

Pro-poor tourism routes: the Open Africa experience

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Tourism development in South Africa has been inconsistent and has failed to fulfil the promises of pro-poor development. Tourism routes have been touted as a promising means of supporting pro-poor tourism. However, in practice, established tourism route models benefit well-resourced establishments and do little to effectively include disadvantaged communities. This article explores the role of tourism routes as a pro-poor tool by outlining the practical problems of both supporting established routes and developing new ones. The Open Africa tourism route development methodology, its limitations, problems and pitfalls are scrutinised by focusing on two Open Africa routes.

Pro-armoede toerismoeroetes: die Open Africa-ervaring

Toerisme-ontwikkeling in Suid-Afrika was in die verlede oneweredig en het misluk om beloftes van pro-armoede ontwikkeling gestand te doen. Toerismoeroetes is geprys as 'n belowende manier om pro-armoede toerisme te ondersteun. In die praktyk baat gevestigde besighede egter meer by toerismoeroete-ontwikkeling as benadeelde gemeenskappe. Hierdie artikel ondersoek dus die rol van toerismoeroetes as 'n pro-armoede werktuig deur te fokus op die praktiese probleme van die vestiging en volhoubaarheid van nuwe roetes. Die Open Africa-roete ontwikkelingsmetodologie, beperkinge, probleme en slaggate word onder oë geneem deur te fokus op twee Open Africa-roetes.

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Tourism development in South Africa has been distinctly inconsistent and has failed to fulfil the promises of pro-poor development for the upliftment of disadvantaged communities. Tourism routes have been touted as a promising means of supporting pro-poor tourism by clustering activities that assist the development of entrepreneurial opportunities. However, in practice, established tourism route models mostly benefit well-resourced establishments and do little to effectively include disadvantaged communities.

For theoretical rigour, the conceptualisation of pro-poor tourism development by drawing on debates in academic literature is followed by an inquiry into pro-poor tourism route development in South Africa. Subsequent sections briefly explore the Open Africa tourism route development methodology. The article outlines in detail the practical problems of both supporting established routes and developing new ones by focusing on two Open Africa routes in the context of tourism sustainability and the difficulty of involving poor communities as equal partners. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings.

1. The pro-poor tourism concept

Tourism is often referred to as the world's largest employer and is frequently touted as a sound pro-poor strategy for its employment-generating abilities (Sofield et al 2004, UNESCAP 2003, WTO_OMT 2004). Pro-poor tourism is a relatively new concept and is defined by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI 2010) as tourism that generates increased net benefits for poor people. It is not a niche or product. It enhances the linkages between tourism businesses and poor people, so that tourism's contribution to poverty reduction is increased and poor people are able to participate more effectively in product development.

However, Mowforth & Munt (2008: 349) caution that pro-poor tourism is not a tool for either eliminating or necessarily alleviating absolute poverty, but rather a measure for making some sections of poorer communities "better-off" and for reducing the vulnerability

of poorer groups to, for instance, hunger. Pro-poor tourism is therefore not a panacea to underdevelopment and general poverty but has found some support in bilateral donor policies (Mowforth & Munt 2008: 349).

Case studies from various countries reveal that tourism in poor countries has a comparative advantage over other economic sectors because it relates directly to the needs of the poor. For instance, tourism is relevant to remote rural areas, supports other economic activities, employs women and young people, and has low entry barriers (UNESCAP 2003: 28). Nearly any tourism attraction or product can meet pro-poor tourism objectives.

The nature of tourism lends itself as a sector that is better suited to address poverty in rural areas than most other sectors. Consequently, poor people inevitably derive benefits from tourism. However, targeted pro-poor interventions in tourism can increase the benefits derived by poor people and marginalised communities. Nevertheless, it is a challenge to establish the benefits of tourism in addressing poverty as few data are available to demonstrate the impact of tourism on poverty (Goodwin 2006: 3). In addition, it is often difficult to define who is poor due to the multidimensional character of poverty, a multitude of definitions and poverty criteria, and the fact that poverty is a relative concept. Consequently, it is a challenge to measure and report tourism impacts on poverty.

Some critics of pro-poor tourism such as Scheyvens (2007: 243) argue that pro-poor initiatives do as a rule little to deliver adequate benefits to the poor and serve more established businesses. However, Rogerson (2003: 108) highlights the importance of linking small enterprises to formal sector tourism in terms of livelihood impacts. This link within the context of tourism route development implies that the latter will promote the interests of both the poor and the established tourism businesses that have a better understanding of tourism services. Harrison (2008: 855) supports this argument, stating that pro-poor tourism relies on and must be integrated into wider tourism systems. He also postulates that helping the poor can often mean helping the better-off clients or employers and that trying to avoid benefiting the non-poor is generally counter-productive.

