensuring sustainable use of resources that bring ecological experience to travellers (Anup, 2018; Hameed & Khalid, 2018).

The most important contribution of ecotourism to development is its provision of products and services while simultaneously accommodating the socio-economic and environmental aspects of society. It supports sustainable development by ensuring a balance between human needs (that is, natural experience) and the preservation of natural ecosystems and biodiversity (Hameed & Khalid, 2018; Kiper, 2013). Owing to its emphasis on the natural experience, ecotourism promotes and supports non-consumptive use of wildlife; for instance, photographic tourism, bird-watching, hiking, and horseback riding and raise awareness about the local environment and the plight of local communities with minimal adverse impacts on the environment (Chaka & Adanlawo, 2022; Guri et al., 2021). Well-crafted ecotourism strategies encourage the participation of poor rural communities and could generate benefits that mitigate the saturation of natural and cultural resources, thus ensuring poverty reduction in rural communities (Agyeman et al., 2019; Mmini & Ramoroka, 2020; Xaba et al., 2024).

However, in practice, ecotourism has often failed to deliver the expected benefits to local communities due to shortages in endowments of human, financial, and social capital within the community (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Mudzengi et al., 2021). This problem has been compounded by the scantiness of literature on the role of ecotourism in poverty alleviation and unemployment in rural areas. The study seeks to address this knowledge gap by determining the extent to which ecotourism supports job creation and poverty alleviation.

Precisely, the central problem that stimulated this study, therefore, is that while ecotourism is being promoted in UMkhanyakude District, its efficacy in terms of alleviating unemployment and poverty remains unclear, owing to insufficient research done on this issue. Much of the research undertaken so far emphasises the link between ecotourism and environmental sustainability, and thus, the potential role of ecotourism in alleviating poverty and unemployment in rural contexts has been overlooked. This study objective is to investigate the role that ecotourism plays in reducing poverty and unemployment in underdeveloped areas such as UMkhanyakude.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research underscores the vital link between tourism, poverty reduction, and sustainable development (Boluk et al., 2019; Rogerson et al., 2013). In recent years, tourism has experienced sustained growth as a result of the growing global demand for ecotourism. Arguably, however, tourism is not a value-free or neutral concept. Rather, like any other industry, it is prone to politics and vested interests, which have a direct impact on both the allocation and distribution of resources and outcomes in rural communities (Nkomo & Adanlawo, 2023). This explanation resonates with the study's focus on investigating the role of the ecotourism sector in unemployment and poverty alleviation in rural contexts. Thus, this study argues that sustainable ecotourism practices are likely to alleviate poverty and preserve natural capital in rural areas. Therefore, this study suggests that there is a close association between ecotourism policy practice, poverty alleviation, and unemployment.

Poverty continues to baffle policy-makers and development practitioners, especially in developing countries such as South Africa. A central problem South Africa is grappling with is how to mobilize and involve the poor in sustainable

ecotourism initiatives in order to reduce hunger and economic deprivation without depleting natural resources. Balancing these policy imperatives remains a major challenge for both the national and local governments (Stoffelen et al., 2020). In development literature, poverty is defined as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising several factors, such as poor health, a lack of education, poor living standards, a lack of income or consumption, a lack of decent work, and a threat from violence (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Zondi et al., 2023). Unemployment is defined as the state of being without a job or the number of people without jobs in a particular area (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020). The UMkhanyakude district municipality's current unemployment rate stands at 31%; this underscores the need for the accelerated implementation of ecotourism to mitigate this challenge.

Ecotourism is seen as a viable solution to the problems facing marginalized rural communities, which have little or no access to meaningful economic activities. This has necessitated the need to adopt sustainable ecotourism. Chaka & Adanlawo (2023) define sustainability as "the property of being environmentally sustainable; the degree to which a process or enterprise is able to be maintained or continued while avoiding the long-term depletion of natural resources." Therefore, sustainable ecotourism development implies development that balances the needs of present generations without compromising the needs of future generations in terms of resource allocation, utilization and preservation (Utete, 2021).

Ecotourism is instrumental in alleviating poverty and unemployment through the transfer of skills and business opportunities (Mnisi, 2022). In this view, the viability of ecotourism or rural tourism lies in its being compatible with and complementary to traditional activities, as opposed to being a substitute for previous incomes. Moreover, it preserves all the countryside's habitats, values, and lifestyles. According to Agyeman et al. (2019), rural tourism has

become a favourable and suitable alternative for tourists, particularly in developed countries. This is possibly because it is hustle-free since there is no international travel involved.

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT)

Pro-poor tourism (PPT) was first coined to mean ‘tourism that generates net benefits for the poor’ (Gonzo, 2023). Several researchers have highlighted the need for adopting a pro-poor approach to ecotourism to ensure local communities’ benefit (Kieti et al., 2012; Tolkach et al., 2012). Neto (2003) posits that the pro-poor approach prioritizes the needs of the poor when allocating and distributing project resources and economic benefits. While pro-poor tourism (PPT) and ecotourism may have similar objectives, the key difference is that the former focuses on poverty reduction rather than a secondary component of the main environmental sustainability strategy. Although environmental protection remains an important goal of PPT, the quality of the environment in which targeted poor groups live is only one part of a broader poverty reduction strategy. The apparent emphasis on poverty alleviation resonates with the purpose of this study, which seeks to assess the contribution of ecotourism to the reduction of this challenge.

