

# DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE (ECO)TOURISM TRAINING AND RESEARCH PLANS FOR ETHIOPIAN UNIVERSITIES

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## Abstract

The economic value of tourism makes it an attractive sector for commerce. Ethiopia has experienced rapid changes during the last decade and can be regarded the leading economic stimulator of the Horn of Africa. The challenge is therefore not only to develop tourism in a sustainable way so that a growing population can be fed, but simultaneously to create better livelihoods for millions of people. The primary objective is to develop an overall education, training and multi-disciplinary research plan for Ethiopian universities with an integrated gender perspective in the field of (eco) tourism, taking into account the professional and/or educational needs of the labour market and the demand-driven research needs of relevant external stakeholders in Ethiopia. Specific plans for universities with regard to training courses, study programmes and demand-driven research programmes will be developed, while explicitly avoiding overlap and overprovision of the afore-mentioned courses and programmes at national level.

Keywords: Sustainable eco tourism, Curriculum development, Research plan

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has experienced rapid changes during the last decade. It is achieving high rates of economic growth (average annual GDP growth rate of 11.2% for the period 2003-2009 (African Development Bank Group, 2010), with Addis Ababa and other cities undergoing rapid transformation. Ethiopia can be regarded the leading economic stimulator of the Horn of Africa. Ambitious agricultural and rural development strategies have been designed and are being implemented such as the Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to end Poverty (PASDEP) and Agricultural Development Led Industrialisation (ADLI) which may enhance private sector and community engagement in tourism services (Mitchell & Coles, 2009: 9, 14). A major Productive Safety Net Programme is underway to support the rural poor who suffer from food insecurity. Yet, it is important to emphasize that Ethiopia's resource base is under considerable pressure and continues to degrade in many parts of the country. Meanwhile every year Ethiopia's population grows by about two million, implicating a daily growth of 5 000 people resulting in an annual average growth rate of 2.6% for the period 2005-2010 (UN Data, 2010). The challenge is therefore not only to develop tourism in a sustainable way so that a growing population can be fed, but simultaneously to create better livelihoods for millions of people. The tourism industry is equipped to do exactly that.

The STRONGBOW project (Sustainable Tourism Based on Natural Resource Management with Gender Balance towards Women) includes five Ethiopian universities namely Addis Ababa, Jimma, Arba Minch, Mizan-Tepi and Wondo Genet College of Forestry and Natural resources which is part of Hawassa University. The project is funded by NUFFIC (the Netherlands Organisation for International Co-operation in Higher Education) and is co-ordinated by the Horn of Africa Regional Environmental Centre and Network (HoAREC), in partnership with the VU University Amsterdam (the Netherlands), the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium) and the Central University of Technology (South Africa).

The government, having recognized the potential of the country's natural resources and other touristic attractions, has the ambition to increase tourism arrivals significantly by 2020. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has the ambition to develop sustainable tourism, in particular pro-poor eco-tourism, as a means to benefit rural communities and to alleviate poverty. Establishment of new parks, the development of park management plans combined with pro-poor tourism, offers good opportunities for integrating natural resource management with tourism development from an economical value chain approach.

In the field of tourism the needs for capacity building include: marketing, image and benchmarking, business skills, enhancement of websites and other information media, ethics, tourism related English proficiency, leadership skills, advocacy, communication skills, teamwork, hospitality and client oriented services. In the field of eco-tourism, the following are to be developed: community based tourism concepts and practices; business knowledge (value chain thinking for souvenir production and marketing of eco tourism destinations, public private partnership development; eco tourism concepts and practices: how to design a package responding to tourist demands (flexibility, diversity); ecosystem / habitat knowledge for tourism (tour designers); plant and animal identification skills (tour designers/scouts/guides); eco-tourism policy development; guide quality (communication and knowledge, flexibility and diversity); wetlands; combining natural and cultural heritage, forests, including church forests, coffee production forests and biosphere reserves. There is further a need for pedagogical knowledge and didactical skills enhancement of university staff (towards a more student and labour market centered approach and stimulating more active learning) and a focus on demand driven action research, multidisciplinary and oriented to the value chains.

This project aims to develop relevant multi-disciplinary university training and research plans in the field of (eco)tourism to meet the mentioned outcomes.

