

Constraints and Challenges of Event Tourism Development in Abia State, Nigeria

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In developed countries, events are regarded as viable strategies for tourism development. But, in many emerging economies, such as Nigeria, the nonchalant attitude of government and poor implementation of policies have affected the sustainable development of event tourism. This paper discusses the constraints and challenges facing event tourism in Abia State, Nigeria using Ekpe cultural festival. Adopting ethnographic research approaches, the perception of community members drawn from two communities—Umunkpeyi and Isingwu were investigated. Staff of tourism agencies were also interviewed. Analysis of results identified themes. The paper argues that these themes must be addressed for event tourism development in the study area.

Keywords: event, event tourism, Ekpe festival, tourism development, Abia State, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have discussed the importance of tourism on host communities especially in the developed countries (Debicka & Oniszcuk-Jastrzabek, 2014; Lawson, 2013; Saarinen, 2011). Other scholars have also noted the capacity for tourism to help in self-determination, poverty alleviation and economic empowerment in the emerging economies (Butler & Hinch, 1996; Nielsen & Wilson, 2012). This is because tourism is well recognised as having great potentials in attracting economic benefits to destinations, thereby making the tourism industry a viable option for addressing global economic issues. Such awareness has brought with it the desire for many nations of the world, both in the developed countries and emerging economies to develop their tourism industry. Event tourism has become one of the key aspects of the tourism industry that have developed extensively. That said, tourism and event studies resonate more in the developed countries than the emerging economies.

Maximising the benefits of event tourism development is difficult in many emerging economies because most of these countries lack good governance, financial support and lack of tourism awareness. Scholars have observed that whilst event tourism has grown and become an area of research and

development in many developed countries (Getz, 2012; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018), questions about event tourism in relation to development and research are yet to be well established in emerging economies. Such negligence could be attributed to government's attitude, nuanced views of local people about what tourism entails, poor implementation of tourism policies and weak governance structure. These issues are multiplied in emerging economies, because of some peculiar constraints identified by Tosun (2000) such as centralised government, poor tourism skills, lack of finance and elite domination.

These constraints highlight the need for more research focused on event tourism development in the emerging economies. Such research will help establish a platform for further discussion on issues and constraints affecting event tourism development in the emerging economies and a better representation in the mainstream event tourism literature. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the constraints of developing event tourism in Nigeria, using *Ekpe* cultural festival as a reference point. Two communities from Abia State- Umunkpeyi (in Ngwaland) and Isingwu, Ohuhu (in Umuahia)- were selected for in-depth discussion.

BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Available literature is replete with evidence of challenges affecting event tourism development. Some of these areas of concern include experience; nature of demand; industry culture; and perception of events business opportunities. Studies have shown that lack of experience in hosting events can be a negative impact to the event industry (Jones, 2011; Lacher & Nepal, 2010). This explains why Jones (2011) argued that varied stakeholders should narrow the objectives of events. This is because the more stakeholders possess varied interests, goals, aspirations, motivations, experiences and approaches, the more difficult it is to achieve the success of event if conflict arises. Additionally, local event organisers do not have the experience, sensitisation or sound education to market products to foreigners and the ability to educate themselves is often limited (Lacher & Nepal, 2010).

Furthermore, studies have shown that the nature of demand can also pose another challenge to event tourism development. Demand for tourism is the ability of the tourist to pay for tourism products and services. These products and services serve as value for tourists' money in the host destination. Dieke (1989) noted that the nature of demand and supply determines the future of the tourism industry. The 'supply aspect is the result of the productive activities that involve the provision of goods and services that can meet tourism demand which is expressed in tourism consumption' (Sessa, 1983) cited in Page & Connell (2006, P.90). Hence, tourism supply refers to the facilities or attractions accessible in a site. This means a destination's sale is projecting what they have to meet the demand of a tourist.

Gursoy, Yolal, Ribeiro, & Netto (2017) averred that a successful hosting of a mega sporting event such as the FIFA World Cup requires that all stakeholders should trust the government and the organising committee. This is because lack of trust within the community hosting a mega-event may have significant negative consequences during the planning process. This may also result in a highly charged political and social exercise. In this sense, it means that trust plays a pivotal role in events success, which is dependent on the involvement and sensitisation of the locals. Therefore, community involvement is needed for hosting a successful event (Rogers & Anastasiadou, 2011), while its absence is a challenge, especially in emerging economies where the local people sometimes lack tourism skills and government adopts a top-down approach.