Nowadays, pro-poor ecotourism is promoted as a way to reduce poverty in emerging markets, through venture creation and self-employment opportunities (Adanlawo et al., 2021; Gonzo, 2023). This, to some extent, resonates with the goal of the study, which seeks to investigate whether ecotourism contributes to unemployment and poverty reduction in the UMkhanyakude community. International and donor organizations, in addition to scholars, are very interested in the pro-poor framework. For instance, in 2002, the Sustainable Tourism Eliminating Poverty Initiative (STEP) was developed by the United Nations World Tourism Organization. By developing and creating jobs for

those who are impoverished and survive on less than \$1 per day, the STEP seeks to alleviate poverty through promoting the development of activities that support sustainable tourism (Rogerson et al., 2013).

The growing emphasis on pro-poor ecotourism was also boosted by the 2002 United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa, which saw poverty alleviation as a key priority. Hence, the role of ecotourism in advancing social sustainability made significant headway under discussions around responsible tourism and pro-poor tourism. Pro-poor tourism is defined as providing net benefits for the poor (benefits exceeding costs) by the UK’s Department of International Development (DFID). Benefits should be understood holistically and should not be limited to financial gains; as a result, they should also take into account social, environmental, and cultural gains, according to the DFID. Pro-poor tourism should also establish a connection between the underprivileged and tourism companies in order to leverage and increase the benefits of tourism for the poor (Musavengane et al., 2019; Tolkach et al., 2012). The emphasis on helping the poor cope with poverty is consistent with the purpose of the study, which argues that ecotourism can be effective if it contributes positively to job creation and poverty reduction in rural communities.

However, like other ecotourism models, the pro-poor approach has received substantial negative criticism (Chaichi, 2017). Pro-poor tourism activities benefit both the rich and the poor; it has been argued that pro-poor ecotourism perpetuates societal inequalities. According to this theory, there are innate structural barriers that work against the underprivileged people who participate in and gain from ecotourism activities (Kala & Bagri, 2018). These include low levels of educational attainment, a lack of microfinance targeted at ecotourism development, and marginalization in decision-making. Further, ecotourism operators have been censured for

showing little ethical commitment to ensuring that their businesses contribute to poverty alleviation in local communities. As a result, it has been suggested that protection measures be instituted in order to prevent large multinational corporations from controlling the agenda and monopolizing decision-making in the international arena (Adanlawo et al., 2023). It is evident from the foregoing that, despite the limitations, the pro-poor approach has received considerable attention as a viable strategic intervention that could successfully combat poverty and unemployment in underdeveloped areas such as UMkhanyakude.

METHODS

The study used a parallel convergent research design comprising qualitative and quantitative research applications to evaluate whether ecotourism projects were undertaken in a manner capable of reducing unemployment and alleviating poverty in UMkhanyakude District Municipality. This design enabled the researcher to use both numeric and non-numeric data to address the research questions. Participants were selected from each of the four local municipalities targeted by the study. The sample was fairly balanced, with all the categories being represented in the study. These include programme officials, project managers, and vulnerable groups such as women and the youth. Both random and purposive sampling techniques were used to select the final sample of 204. Details of how this was achieved are provided as follows: The total sample for the quantitative component was based on Yamane (1967):

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Based on the above formula, the intended focus was 400 participants; as a result, only 172 participants were selected. This number excludes the 32 participants for the qualitative component. To arrive at 32 participants, eight participants were

selected from Halbisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and Umhlabuyalinga and this figure was determined by data saturation. Data saturation was achieved at the seventh interview in the first municipality, then the number was maintained in the subsequent municipalities for purposes of consistency. Based on the above formula, the intended focus was 400 participants; as a result, only 172 participants were selected. This number excludes the 32 participants for the qualitative component. To arrive at 32 participants, eight participants were selected from Halbisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and Umhlabuyalinga, and this figure was determined by data saturation. Data saturation was achieved at the seventh interview in the first municipality, then the number was maintained in the subsequent municipalities for purposes of consistency.