## **2. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Ethiopia is known for its natural resources, especially the number of endemic species including many wild coffee varieties, and other flora and fauna and its rich biodiversity in general.

However, these natural resources are seriously threatened by a number of human-induced factors. Despite the positive actions taken by the Ethiopian Government and international support, the coordination of efforts is still insufficient and lack synergy.

The government of Ethiopia regards tourism and eco-tourism as an important growth sector: it plans to significantly increase its investments and contribute to further development of the sector. However, during recent discussions with Ethiopian travel and tour operators, it became clear that stakeholders perceive a mismatch between the current Bachelor's and Master's training in tourism and the demanded labour expertise: trained graduates do not meet the sector's labour requirements. Furthermore most of those working with travel and tourism organisations had not received any formal training within this field necessitating industry related training programmes.

### **3. EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

The primary objective is to develop an overall education, training and multi-disciplinary research plan for the partner universities with an integrated gender perspective in the field of (eco) tourism, taking into account the professional and/or educational needs of the labour market and the demand-driven research needs of relevant external stakeholders in Ethiopia. Specific plans for each university with regard to training courses, study programmes and demand-driven research programmes will be developed, while explicitly avoiding overlap and overprovision of the afore-mentioned courses and programmes at national level.

Secondary, a set of well-grounded feasible recommendations to each university in the domain of curriculum review, gender mainstreaming, both concerning academic staff and concerning contents of research, training and education programmes, requirements concerning human resources and/or human resource development of academic staff, and an implementation strategy is to be developed.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The major objective is to formulate relevant multi-disciplinary university training and research plans in the field of (eco)tourism. Officially, the project involves less than a quarter of the universities in Ethiopia. One of those, however, is the largest university in the country, The University of Addis Ababa. Another, generally recognised as the national leader in nature resource management training at university level is Wondo Genet College of Forestry and Natural Resources, which is part of Hawassa University. This partnership of five institutions is therefore well placed to make a significant contribution in the sectors on which it has chosen to focus. This contribution will have added weight because it is a joint venture of the five institutions.

Whereas it has become common in Ethiopia for universities to collaborate in the development of harmonised curricula, longer-term partnerships like STRONGBOW remain rare. This project can therefore serve as a useful model of what Ethiopian universities can do when they join hands.

Seven activities have been planned and scheduled in order to generate this result and meet the outcomes of the overall project. Following an exposure visit/study tour for Ethiopian focus persons to South Africa, a regional study on the (eco)tourism potential in Ethiopia was conducted including an evaluation of the management of wildlife protected areas. Furthermore, a training and research needs assessment (TRNA) for the partner universities in Ethiopia – based on, integrated with and complementing the aforementioned activities and outcomes (Turner and Wondafrash, 2012). This training and research plan (TRNA) will form the basis for curriculum development for relevant multidisciplinary university training and research agendas.

Given the poor experience to date with questionnaire response rates, consultative meetings and workshops will be facilitated in order to obtain the relevant information. More than one data collection session may be necessary. Research activities will therefore include a variety of workshops, field trips and interviews for the collection of data. The policies and requirements for curricula at higher education institutions in Ethiopia such as the Higher Education Proclamation (2009) and the Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education on harmonisation and modularisation will be included in the study. Multi stakeholder consultation and workshops will take place with all relevant resource persons at private sector organisations, government offices, knowledge institutes, HoAREC, universities, alumni, NGOs, communities and other Ethiopian universities teaching ecotourism, such as Mada Walabu. Consultation and collaboration with the Association of Tourism Training Institutions and industry representative bodies such as the Ethiopian Tourism Association and the Ethiopian Tour Operators Association is also of utmost importance.

Investigations will be sector specific (accommodation, transportation, ecotourism, travel, tour guiding, birding, gaming), as industry and employers' needs in these different fields may differ substantially.

## **5. TOURISM IN ETHIOPIA**

Ethiopia offers a great variety of interesting attractions and has much to offer in terms of archaeological and cultural heritage, geological and natural resources that offer great potential for sustainable tourism (Frost & Shanka, 2002:1). The contribution of the tourism sector to economic development is not exploited to its full potential for a variety of reasons, including: the image of Ethiopia as a tourism destination is not what it should be and although tour associations and government offices exist, the major role players in the tourism sector are not well organised and effective.