This article assumes that the interest of the poor will be best served by being linked to formal sector tourism by means of tourism route initiatives. Formal sector tourism is well positioned to enhance the links between tourism businesses and poor people, thus increasing tourism's contribution to poverty reduction and enabling poor people to participate more effectively in the development of tourism products.

2. Pro-poor tourism development and routes in South Africa

Tourism routes are not a new concept. According to Greffe (1994: 23), the term refers to an "initiative to bring together a variety of activities and attractions under a unified theme and thus stimulate entrepreneurial opportunity through the development of ancillary products and services". Route tourism is thus a market-driven approach to tourism destination development. Rogerson (2004: 405) describes route tourism as of particular interest in local economic development planning as it involves developing cooperative planning arrangements and relationships between different localities to enable them to collectively compete as tourism spaces. Tourism route planning is therefore a subset of what can be called cooperative tourism planning. Rogerson (2004: 405) states that South Africa shares a commonality with international experiences due to the clustering of activities, the erection of user-friendly signage, and the establishment of easily accessible information offices as the heart of tourism route development.

The first tourism route established in South Africa was the Cape Wine Route which is world-renowned and an example of a successful route concept that attracts tourists to a specific region offering wine and culinary tasting experiences. Other examples of successful commercial routes are the Highlands Meander, the Midlands Meander and the Cape Garden Route.

However, Visser (2004) and Rogerson (2004) argue that the impact of tourism route development in South Africa has been markedly

inconsistent between different communities in neighbouring locations. The involvement of South Africa's historically disadvantaged communities in tourism route development has been minimal and is perpetuated by tourism route development models that benefit the well-resourced establishments but do little to effectively include disadvantaged communities. Rogerson (2002: 161) supports this assumption with his findings that local black communities on the Highlands Meander route in Mpumalanga did not derive any benefits from the development of the route. In another case study Rogerson (2007: 65) alludes to a similar situation by stating that it is not surprising that in common with other route tourism initiatives across South Africa, the outreach and impact of the Magalies Meander route upon surrounding black communities is minimal.

Rogerson (2007: 52) also remarks that a review of the international experience across tourism routes in both developed and developing countries suggests that several key preconditions are necessary for successful tourism routes, including cooperation networks, regional thinking and leadership; product development, infrastructure and access; community participation, micro-enterprise development and innovation; information and promotion as well as an explicit pro-poor focus.

These preconditions suggest, among others, that an explicit pro-poor tourism focus is crucial for the success of tourism routes. This also supports Harrison's (2008: 855) notion that helping the poor can often mean helping the better-off clients or employers and that trying to avoid benefiting the non-poor is generally counter-productive.

3. The Open Africa tourism route development methodology

As an organisation, Open Africa has been active in developing community tourism routes with a pro-poor dimension since 1995. It has supported communities in establishing tourism routes in ways that establish a link between poor start-up and

more established businesses. Benefits of route development are consequently shared among all participants whether rich or poor.

Open Africa obtains donor funding to launch new route initiatives. Its aims are to incorporate individuals with diverse backgrounds who would normally be excluded due to a lack of capital and experience. The objective of developing routes is to formalise local offerings and introduce local route participants to other tourism structures, which could be beneficial to the route. The Open Africa initiative, therefore, relies heavily on community participation and offers support by formalising routes, getting participants registered on the Open Africa website, and offering support and advice in terms of marketing. The initiative intends to remain a community initiative, driven from within the community with support from Open Africa. There are four main components in Open Africa's approach to the development of tourism routes (*cf* Figure 1). The process starts with a request or application for a route by a community member in a specific area. This method is preferred when developing a new route due to strong buy-in by the local community.

Once an application has been received, Open Africa sources funding from corporate companies, donor agencies, or government and other institutions to aid the route development process.