In selecting respondents for the quantitative dimension of the study, the researcher used two types of databases obtained from each of the local municipalities. The first database comprised community registers. The second database included a list of companies registered with the municipality's supply chain or procurement unit. Specifically, the criteria used to select participants included expertise, understanding of ecotourism program implementation processes, skills, and proximity to ecotourism projects. Four ($n = 4$) officials and four ($n = 4$) program managers, for a total of eight, were selected from each of the four local municipalities. This resulted in a combined purposive sample of 32 participants ($8 \times 4 = 32$) for the interviews. For simplicity and ease of operation, the data gathering process was divided into two phases. In Phase One, semi-structured interviews were conducted with program officials, project managers, and owners or operators of ecotourism enterprises. In Phase Two, standard questionnaires were administered to participants (employees of ecotourism enterprises and community members from each of the four local municipalities) in their workplaces.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed to analyse quantitative data solicited from ecotourism operators and their employees. The descriptive data in the form of statistics were transformed into percentages and later reported in pie charts and bar charts. The qualitative data collected from programme officials and project managers in each of the four local municipalities of UKDM (Hlabisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and UMhlabuyalingana) were processed through the ATLAS TI application, which entailed the creation of a Hermeneutic Unit (HU) where all the interview and focus group transcripts and text-based information from document reviews were stored.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

It is imperative to establish whether ecotourism can reduce poverty and unemployment in UMkhanyakude District. This is crucial because the study primarily aimed to determine if ecotourism projects were helping to mitigate poverty and unemployment. To address this issue, the study focused on the following:

Income Levels in Ecotourism Activities

Income levels significantly indicate progress or regression in addressing the challenges posed by poverty and unemployment in any policy intervention, including ecotourism (Irandu & Sha, 2016). Thus, it was vital to find out from community members what their income levels for ecotourism projects were. The study uncovered the following:

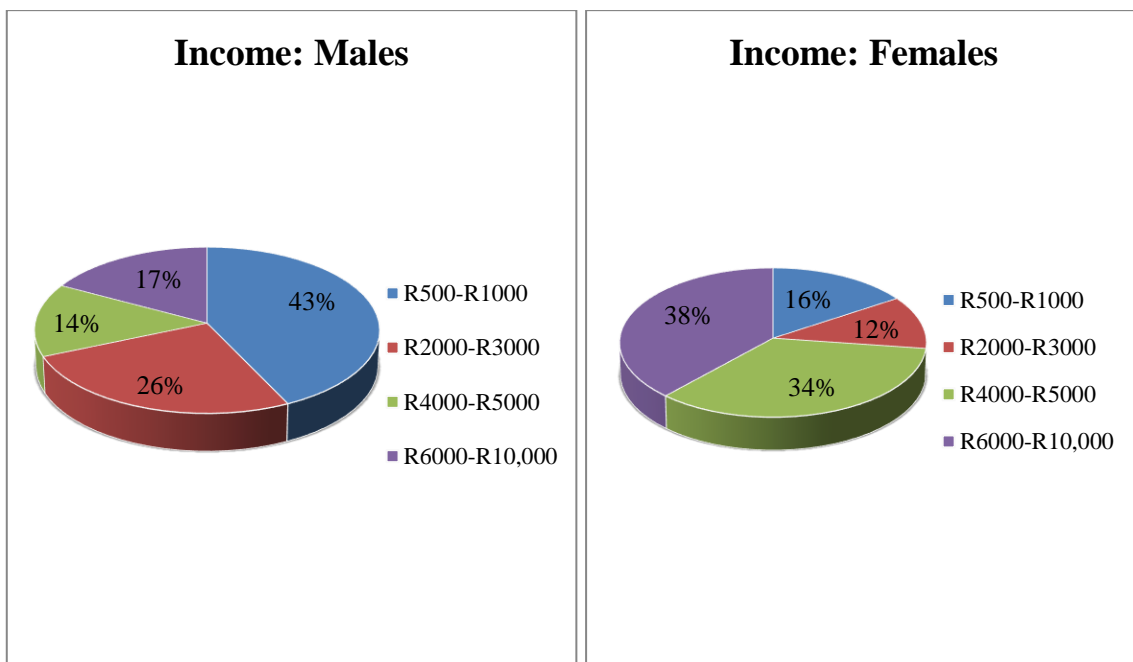


Figure 1. Income Levels in Ecotourism Activities

According to Figure 1, a significant number (43%) of males earned between R500 and R1, 000 per month, compared to only 16% of the females who were in the same income bracket. Additionally, 26% of males earned between R2, 000 and R3, 000 per month. Comparatively, the number

of women in this income bracket was significantly low, at 12%. Meanwhile, the number of males earning between R5, 000 and R6, 000 per month was significantly low (14%), compared to 34% of female participants who earned this amount. In addition, very few men (17%) in the higher

income bracket earned between R6, 000 and R10, 000 per month. In contrast, the number of women who earned this amount was relatively high, at 34%. On the positive side, these results show that some women benefited more equitably from ecotourism activities than most of their male counterparts, who largely earned between R500 and R1, 000. These results are consistent with the findings of other researchers (Agyeman et al., 2019; Gonzo, 2023), this shows that ecotourism has the potential

to generate substantial benefits for the poor in terms of both income and local infrastructural development.