Knowledge and professional skills to provide attractive services for tourists are not yet fully developed and the potential of the sector for the different segments (international, national, business tourists, backpackers, high budget, low budget) is ill understood and not translated in diverse packages.

## **6. HIGHER EDUCATION IN (ECO) TOURISM**

Numerous challenges in higher education in Ethiopia in the context of (eco)tourism have been identified:

- Education and research institutions are not sufficiently dealing with the real problems and demands within the field.
- Insufficient consultation between implementing bodies, education and research institutions and policy makers at all levels. This limited the development of comprehensive training and research packages that respond to the diverse environmental problems in the country.
- The internal links between higher education institutions' departments dealing with (Eco)Tourism and those dealing with business and economics, are still to be strengthened so that research and training programmes that address sustainable economic use of natural resources and (eco)tourism are established in a multidisciplinary way.
- There is a need to develop research and training that look in more detail into economically viable natural resources and introduce a value chain thinking including the tourism value chain.
- Training and research approaches are not integrated.

Solving the above mentioned issues, the study programmes will become much more tailored to national or local needs and opportunities of the regions/localities and will enable universities to deliver better and more skilled professionals. This will, gradually, also lead to more opportunities for income generation for the university staff through improved consultancy services and better job opportunities for the graduates.

## **7. AREAS FOR CAPACITY BUILDING**

Linkages between the HEIs and Technical and Vocational Education and Training institutions, (TVET) are not yet well developed, and the training and education offer within the education sector not yet well enough aligned. Moreover, a strong relationship between HEIs with the TVET centres is required to improve services to communities, companies and government bodies on the basis of new knowledge acquired from the field.

The above implies that there is a need to develop much more consultation and operational linkages between universities, TVETs, implementing organisations, research institutions, development organisations, and companies, participatory Forest Management-associations, as well as farmers- and women's

organisations, so that the needs from all these stakeholders will better inform the education and training offered in a particular geographic area. Also, such consultation will allow a more comprehensive research agenda to be established within the universities (covering both conservation and natural resources management needs, as well as economic use of natural resources).

The situation of tourism and eco tourism training in the HEIs and TVET colleges in Ethiopia is as follows: Addis Ababa University offers since 2009 an MSc in tourism. Gondar, Axum and Hawassa universities offer a BSc in tourism (national curriculum). Other universities and TVETs have some training on offer in tourism related services at lower levels. Training in eco tourism is in development and only Wondo Genet Forestry and Natural Resources College gives BSc courses in this field. Although there are no studies indicating the level of satisfaction of the current training provision (as required by the demand), the vastness of the country and the tourism potential and diversity suggest that there is scope for decentralised training and research in order to respond to the regional ecological, cultural and economic specificities.

## **8. THE LABOUR MARKET**

The proposed curriculum development and research design should focus on the current and anticipated future needs of the labour market. In (eco)tourism, the private sector makes up the bulk of this market, although there are some employment opportunities in protected areas managed by the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA) or parastatals at regional level. Limited opportunities exist for university graduates with government agencies at federal or regional levels.

In terms of the labour market, the tourism industry revealed some shortcomings: the industry demands a high level of practical competence. Ethiopian university graduates, however, are widely criticised for lacking this practical competence. The training focuses more on conceptual and academic aspects than on practical, field experience and skills – not least because providing adequate practical exposure for the rapidly rising numbers of students is virtually impossible with the limited budgets available to universities. Some lecturers argue that their role is to produce managers, not manual workers. In reality, however, the market only demands a limited number of managers – and even they can only be effective if they understand the practical side of the activities they supervise. The criticisms are particularly marked among tourism enterprises, which often say that they prefer to hire graduates from technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions because they are more competent in the work place than those from universities.