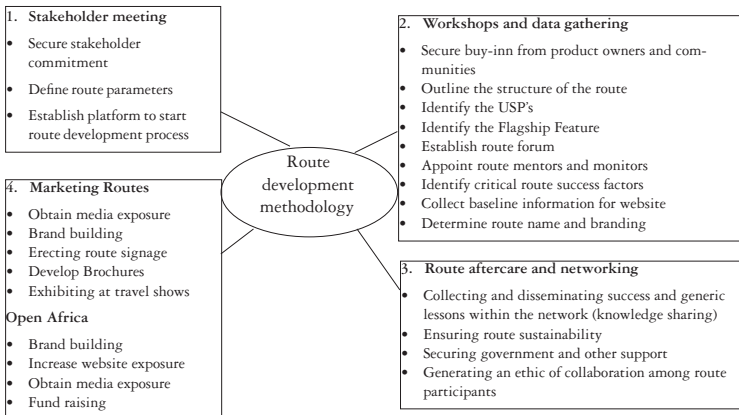


Figure 1: The route development methodology

During the first meeting, an overview of the Open Africa organisation and the route development process is provided before the parameters of the route are broadly defined. The next step is to identify the main towns and attractions on the route and potential partners prior to any further planning. This information enables the Open Africa team to arrange workshops in each of the main towns or areas on the route that have been identified.

Subsequent to the first stakeholder meeting, a series of workshops is conducted in the route area. These workshops are used to develop the route structure with inputs from local tourism operators and other stakeholders.

Following the establishment of the route framework, a launch function is held where the route is introduced to the media and other relevant stakeholders. This is a key moment in the process and serves to boost the confidence of local operators and to gain maximum exposure for the route. This signals the birth of the route that will need sustained commitment and buy-in from the route forum and participants.

The maintenance of the newly established routes is facilitated by networkers (*cf* Figure 1) who are appointed to oversee the collection and dissemination of success stories and the sharing of knowledge among route participants. Information is collected during periodic site visits to the routes, and by means of telephone calls to and submissions from route forums.

Linkages meetings are also instituted as additional support to routes. Although not necessarily within the ambit of Open Africa, a meeting between the route and two or three support organisations is facilitated to assess how various programmes of support can address the needs of the route.

A process of monitoring and evaluation forms part of the route aftercare function. Monitoring is conducted annually according to the triple bottom line principle, namely economic, social and environmental indicators. Every route participant completes a questionnaire when registering and the route networker conducts subsequent interviews with the participants. Besides monitoring individual

participants, the activities of the route forums are constantly monitored by means of periodic site visits and telephone calls.

Open Africa also assists with the marketing of routes by way of news releases and in-depth articles in travel magazines such as *Weg/Go*, *Africa Geographic* and other relevant publications.

Open Africa provides assistance with applications to relevant authorities for erecting route signage. Road signage along routes is considered a critical part of the marketing of routes internationally (Stoddard & Rogerson 2009: 15).

Printed brochures are another popular marketing tool used to maximise exposure to potential clients. Where some routes have been successful in developing and distributing brochures, other routes find it difficult to raise funds or lack the knowledge and expertise to develop their own brochures. Since 2007, Open Africa has provided support and limited funding for the design and development of new route brochures.

4. The challenges: two case studies

The following two case studies illustrate the challenges facing new and established tourism routes. Both of these routes are part of the Open Africa network of routes. The first route, “Bush to Beach”, was established in 2007, whereas the second route, “Xairu Blue Crane”, has been in operation since 2003.

4.1 Research methodology

The two case studies result from an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Open Africa route development methodology by the Human Sciences Research Council in 2007. The main method used for obtaining information was by participant observation and unstructured in-depth interviews. In total, 23 interviews were conducted with “Bush to Beach” and “Xairu Blue Crane” stakeholders who represented route forums, route members, local government officials and non-governmental representatives.

4.2 The “Bush to Beach” route

The “Bush-to-Beach” route provides a unique tourism experience that links South Africa’s Kruger National Park to Mozambique’s pristine coastal areas. The route starts at Phalaborwa and leads through the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park to the towns of Massingir, Chókwe and Xai-Xai, before heading north to the tourism centres of Inhambane and Vilankulo. This route was initiated by participants of the Rixile route, another Open Africa route that spans from Phalaborwa to Giyani.

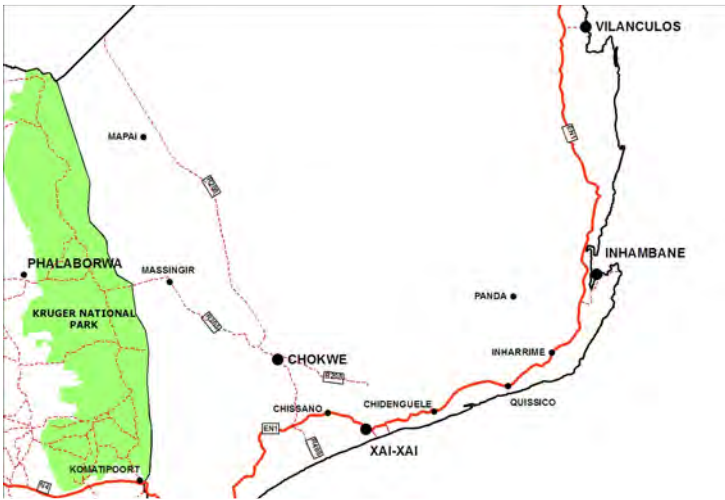


Figure 2: The “Bush to Beach” route

4.2.1 Determining the viability of the route: environmental scanning

In addition to the preconditions highlighted by Rogerson (2007: 52) for sustainable routes, Hardy (2003: 317) contends that a drawcard such as a unique drive experience, landscape heritage features or environmental features should be on offer. The feasibility of the long-term sustainability of a route will, according