Sources of Income

This question aimed at establishing whether there were any specific ecotourism activities that provided income for male and female participants in UKDM’s ecotourism industry. The study discovered the following:

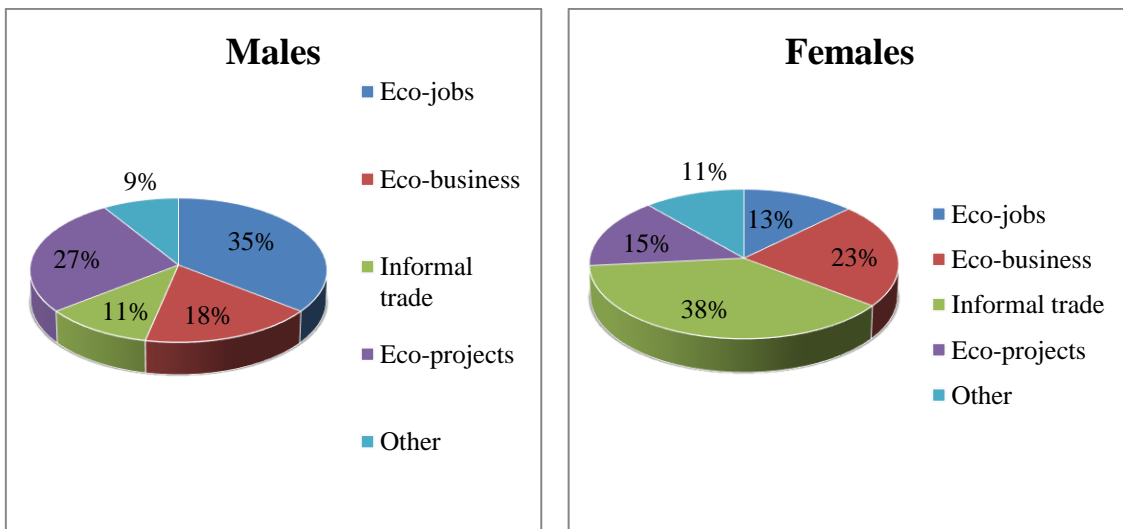


Figure 2. Sources of Income for The Participants

Figure 2 shows that 35% of the males derived income from jobs in the ecotourism sector. Comparatively, very few women (13%) relied on income from ecotourism jobs. Meanwhile, 18% of the men got their income through participation in ecotourism business activities. Contrary to this, 38% of the women obtained income from similar activities, suggesting that more women were becoming involved in venture creation activities in the local ecotourism industry. The findings from the interviews confirmed that women were actively involved in both formal and informal ecotourism business activities in areas like Hlabisa and Mtubatuba, although such activities were relatively low in Jozini and UMhlabuyalingana, partly due to a lack of awareness and underdevelopment. Evidently, these results indicate that

ecotourism plays a critical role in employment creation and poverty alleviation (Mnisi, 2022). Overall, the results are consistent with what other researchers say about the need to get local communities more involved in ecotourism activities to reduce poverty.

Types of Ecotourism Services Available

The question sought to determine the type of products and services offered in UMkhanyakude’s ecotourism sector. The obtained data sets indicate that the ecotourism services and business models found in each of the four local municipalities were largely shaped by the kinds of natural resources available in that area. In other words, community members chose their business models on the basis of demand, sensing what ecotourists wanted, and then

packaged their service offerings according to what was popular on the market. The results are revealed in Figure 3 below:

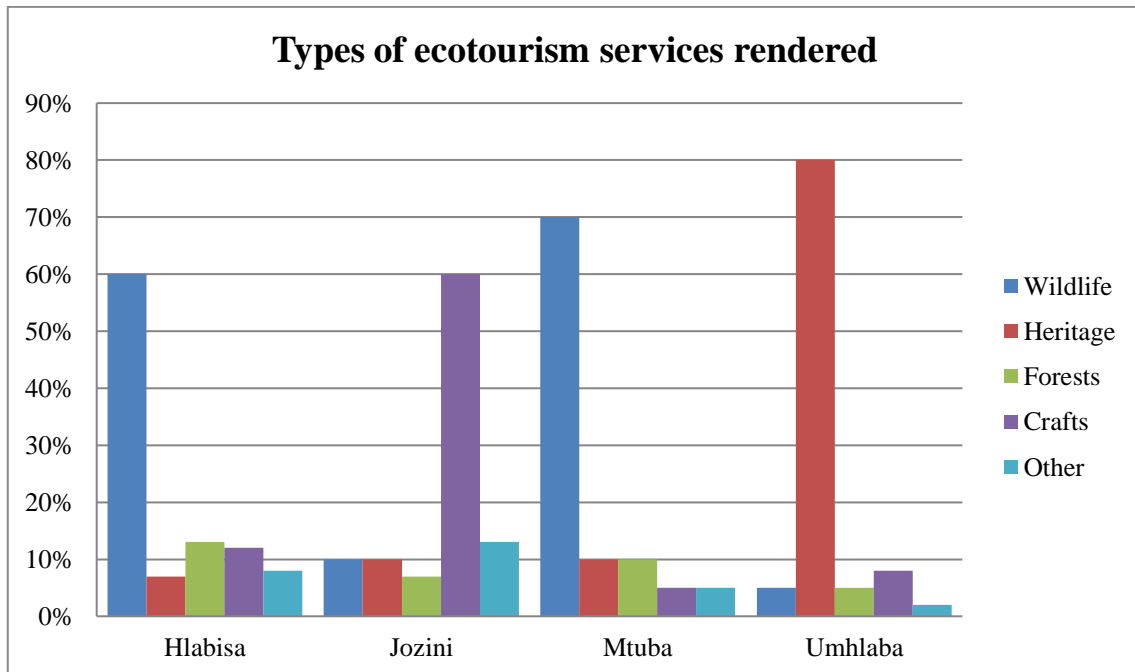


Figure 3. Types of Ecotourism Services Rendered

According to the results in Figure 3, Hlabisa and Mtubatuba had more (80%) wildlife services than the rest of the local municipalities. In Jozini, crafts services were the most common forms of ecotourism; while UMhlabuyalingana dominated with heritage sites (80%). Overall, these results suggest that ecotourism services remain largely underdeveloped in areas like Jozini and Umhlabuyalingana. This concern was also confirmed by programme officials and project managers during focus group discussions. Faced with a largely underdeveloped ecotourism industry, local communities in Jozini relied heavily on crafts as the major entrepreneurial activity, though it was largely small-scale and survivalist in nature. In UMhlabuyalingana, 80% of the entrepreneurial activities occurred at the Isimangaliso Heritage site, where mostly women sold crafts and related goods to tourists. Evidently, these results show that entrepreneurial activities in ecotourism were severely limited, which made some households more vulnerable to poverty and unemployment. Describing

the nature and distribution of ecotourism services in UKDM, one programme official from Jozini indicated that:

“Our areas (municipalities) are endowed with different, precious natural resources and species which then determine viable business options to be promoted in each area. Hlabisa and Mtubatuba are blessed with wild animals which attract a large number of tourists each year. If you go to UMhlabuyalingana, you find that the Isimangaliso World Heritage Site is also a major draw-card for tourists.”

The above finding on the modes of ecotourism found in the UKDM is consistent with the findings of other researchers. For instance, Jing & Fucai (2011) established that ecotourism activities are based on ecological culture, ecological technology, ecological products, content, and civilization. For these services to be demanded by ecotourists, they must be of high quality. However, quality is neglected

in the provision of these services (Yusof et al., 2014).

Encouraged to Start Ecotourism Business

One of the fundamental requirements of the BBBEE legislation is to ensure that previously disadvantaged South

African communities have access to business opportunities, including ownership of equity in bigger companies. Thus, the study elicited the views of community members in Hlabisa, Mtubatuba, Jozini, and UMhlabuyalingana local municipalities to discuss their experiences on this issue. The results are as follows:

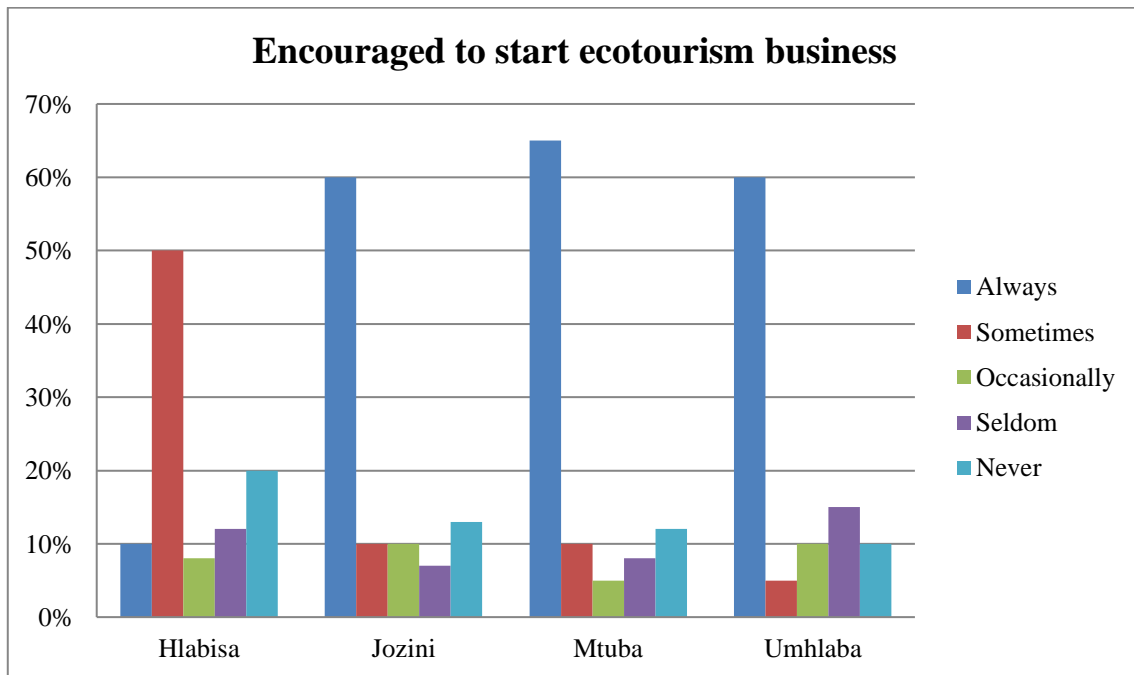


Figure 4. Encouraged to Start Ecotourism Business

Figure 4 indicates that the majority of the community members in Mtubatuba (65%), UMhlabuyalingana (60%), and Jozini (60%) have always been encouraged to start their own ecotourism ventures. Contrary to this, Hlabisa had the lowest number (10%) of community members who had been encouraged to start such businesses. At the same time, the number of local people who had never been encouraged to start their own businesses was relatively high (20%) in Jozini, compared to the other two local municipalities with 10% each. Meanwhile, the number of locals who were sometimes encouraged to start their own ecotourism ventures was relatively high (50%) in Hlabisa compared to the other local municipalities, where only 10% had been encouraged to do this. During the interviews, one programme

official in Mtubatuba local municipality indicated that:

“We are not only supporting established small businesses, but we also support people who engage in informal trading activities to earn incomes in order to support their families. These informal traders need to be respected and given the necessary support for them to be able to grow their businesses. Currently, we encourage them to use the available opportunities side-by-side with established small businesses, and tourists buy from all businesses irrespective of size”.

The results on the encouragement of local people, especially the youth to participate in ecotourism venture creation

activities are consistent with the conclusion reached by Oladeji et al. (2022).

Encouraged to Partner with Big Ecotourism Companies

Enterprise development was promoted through incubation, and partnerships form part of the BBBEE policy framework across all the economic sectors, including ecotourism. Given this background, the study assessed participants'

views on whether they had been encouraged by their municipalities or tourism promotion agencies to form partnerships with established companies in the sector. As indicated in Figure 5, there were mixed reactions to this question. While some participants confirmed receiving encouragement from their municipalities, others reported that they had never been encouraged to partner with big ecotourism companies for them to learn about ecotourism services.

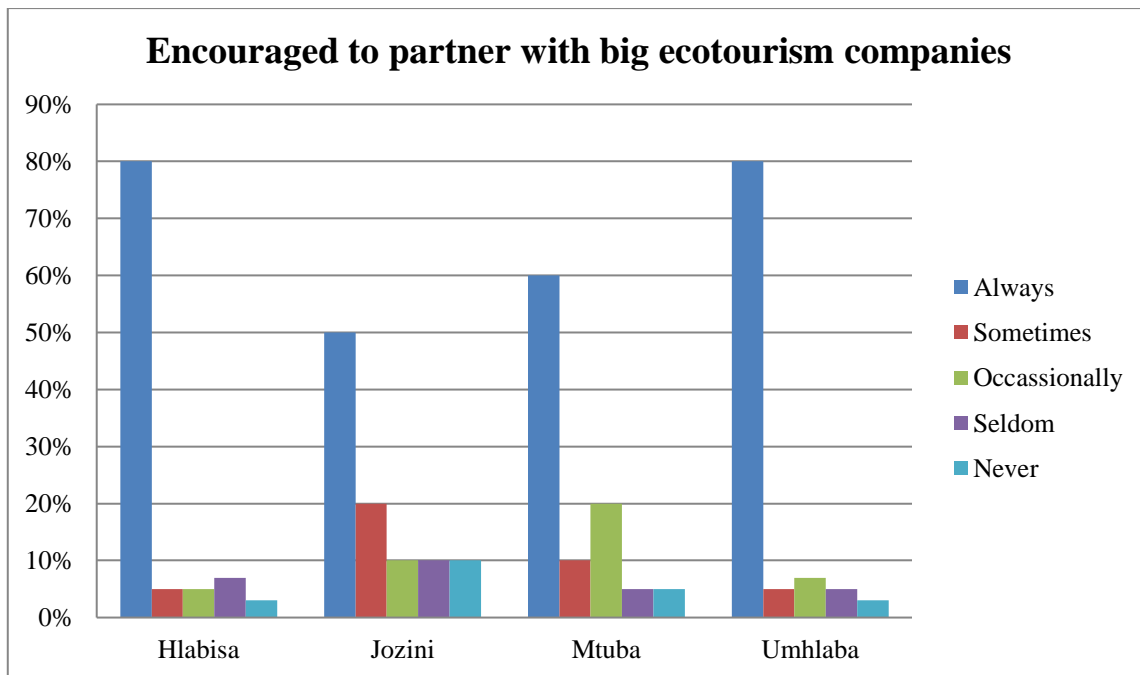


Figure 5. Encouraged to partner with big ecotourism companies

Interestingly, the results in Figure 5 show that most (80%) community members in Hlabisa and UMhlabuyalingana have always been encouraged to work with big ecotourism companies in their areas; followed by Mtubatuba with 60%. This is understandable, as these areas are often described as among the most attractive tourist destinations in KwaZulu-Natal due to their spectacular natural beaches (Sodwana Bay in UMhlabuyalingana) and the “Big Five” (Hlabisa). In Jozini, the number of community members who were sometimes encouraged to work with big tourism companies was significantly high, at 20%. Only 20% of community members across the four local municipalities had never been

encouraged to work with big ecotourism businesses in their areas. In Umhlabuyalingana, project managers reported that partnerships between small local enterprises and established ecotourism occurred in the Isimangaliso World Heritage Site in Sodwana Bay. Here, some small-scale local ecotourism ventures collaborated with big businesses to maintain and service boats; supporting nature conservation literacy projects for young children and training youths on surfing to keep them away from crime and other social ills. Overall, this suggests that the four local municipalities have attempted to promote collaboration between small and big ecotourism enterprises in the UKDM, although more

effort is needed to ensure that community members understand the financial benefits of such partnerships. In Hlabisa, one project manager said:

“For small businesses to grow, they need the support of bigger ones, so we encourage the local business chamber to mentor and assist budding entrepreneurs in all aspects of tourism, not just ecotourism. We have started to see the fruits as many people are starting to engage in formal and informal tourism activities to improve their earnings.”