Additionally, Gaynor (2009) argued that the rationale for involving the right stakeholders directly or indirectly when planning a special event is to achieve success. The author quipped that the planning process requires collaboration, determining the priorities, exploring alternatives, holding a confirmation briefing, facilitating operations and using after-action for improvement. Scholars have also observed that the diversity of event managers constitute a problem during event planning and management process. Thus, the need to use knowledgeable persons when planning for event.

In addressing the constraints of event tourism development, several authors have also identified the success criteria. These include a need for planning, flexibility and the need for caution (Dieke, 1989; Getz, 1993; Müller, 2015). Rick (2015) highlighted four methods to help ensure success when planning a

sustainable event. They include: ‘making a compelling case for change; engaging people in meaningful conversation; making sure the right people are involved and, ensuring that the people who need to be influenced trust you’ (p.14). It is important to note that planning is not an easy task in any type of event. Therefore, to maintain the four methods suggested, it is necessary to consider that planning is a continuous process and starts with the order of preference which considers the locals on whose land the event is hosted.

METHODS

Qualitative research grounded in constructivism paradigm was used, adopting an ethnographic approach as the most appropriate method for the study. Ethnography has its root in anthropology and is one of the oldest methods of conducting a qualitative research (Holloway, Brown & Shipway, 2010). Ethnographic approach offers a “voice” to respondents and the usefulness leads to a better understanding of events (Holloway, Brown, & Shipway, 2010). This study used both in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Fieldwork was conducted for this study, during which time the researcher interacted with the local people. The fieldwork lasted for six months and a purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants. The rationale is to ensure that particular categories of people within a sampling universe are represented in the final sample (Robinson, 2014). This approach was chosen because it was impossible to interview all the various communities that made up Abia State. Hence, the interviews and focus group discussions targeted local people who play active roles in *Ekpe* cultural festival. Staff of Abia State tourism agencies were also interviewed.

A total of 30 participants were interviewed. Out of the 30 participants, 12 participated in the one-on-one interviews and 18 participated in the focus group discussions. The respondents in the in-depth interviews were made up of 5 tourism officials, 5 local people from Isingwu community and 2 local people from Umunkpeyi community. Two focus group discussions were conducted in Umunkpeyi community and are denoted as FGD1 and FGD2. Table 1 summarised the respondents that participated in the research.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED

Place	Informants (30)
Umunkpeyi	20
Isingwu	5
Abia Tourism Board	5
Total	30

The data collected from the interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using content analysis (CA). CA is an analytical approach which helps to systematically assess the content of various forms of recorded communications. CA also helps to identify patterns, themes, prejudice, biases and meaning using a systematic approach to compare and summarise a given data (Camprubi & Coromina, 2016). This analytical approach helped in understanding who said what and why during the data collection process. CA was useful in the present study to understand and group the various themes and categories that emerged from the comments made by the research participants. Units of codes were developed, preliminary coding was conducted, and themes and categories were developed and grouped.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of data, eight themes emerged, indicating constraints and challenges to event tourism development in the study area. These constraints are: lack of collaboration, poor funding, government attitude, the impact of modernisation and Christianity, lack of tourism skills, mistrust among stakeholders, poor implementation of policies and poor road network.

Lack of Collaboration

Results showed that the government establishments in charge of tourism in Abia State - Department of Tourism (DoT), Abia Tourism Board (ATB) and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MoTAC)-do not collaborate with the local people during the planning of *Ekpe* cultural festival. As a result, the issue of collaboration emerged as one of the constraints to event tourism development in the State. Thus, for event tourism to thrive in Abia State, collaboration and sensitisation should serve as prerequisites. Some participants noted thus:

There isn't much we know about tourism or developing our festival for event tourism development in our community. But, we would like the government to get involved during the festival so that other towns in Abia State and even the world will appreciate how we celebrate our Ekpe festiva modernity (Participant 2 from FGD 1). We still want to go ahead with the celebration regardless of civilisation or even without collaborating with the government (Participants 2 – 6 from FGD 2 in Umunkpeyi community).

A respondent from the tourism organization commented:

We do not have any role in Ekpe festival. There were some difficulties that affected our collaboration with local communities in managing other tourism activities. Such difficulties include convincing the local people to collaborate with government and the issue of mistrust. Thus, we described the attitude of the local people as not supportive regardless of the previous attitude of government towards them (Respondent 15, ATB).