to Hardy (2003: 327), to a large extent be determined by what the route has to offer and how these features are showcased.

The first step in developing a route is to establish what drawcards exist. Although this task is a logical first step, it encompasses a significant amount of work. Information on travel patterns in South Africa and Southern Africa is hardly available, and arrival and departure statistics for remote areas are virtually non-existent, making this a particularly challenging task.

During the development of the “Bush to Beach” route, it was evident that formal indicators of growth were absent and the only way of determining the feasibility of the route was to interview tourism officers, tour operators, hotel owners and industry players. Evidence of growth in the tourism industry was found with increased hotel and guesthouse occupancy levels, more tourist visits to the local tourism office and a larger contingent of travellers entering the Kruger National Park at the Phalaborwa gate.

4.2.2 Securing commitment from local authorities

In line with the precondition of having cooperation networks, securing commitment from local authorities is vital to the Open Africa model. UNESCAP (2003: 31) also underscores the importance of cooperative networks with local officials to work effectively with both the public and private sectors in the planning, management and creation of visitor experiences and attractions.

Despite competitive behaviour, forming routes in collaboration with relevant local authorities (local-economic development officers, tourism officers) makes economic sense from a marketing, networking and economic perspective. During the formation of the “Bush-to-Beach” route all local role players visited were very receptive towards the idea of collaborating with Open Africa. Local government institutions perceived the identification of small entrepreneurs as particularly promising, aiding wider programmes of local economic development. Deliberations revealed that these initiatives (public/private partnerships) were not a common occurrence, and the suc-

cess depended on the enthusiasm of specific individuals within local government rather than on formal structures.

However, the cross-border nature of the “Bush to Beach” route complicated collaboration with local authorities due to the number of authorities involved. Language barriers also impacted on communication between South African route participants and their Portuguese-speaking Mozambican counterparts. Vast distances between South African and Mozambican participants on the route as well as the costs and administrative processes associated with crossing the South African/Mozambican border complicated co-operation between local and foreign route participants.

4.2.3 Buy-in from local participants

As highlighted earlier, communities approach Open Africa to assist them with the formation of routes. The necessary funding for the creation of the route is then obtained. Open Africa facilitates the route formation process with the communities’ firm understanding that the route would ultimately be their responsibility. This approach is in line with what some tourism theorists advocate, namely that tourism will only be able to sustain itself in local communities where the residents are willing partners (Briedenhann & Wickens 2004: 75). These theorists maintain that successful tourism development initiatives are unlikely to succeed if they are not based on a “people-centric” approach, in which local communities have the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their communities.

Unfortunately, empty political promises of employment opportunities have made people, in impoverished areas in particular, doubtful of any community development initiatives. These initiatives are often overshadowed by feelings of inequality, fear, distrust, and antagonism that inhibit successful community participation (EDA 1999: 2). Communities perceive community development initiatives as exploitative to some and beneficial to others. Power struggles often emerge between traditional community authorities and more liberal thinkers. Mistrust between various factions is endemic, since any potential economic activity is considered to

represent a potential benefit to one sector of the community while simultaneously marginalising another (Richards & Hall 2000: 244). Entrepreneurs, who take up the opportunities, are often the catalysts of friction, challenging traditional leadership and acting out of order. These barriers to community participation and community involvement have resulted in some developers opting to deal with individuals, providing incentives, and not attempting to obtain co-operation from the communities.

4.2.4 Stakeholder meeting

The initial step in a route's development is the approach made to Open Africa. All interested parties are welcome and considered to add value, no matter how small the value may initially be. Typically, participants include start-up small and micro-enterprises as well as established businesses seeking to increase tourism traffic to their area. Open Africa crystallises their thinking and helps them focus on their strengths. On this basis, routes have been developed to embrace a wide cross-section of interests, in rural and farming communities, townships of large metropolitan areas, as well as small towns and villages.