The growing emphasis on the need for partnership between local and big ecotourism companies resonates with the findings of research conducted by Odede et al. (2015), which revealed that in Kenya’s Kisumu County, communities that once had very little industrial experience and misguided management systems are now flourishing owing to the employment of local people. Odede et al. (2015) concluded that where local communities have control over ecotourism activities, community-based ecotourism can effectively alleviate poverty in rural areas.

Informed About Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Opportunities

Black economic empowerment is a policy of the South African government which aims to facilitate broader participation in the economy by black people. Equitable access to economic empowerment opportunities is one of the key strategies facilitating the entry and participation of previously disadvantaged communities in South Africa’s mainstream economy. In terms of the Tourism BBE Charter (2005), tourism organizations can achieve this goal through the implementation of several measures, including ownership, strategic management, employment equity, skills development, preferential procurement, as well as enterprise and social development. The implementation of the BBBEE policy is therefore mandatory for companies in all sectors of the economy, including ecotourism (Chaka & Adanlawo, 2023). It was on the basis of this understanding that the study canvassed the views of community members to establish if they had been informed about BBBEE opportunities.

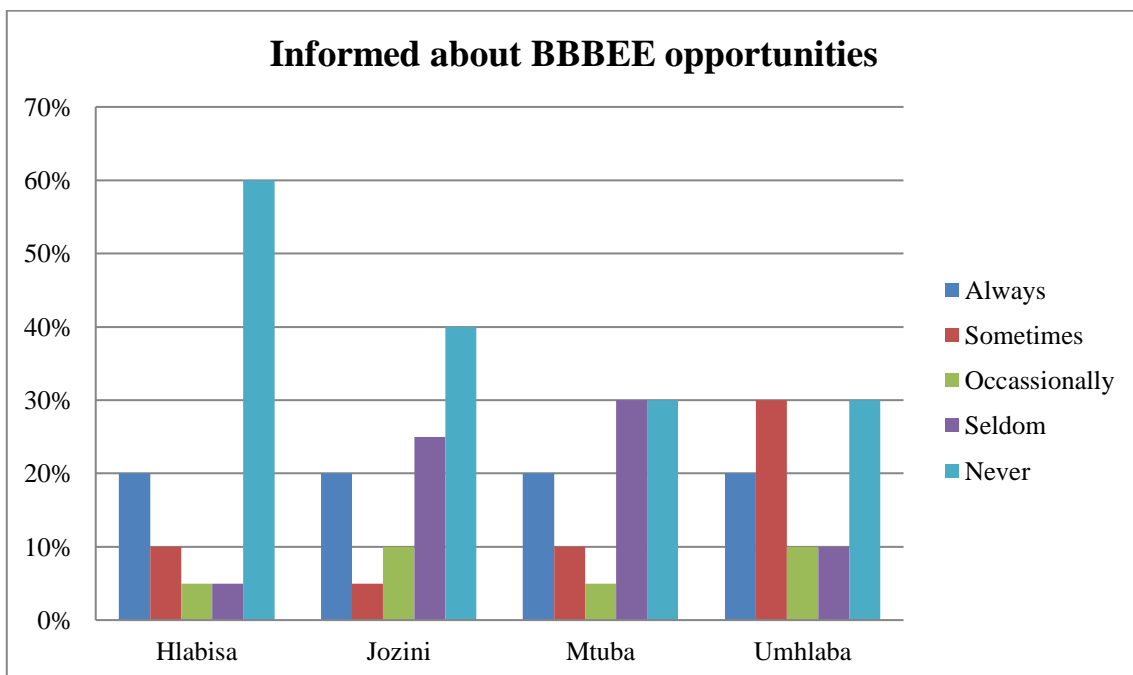


Figure 6. Informed About BBBEE Opportunities in Ecotourism

Figure 6 shows that approximately 20% of the community members across the four local municipalities of Umkhanyakude had always been informed about the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment opportunities in the ecotourism sector. In addition, a significant number (40%) of these participants had only been occasionally informed about the BBBEE opportunities in their areas. However, the results in Figure 6 also show that the majority (80%) of community members in these four municipalities had never been informed about these opportunities in their respective areas. This finding is suggestive of the gaps in the manner in which ecotourism services are packaged and communicated to local communities in Hlabisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and UMhlabuyalinga. This also implies a lack of a standard procedure for conveying such information to local people. In the absence of a standardized communication framework, community members in remote areas hardly access the relevant ecotourism information in these local municipalities. According to one programme official in UMhlabuyalingana:

“The challenge is long distance coupled with transport shortages. People have to travel long distances to get business-related information. Even attending IDP meetings poses problems because some areas have no electricity and road infrastructure. So, people who are keen to start ecotourism businesses often use friends and relatives to get (BBBEE) information. The information is there but the problem is how to get it to the community because of the constraints I have just mentioned.”