## 9. PLANS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 9.1 Curriculum Development

It is recommended that the following general principles should guide curriculum development in (eco)tourism by participating universities and their partners:

- The (eco)tourism industry can make an important contribution to the GDP of Ethiopia if managed correctly and developed in the spirit of environmentally and socially responsible tourism. In order for it to flourish, the perception of quality and expertise within the tourism industry needs to be established through quality training and education.
- The curriculum of current qualifications include at least the basics of hotel operation; travel agency and tour operation management; tourism marketing; sustainable tourism management; English for travel and tourism; tourism professional ethics; tourism development policy and planning; ecotourism and wildlife management; heritage conservation and management; customer care and services; tourism destination development and management. Principles and practice of tour guiding would be similar to other international curricula when benchmarked. Therefore it can be assumed that the problem lies with the critical outcomes of such subjects.
- Training needs cannot be identified in isolation and without consultation on the curriculum with the major industry role players who will in future act as employers of the students. The fact that the industry considers that less academically qualified staff are more effective in many roles than university graduates is an indicator that major corrective measures should be put in place to address this perception.
- Tourism related subjects could be introduced into the school curriculum, such as Tourism, Consumer Studies and/or Service Quality. Introduction of these subjects will have a dual purpose namely creating awareness in the field of tourism which will stimulate interest and university enrolment figures and providing learners with background and information on the tourism industry.
- Industry specific training (Tourism, Ecotourism) for lecturers. Universities should guard against using a majority of lecturers with generally relevant qualifications rather than subject specific qualifications. All such qualifications should be supported by industry experience and exposure. Due to the dynamic nature of the tourism industry it is also necessary to ensure that all lecturers keep abreast of changes in the industry by means of frequent interactions and exposure to the various sub-sectors. It should be noted that Management, Marketing, Tourism Development and Tourism Practice are the major components of the curriculum.

- The maximum staff to student ratio is 1:40. Due to the practical nature of a number of subjects included in the curriculum this ratio should not be exceeded. Research has indicated that the student pass and retention rates are affected negatively if class sizes exceed this ratio.
- The curriculum should be developed to meet industry requirements which are market and demand driven. The core curriculum will focus on compulsory offerings, whereas electives may be used to address specific demands which may vary from one area to the next. Electives will also allow students to focus on specific fields of interest and specialisation. In areas where there are insufficient natural attractions to support marketing of the destination, possibilities such as establishing a conference or corporate market could be investigated.
- Manage and limit the intake of students. This will enhance employability and avoid flooding of the market. Industry demand will determine intake and selection guidelines.
- In order to meet industry demands and ensure quality skills transfer, the training must be a combination of theoretical and practical principles which will be transferred in the classroom through teaching and practical demonstration.
- Introduce tourism and training technologies where appropriate. Technology plays a very important role in the upcoming (eco)tourism industries.
- Tourism is a service industry in which consumer satisfaction and level of service delivery are very important. Students should be coached from first year to realise that their attitude and their behaviour have an enormous impact on the health of the industry. The South African Host short course is an example of a 'finishing' course that local students complete shortly before entering the industry.
- Marketing should also be a compulsory subject that forms part of the curriculum throughout the course. Students with sufficient knowledge in this field will be able to serve the industry effectively and will have the ability to sell tourism products such as air transportation and accommodation and provide professional public relations services.
- The curriculum must be supported by elective short courses in specialist areas such as training in a global distribution system for instance Galileo, Worldspan or Amadeus. Fidelio which is a computer reservations system for accommodation, a general First Aid course, Adventure Course level I and II. Students should be allowed the opportunity to complete as many of the electives as possible.



- The subject Tourism Management should include a strong focus on entrepreneurship. The aim of this module should be to enable graduates to compile and manage business plans. The embedded knowledge should empower students to be able to start their own businesses. Basic business characteristics, business principles and franchising should also be included.
- The global trend towards green initiatives and sustainable development requires students to have detailed knowledge of ecotourism and sustainable tourism development. Ecotourism should form part of the curriculum as a core subject or be incorporated into Tourism Development. Detailed knowledge in terms of ecotourism in Ethiopia and the global market is needed.
- A lack of destination knowledge impacts on marketing, selling and service quality. The needs of a client cannot be properly addressed if the student cannot relate to the destination. Subjects included in the curriculum such as Travel and Tourism Practice cover local and international destinations. The subject outcomes should include general tourist information, tourist attractions and places of interest and a basic business profile of the destination.
- Poor communication skills impact directly on all sectors of the tourism industry. Communication between clients, service providers and product owners is essential. Good communication skills in English are needed. Additional languages such as French and Spanish are also recommended.
- Work integrated learning (WIL) should also form part of the curriculum. A period of six months (60 credits) is suggested. Placing students at suitable employers becomes difficult if placement for shorter periods is requested. Research shows that students who have completed WIL have a higher employment rate. WIL also provides all students with much needed experience for permanent employment.
- The subject Travel and Tourism Practice will focus on the operational side of the tourism industry. Tour guiding, group management, fares and ticketing all form part of the exit level outcomes. Tour guides should be trained to deliver quality service and deliver expert knowledge. Training should also cover microphone techniques, cultural sensitivity and how to manage unexpected situations amongst others. The moment a fee is charged for any service delivered it has to be ensured that what the tourist receives meets his expectations. If expectations are not met, the service will soon be branded as not adding value to the experience.