While Open Africa's method affords stakeholders and participants the opportunity to collaborate and to form a collective that can build consensus relating to tourism issues, it also gives rise to significant challenges. One of the most taxing challenges is the great diversity in social status and unequal power relations among stakeholders and participants who range from poor roadside curio traders to comparably well-off and established business owners.

Relative wealth, exposure, capacity, and institutional practices embedded within society often restrict the influence of particular stakeholders or participants in collaborative arrangements. As Open Africa deliberately forms collectives in which such factors may be unequal, an ethic of equality must be supported by innovative techniques to compensate for power inequities or social forces that will favour dominance by those enjoying a competitive advantage.

The "Bush-to-Beach" route displayed signs of this power relations dilemma where well-established business people were far more

vocal in exchanging views. Roadside curio traders were less vocal and often did not possess the knowledge to adequately share thoughts on concepts such as websites, internet, and GPS (Global Positioning System). Discussions were dominated by established business owners and managers, which suggests that if this meeting methodology is the norm, well-established business will inevitably take the leading role in the Open Africa procedures. They are at the forefront of identifying what tourism attractions the area has to offer and they are also more likely to be elected as route forum chairpersons. These observations were in line with UNESCAP (2003: 64) comments on the difficulty of involving the poor in either decision-making or tourism development. According to UNESCAP (2003: 64), destination tourism organisations must be aware of the multiple issues and constraints in encouraging the participation of the poor.

Illiteracy and lack of skills among the poor, especially the poorest, means that they find it difficult to participate in the decision-making process and preparation of tourism development actions/plan. Traditions of gender inequity make it difficult to accomplish changes in gender relations and involvement of women in local enterprise development.

In addition, the poor often lack an understanding of tourists and their interests. Route participants collectively identify local attractions and select a flagship attraction as the route's name and identity. But understanding what attractions a route might have for tourists poses special challenges for local start-up entrepreneurs who lack experience of urban and foreign tastes. In the "Bush-to-Beach" workshop, the well-established businesses referred to turtle viewing, fishing spots and adventure tourism that would clearly complement their existing business. The smaller entrepreneurs did not list any initiatives or attractions that might attract tourists and impact on their businesses. This opened up possibilities that route development might benefit established businesses more than poor small entrepreneurs.

In order to accomplish the notion of pro-poor tourism development, opportunities have to be created to enable the poor to

participate as fully as possible in directing the development of tourism routes. Pro-poor tourism routes also need to focus on appropriate training of poor participants to increase their awareness and understanding of who the tourists are and what products they want.

An audit of the skills and experience of route participants (human capital) is a useful tool to identify particular individuals who have useful skills, knowledge or contacts that might be used to strengthen the skills base needed to effectively develop the route. Such skills might include marketing, graphic design, mapping, administration, mentoring, and so on. Specialist knowledge of specific areas and participants with good contacts with relevant government departments and other institutions are also required to expedite and strengthen the route formation process by capitalising on existing local networks relating to tourism and development.

The potential for including indigenous knowledge in the route formation process requires special focus and encouragement. Exposure to local traditions, foods, and so on, has the potential to greatly enrich the routes and ensure that they are not dominated by products that are widely available elsewhere through established formal tourism outlets.

4.2.5 Route forum creation and information collection

The appointment of the route forum members is crucial to the success of the Open Africa concept and in line with Rogerson's (2007: 52) leadership precondition. The route forum members and, in particular, the forum chairperson drive the process and ensure that communication among members and Open Africa takes place. The selection of the forum members and chairperson takes place democratically and anyone can be nominated and elected. Uniquely, in the industry, this process unites established and white-owned businesses with black and start-up businesses with the rare potential to bridge social (race and class) divides that remain endemic in rural South Africa. Nevertheless, the potential for power struggles derived from earlier conflicts remains a threat. The natural development of class dynamics can also provide barriers to co-operation.

In the “Bush-to-Beach” route, it was evident that the majority of the members owned established businesses and were active in various other forums, committees and business ventures. In addition, the more vocal people were nominated as forum members and representatives (a racially influenced dynamic). This raises the concern that, while such individuals may have valuable network capabilities and the infrastructure to support the initiative, they are very often driven individuals who may proceed with initiatives unilaterally. Becoming too reliant on one or two such individuals introduces a significant risk factor of over-dependence should such a person resign. This risk is increased when forum chairpersons are overtaxed with time-consuming responsibilities that often lead to burn-out, followed by resignations.