On the positive side, the results in Figure 6 concur with the literature on the positive impacts of ecotourism on local communities. For instance, ecotourism has brought financial resources to poverty-stricken areas worldwide. With the right effort and adequate planning, ecotourism

may decrease the world's poverty levels, increase education levels, and create jobs (Mnisi, 2022). In Kenya, empowerment initiatives were diversified to ensure the empowerment of women in all aspects of ecotourism; such as business management, leadership, customer care, driving skills, structured skills identification and fling programme for female entrepreneurs, and the provision of temporary jobs to young girls to facilitate their entry into the ecotourism industry (Odede et al., 2015).

On the contrary, Mnisi's (2022) study established the factors hindering the active participation of local communities in BBBEE opportunities in the ecotourism sector. These include the negative attitude exhibited by Black people towards the tourism sector; thus, tourism is considered a ‘White people thing; lack of entrepreneurial skills, high entry costs; for example, the material resources required to acquire ownership are expensive; low literacy levels among rural communities; access to opportunities that benefit the politically connected Black people; and corruption within the tourism industry.

The results indicate that it was difficult to determine management's ability to improve the performance and functionality of the BBBEE initiatives because there were no clear roles or accountability for carrying out these initiatives. It was determined that managers in the Umkhanyakude District Municipality failed to establish pertinent and adequate BBBEE policies, plans, strategies, and procedures for the entire district, negatively affecting the functionality and performance of BBBEE. This finding relates to the adequacy and/or inadequacy of the BBBEE policies, plans, strategies, and procedures.

The finding affirming that ecotourism contributed to the reduction of unemployment and poverty in the UKDM is corroborated by a similar study undertaken by Mukrimah et al. (2015) in Malaysia's Kuala Tahan National Park. His study found that, on average, 47% of the average monthly income of villagers was generated

from ecotourism-related activities. The highest percentage was from villagers' engagement as tour guides. The income from these sources accounted for 13% of the household income. In addition, ecotourism-related retail stores or restaurants also significantly contributed to the average monthly household income at 10%. The incidence of poverty among the households in the village was 4% in 2014, compared to 3.4 among rural Malaysian households in 2012. Drawing on these results, Mukrimah's (2015) study concluded that the income received from forestry and ecotourism indeed reduced poverty among local households.

These results are also consistent with the findings of recent research conducted by the KZN Department of Health, which showed that the status of economically employed persons in the UKDM stood at 41.4%, compared to the provincial rate of 57.7% (UMkhanyakude District Health Plan, 2018-2019). This paper showed that despite the severe constraints on financial resources, efforts have been made to empower local communities so that they can participate in and contribute to their own development through ecotourism projects. The paper also demonstrated the manner in which ecotourism contributed to the reduction of poverty and unemployment in UMkhanyakude District. The overall analysis revealed that ecotourism partially contributed to the eradication of poverty and unemployment in the area and that the degree of success differed from one local municipality to the next.

Success stories in ecotourism projects have been widely reported in Namibia (Dowling & Pforr, 2021); Brazil (Pegas & Castley, 2014); and Kenya (Irindu & Shah, 2014). With assistance and guidance from the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Department of Tourism, structured benchmarking exercises may be undertaken to learn how other countries involve and capacitate local communities in ecotourism projects. Lessons and best practices deriving from the benchmarking processes could then be adapted

and used to improve the implementation of ecotourism in UMkhanyakude. Preferably, the benchmarking activities should focus on (a) community roles and responsibilities; (b) awareness-building strategies at the community level; (c) stakeholder consultation and involvement; (d) capacity-building programmes and (e) supply chain management systems and processes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the extent to which ecotourism has reduced poverty and unemployment in the UKDM. In Jozini community, earnings from ecotourism were relatively low, ranging from R500 to R1, 000 per month, mainly from the sale of braai wood and precious stones; while income from ecotourism jobs ranged between R2, 000 and R3, 000 (Figures 1 and 2). Based on the results, it can be concluded that ecotourism has the potential to reduce poverty and unemployment in rural communities in line with the dimensions of sustainable development goals. From the results, it can be deduced that, to a greater extent, ecotourism is contributing towards the reduction of poverty and unemployment in UMkhanyakude District Municipality. Overall, the results show a positive trend pointing to a gradual improvement in poverty alleviation in the UMkhanyakude. This may help contribute to the reduction of the provincial poverty rate. This study only covers four local municipalities in UMkhanyakude district; the results might not be applicable to other areas. Future research could widen the scope of the study by examining the contribution of ecotourism in reducing unemployment and poverty at the provincial level.

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