- Tourism Development should be included as a core subject. Students should upon completion have the ability to support sustainable development, address issues related to access, suitable accommodation, manage eco-friendly development and be able to support local communities in the decision making process with regard to the development of tourism enterprises.
- Current university curricula seem to emphasize the basic outcomes needed for a graduate to be successful in the tourism industry. Consultation revealed that theoretical knowledge is not what industry needs. The outcomes stipulated should therefore rather be addressed by means of a practical training environment and WIL.
- Support all graduates with the necessary books, information and access to library and information services.
- A standard harmonised curriculum with different electives for each university is suggested. This will also support articulation.
- Combining theoretical classroom education with assignments, field visits and field practice is an improvement on a purely theoretical qualification but it needs to be noted that single and multiple day visits to destinations, transportation and ticketing organisations or sustainable tourism sites do not add value to training. They provide exposure but this cannot replace practical training.
- Improving standards is a continuous process whereby students are coached on a daily basis on their attitude, service delivery and making them realise that 'you can make the difference'. This does not form part of any specific subject but must be continually communicated by lecturers.
- Selection of students who are specifically suited for the (eco)tourism industry is of the utmost importance. People skills and communication cannot be replaced by a good academic record. An interview as part of the selection process is suggested to ensure compatibility. Personality is a trait that cannot easily be taught.
- Curriculum development should consistently distinguish between the functions of TVET training and of university training at Bachelor's and Master's levels. While TVET education should focus on 'how', and Master's level education on 'why', BA and BSc training should cover both 'how' and 'why', with an emphasis on achieving basic practical competence in the relevant field(s).

## **9.2 Research plans**

With regard to (eco)tourism, the research plan has only weak foundations on which to build, as very little university-based research is currently carried out in the sector beyond the work that students do as part of their degree programmes.

It is recommended that the universities of Arba Minch, Addis Ababa, Hawassa and Mizan-Tepi should consult the Ministry of Culture and Tourism about the establishment of an applied research consortium on tourism and ecotourism in Ethiopia. Axum and Gondar universities should be invited to join this consortium, which would begin to strengthen its members' research output, ensuring that it is demand-driven, applied, relevant, accurate and of high scholarly quality – helping to build the (eco)tourism sector while serving the academic purposes of university students and staff. Consideration will also be given to including research user organisations in the consortium such as Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority.

Participating universities should identify priority research themes. Working on a limited number of research themes or clusters will be more efficient, given the restricted research capacity that is available. This will ensure that research programmes are gender sensitive and that research responds to the interests and concerns of sector stakeholders. Participating universities will develop and apply capacity in priority research approaches and methods, which are likely to include research proposal development and participatory, demand-driven action research.

Universities will ensure fulfilment of the Master's and doctoral research programmes to which they are committed in order to help achieve capacity building/staff development. At least one third of the research topics selected for this purpose will respond to the priority (eco)tourism themes identified. Develop at least two research proposals in the field of (eco)tourism that will involve at least three researchers from the staff of universities in the consortium, has a direct linkage with at least one government or private sector stakeholder such as a hotel, a tourism agency or a national park and addresses at least one of the agreed priority research themes identified. Participating universities and partners will implement and publish the findings of the research programmes developed.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

Once developed, monitoring and evaluation of the training and research plans will be integrated with the overall project and revised where needed. It is important that once training and research plans are finalised that regular interaction between project participants, stakeholders and industry take place about the lessons that are being learned with regard to curriculum development, teaching progress, gender mainstreaming, graduate experience, research design, research management and research methods.

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