Although the workshop methodology seeks to inspire an ethos of cooperation and inclusion, it seldom translates into a common and inclusive network of participants among whom resources are shared. Participants rarely recognise networking as one of the benefits of the Open Africa model. Many knew each other prior to the Open Africa initiative and those who were not acquainted did not necessarily form new partnerships or networks. At various routes, it was clear that many participants had never seen each other's products and they regularly made assumptions regarding the quality of products without proper knowledge. In addition, poor participants displayed a lack of understanding of tourists and their interests.

There is a need for organisations, such as Open Africa, to play a more prominent role in facilitating networking among the members. This could be done by, for example, encouraging the forums to organise tours along the route to allow participants to familiarise themselves with products that other service providers have to offer. Networking related to products or offerings in the area might also facilitate participation of the smaller operators. In order to facilitate networking, assistance could be provided with the development of itineraries for tourists on the various routes. Participants need to collaborate in developing products for the tourists which could benefit all route participants. This type of facilitation appears necessary if the objective of maximising dialogue in the various communities is

to be achieved. Explicit guidelines for forums need to be developed in order to ensure that responsibilities are more equally shared.

4.2.6 The website

Internet publicity is an essential marketing tool, especially in the hospitality, tourism, arts and crafts, and restaurant sectors. For both international and domestic tourists, the internet is the first means of accessing information regarding accommodation and attractions in an unfamiliar destination area. It was observed that the more established businesses with the necessary skills and resources have invested in their own websites. Others rely on their listing on websites of municipal and provincial tourism boards.

The well-established business owners on the Open Africa routes were keenly aware that internet advertising is essential to their businesses and therefore very sensitive to their inclusion on Open Africa's website, which they usually cited as the reason for their participation. Route participants without their own websites consider the free publicity offered by Open Africa as the main attraction.

4.2.7 Cross-border challenges

Developing tourism routes across international borders poses numerous challenges, the most significant of which being the problems that stem from language barriers and great distances. This complicates cooperation and communication between South African and Mozambican counterparts as is the case with the "Bush to Beach" route. More time and effort is needed in getting both South African and Mozambican local authorities to support the initiative.

Having a single route forum and chairperson to coordinate route activities that straddle international borders is not practical and may impact negatively on the setting and achievement of mutually acceptable objectives. This calls for dividing cross-border routes into manageable segments, each with its own chairperson and route forum with proper coordination and communication between different segments to align mutually beneficial objectives and to develop complimentary tourism products and services.

4.2.8 Route launch functions

The launch function of the “Bush to Beach” initiative was held in the Kruger National Park, near the Phalaborwa entrance, and approximately 200 people attended. This was a festive occasion at which the route was celebrated. Local artefacts were presented and the event showcased participants and products. In the case of the “Bush to Beach” launch, local dancers entertained the guests while the minister of Tourism in Mozambique and other delegates celebrated the launch. Although the launch was a very festive, well-attended occasion, with positive energy, other routes reported that this was where the initiative lost momentum. Whether this was due to Open Africa’s formal departure and handover was not clear, but evidently route participants felt that general guidance, support and mentorship after the launch function needed to be improved.

4.2.9 Post-launch support and monitoring

Following the route launch, more formal assistance is required. The launch function might be conceptualised as the midpoint of Open Africa’s role and not the end product. Assistance with the design of action plans to facilitate and ensure continued participation in the routes, with long- and short-term goals, is needed.

In order to generate interest in these initiatives, participants need to establish or be provided with motivational benchmarks and discuss progress during subsequent meetings. If forums lack the necessary skills to keep minutes and track such projects, assistance should be provided to enable route forums to gain the necessary skills by identifying effective and appropriate local training.

4.3 The “Xairu Blue Crane” route

4.3.1 Background

The “Xairu Blue Crane” route is one of four Blue Crane routes established in the Western Cape. It spans a diverse area ranging from the foothills of the Langberg Mountain Range to the

coast at Witsand and the mouth of the Breede River, one of the few navigational rivers in South Africa. The route consists of Heidelberg and three villages, Witsand, Suurbraak and Slangriver. The latter two represent mainly poorer communities with a rich cultural heritage. However, incorporating these two villages has been challenging due to the dominance of Heidelberg and its fledgling tourism industry.

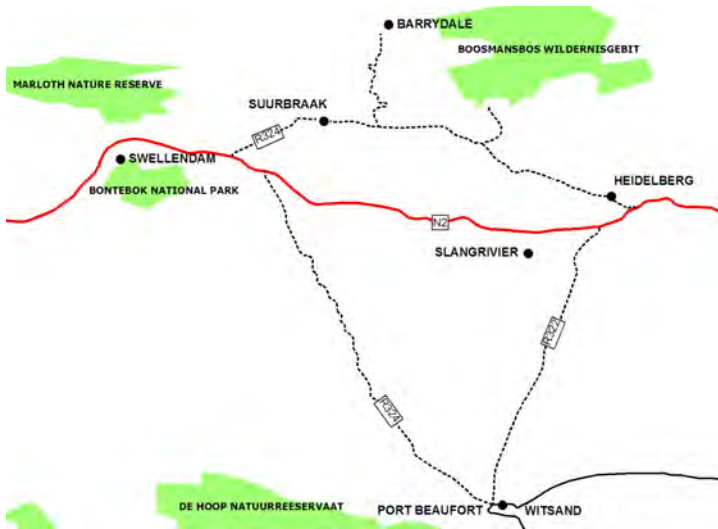


Figure 3: The "Xairu Blue Crane" route

Source: *Country Life*, April 2007

This route was enthusiastically launched in March 2003 but soon experienced problems when the route forum chairperson resigned. This event and a change in the Open Africa contact person relegated the Xairu route to a name with little or no route activity taking place. The fortunes of the route changed dramatically in 2006 when the route was reinvigorated by Open Africa's renewed presence and an eight-page article in the *Country Life* magazine. Renewed interest led to the establishment of a new route forum. The number of participants also increased from 21 to 36 tourism

establishments in a short period of time. This has led to a number of challenges that simultaneously support and confront the route and its members.

4.3.2 The challenges

The revival of the route in 2006 has elicited an improved outlook for the route, its activities and participants. New members who joined the route have provided new lifeblood and energy to the route and its activities. The compilation of a new tourism brochure was regarded as paramount to the forums' agenda, with road signs demarcating the route and the easing of relationships with the manager of the Heidelberg information office also high on the list of priorities.

4.3.3 Including the main players

Despite all the positive route attributes, optimal functioning of the route has still not been achieved and relates to two concerns, namely that members do not regularly attend meetings, resulting in forum members dominating most of the route activities and that not all important role players are members of or have representatives on the route.

4.3.4 The chairperson dilemma

None of the route forum participants were prepared to stand as the solely elected chairperson of the route forum. This has led to a situation where two route members are co-chairing the route. Both chairpersons have relatively high community profiles and were very involved in other tourism and agricultural institutions.

Despite the commitment of both chairpersons to the Xairu route, the burden of managing the route has been very demanding since its revival in 2006. The division of work was less than ideal with most of the responsibilities for managing the route being borne by only one of the two chairpersons. The considerable amount of time consumed by route activities, such as compiling a new route brochure, keeping contact and regular communication with members, managing the demands of new members, arranging forum meetings and consultations with other stakeholders, such as local and regional

municipalities, is unsustainable when viewed in the context of having to manage one's own business.

4.3.5 Marketing the route

For the largest part of its existence, the level of exposure of the "Xairu Blue Crane" route has been relatively low key and mostly limited to the Open Africa website. This changed when the Xairu route featured in the April 2007 edition of *Country Life* magazine. This article has not only widely publicised the "Xairu Blue Crane" route, but also infused new energy and optimism among route participants.

The route was also invited to be part of a delegation of Eden District Municipality representatives at the 2007 Tourism Indaba in Durban. The importance of having a representative at the Indaba was paramount to the route forum due to the exposure that the route might obtain. This provided the main incentive for compiling a brochure of the route and its offerings. The creation of a brochure was perceived as one of the most significant route marketing tools. Some participants rated it even more relevant to their marketing drive than the publicity the route receives on the Open Africa website. In the absence of membership fees to fund projects such as producing new brochures, innovative methods had to be found in order to raise funds. Selling advertising space in the brochure was one of the main methods of raising funds but risked division among members when some tourism products featured more prominently in the brochure than others.

Regular publicity in the local newspaper was also considered important as this stimulated interest from tourism product owners and members of the community who were unaware of the route's existence.

Not all the route participants were aware of the fact that the Xairu route featured on Open Africa's website. Some of those who know about the website never paid a visit to the site and could therefore not comment on it. This is most likely due to the fact that not all participants had internet access and many new members were never made aware of the website's existence. One of the shortcomings of

the route was therefore the way in which new members are recruited, introduced to and supplied with information about the route and its workings. Those who did comment on the website mentioned that it should be more dynamic and regularly updated to reflect changes in product offers. Changes to this effect have since been implemented.

4.3.6 Knowledge of other route participants' offerings

Some route participants identified a lack of knowledge of other tourism products available in areas such as Witsand, Slangrivier and Suurbraak as a barrier in marketing the route as a package. The latter two areas are not well known and house mostly unemployed and marginalised communities. Consequently, no references are made to tourism products in these lesser known areas.

4.3.7 Effective communication

A lack of regular communication between product owners was identified as a major problem that impedes local collaboration and networking. Communication via e-mail excludes many of the disadvantaged participants who have no internet access. Telephonic communication was regarded as expensive and time-consuming for frequent notifications of meetings. Other means of communication need to be explored. More efficient means of communication could also be obtained by using local tourism information offices at Heidelberg and Suurbraak as nodes of communication.

4.3.8 Route signage

The route forum had good relations with the local municipality, and regular communication took place on issues such as signage. The municipality also offered financial support for projects such as signage, subject to the availability of funding and on condition that a business plan be submitted to the council. Obtaining permission for erecting signage within municipal boundaries was a straightforward process except for the lengthy period of time it took to complete. By contrast, it was considered impossible to obtain the same permission for signage on national roads due to

very strict guidelines set by the South African National Roads Agency Ltd (SANRAL). This poses a significant challenge to the Xairu route that includes a section of the busy N2 national road. Creating awareness among travellers on the N2 was considered key in exposing and marketing the Xairu route to the large number of 'Garden Route' tourists who pass through the area.

4.3.9 Embracing disadvantaged communities

The impoverished Slangrivier community is part of the Xairu route but has no representation on the route. The local Slangrivier tourism office initially represented the community but closed its doors before revitalisation of the route in 2006. The remoteness and isolation of the community and the lack of tourism activities were the main reasons for the demise of the tourism office. Reinvigorating the local tourism office is central to developing the tourism economy in Slangrivier and enhancing the sustainability of the route. This could provide the necessary vehicle to facilitate the development of new tourism products and attractions in Slangrivier that could add to the "Xairu Blue Crane" portfolio of tourism offerings.

4.3.10 Mobilising members

One of the major challenges of the route forum has been to mobilise members to attend route meetings. Those who did not attend meetings claim that they were aware that meetings took place but were unable to attend because of business commitments. The timing of meetings was reported as the main obstacle to attendance because it coincided with peak business hours of guesthouses and restaurants. Suurbraak participants also reported that they do not attend meetings regularly due to difficulties in obtaining transport to Heidelberg venues.

5. Conclusion

The Open Africa route development methodology establishes an inspirational ethos of cooperation and inclusion, and consistently generates an early burst of excitement in participants. The model

also encourages transformation as disadvantaged entrepreneurs find a supportive framework to enter the tourism industry. However, one of the main challenges is to adequately account for power differentials among impoverished and other participants during the initial development of a new route. This problem contributes to route identities and forum memberships that could significantly favour established businesses. Bearing Harrison's (2008: 855) argument in mind, the fact that established businesses benefit from route development does not necessarily pose a problem but becomes one when benefits prove to be significantly less and do not meet the expectations of poor participants. This raises serious questions concerning the commitment of tourism routes to core pro-poor tourism principles of increased net benefits to poor people and consequently the sustainability of such routes. Including disadvantaged individuals and communities might be challenging but is crucial to the success of Open Africa-branded routes.

Experience has shown that the enthusiasm generated by the workshops is often short-lived and followed by a decline in participation. This is mostly caused by membership benefits that do not fulfil high expectations. These benefits are often difficult to quantify or link directly with being a route member. An effective route marketing system is thus called for and needs to be complemented by a system for measuring tangible results in order to comply with Rogerson's (2007: 52) core principle of information and promotion.

Despite the existence of an implementation manual, routes often lack guidelines that formalise cooperation among members and with external role players. Co-operation among members does not include mentoring, and cross-marketing synergies could be one of the most significant advantages offered to poor participants, in particular. Such developments will simultaneously assist micro-enterprise development and pro-poor objectives and comply with cooperation networks as precondition for successful tourism.

Due to their design, routes are excessively dependent on the forum chairpersons, who consistently face burn-out. This speaks

strongly to leadership and the need for leadership development in order to sustain tourism routes.

The relationship between the route forums and local authorities is of paramount importance to capitalise on synergies that would benefit tourism management and development in the area. Cooperation between stakeholders is necessary in order to achieve an overarching objective, namely to assist and develop all tourism products and participants within demarcated routes. This will address both cooperation and product development concerns as precondition for successful tourism routes.

Finally, the development of tourism routes that straddle international borders is significantly more complex than that of local routes. Route developers should be mindful of the amount of time, energy and planning needed to build tourism networks, involve poor communities and set up communication channels between different segments of routes in order to coordinate activities and meet the objectives that will benefit all route participants.

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