This is the case because the Nigerian government sometimes adopts a top-down approach to development which tends to neglect the views and contributions of the local people (Oluwatuyi & Ileri, 2016). Thus, government's relationship with the local people is not supportive of tourism development. Hence, collaboration will ensure that the tourism agencies are part of the planning process. Also, the local people should be empowered to take up roles as event tour guide, management of facilities at the destinations and security personnel. Such collaboration will also give the people a 'voice' in the development process. As Sheehan & Ritchie (2005) noted, the success of stakeholder collaboration is dependent on voice coordination of various stakeholders and equally understanding their salience in a collaborative manner. Such collaboration helps in sensitising the stakeholders.

Poor Funding

Ekpe festival is an event that is celebrated annually in the two communities. That said, poor funding was identified as one of the major issues affecting the event. Several respondents noted that financial challenges limit the planning of the event, and also determines the scale of attendance and spending during the festival because of the economic hardship in the country. Respondents from both Umunkpeyi and Isingwu communities explained further:

There is limited funding which has affected the proper planning of the festival to meet international standards. The sponsorships we get from individuals in our community are not usually enough to help us with the plans we have prior to the festival. The issue of government not being supportive affects the festival because we need to develop the

festival like Argungun fishing festival in Kebbi State or even the Calabar carnival in Cross-River State (Respondent 13, Isingwu community).

The festival is an age-long tradition of our people and over time we have had a way of planning it in our own local way and have recorded at least some success in the end. However, if the tourism organisers and the government will be able to organise a meeting where we would be sensitised and assisted financially, then the festival will be hosted well to attract more visitors in our community (Respondent 8, Umunkpeyi community).

Observations showed that the people were enthusiastic and celebrate the festival with pride because the festival has survived as part of their culture. But, lack of funds and infrastructure has to some extent impeded the growth of the festival. This is because there is no financial support coming from both the government and the tourism parastatals in the State. There is a need for government to get involved which will help ensure adequate planning and organising of the event in future. Funding constraint was also noted by Bello, Lovelock & Carr (2016, 2017). Although in the context of their study their argument is related to tourism, thus, it is also argued in this study that funding affects tourism generally.

Government Attitude

Event tourism is new in Nigeria. Thus, it is important that event tourism is developed responsibly to ensure that benefits accrue to the people. This highlights the need for government to change their approach to tourism development in Nigeria by creating conducive environment. As noted by Bello et al (2016), government involvement in tourism helps in tourism development planning, from the national to the local level. However, government attitude to event tourism development in the study area has not been supportive of tourism development. Whilst the government supports tourism development through sound policies in the State, implementation has been a big constraint.

This scenario is not just peculiar to Abia State but is a national trend in the country. Thus, it is worrisome how the tourism industry can be developed and sustained with government's nonchalant attitude toward event tourism development. One of the respondents from the tourism parastatals noted that tourism seems to be at the current level because of bad governance and government inability to understand the benefits that accrue from tourism. The respondent commented that:

if both the government and private sectors will support tourism, the sector will thrive because the State boasts of both natural and cultural resources. The Ministry had organised some cultural events in the State in the past such as 'Ugwu Abia' Carnival and Enyimba Carnival held in 2016. But, there is no continuity in the celebration of these events in the State. Thus, tourism development is affected in the State because of lack of motivation, government attitude to tourism, funding and continuity (Respondent 14, DoT).

Impact of Modernisation and Christianity

The impact of Christianity and modernisation has changed the old ways of celebrating *Ekpe festival*. For instance, Respondent 12 from Isingwu community explained that before the advent of Christianity, the local people practised some rituals which were considered barbaric. Presently, the concept has been overtaken by religion, civilisation and Western education. The comment from a respondent is captured thus:

There is the issue of the impact of modernity on the authenticity of some aspects of the festival. For instance, the native mode of dressing during the festival- which used to be 'Igbo' attire- is gradually being influenced by modern attire and decoration (Respondent 13, Isingwu community).

Another respondent also noted that in the past, young men were eager to join *Ekpe society and to carry the Ekpo Masquerades* which usually accompany the *Ekpe* head during the festival. More than 30 *Ekpo* masquerades are usually on display during *Ekpe* festival in the olden days. However, presently, this is no longer the case as most young men have abandoned the festival because of modernity and Christianity. Most respondents from Isingwu community acknowledged that:

things have changed because of nonchalant attitudes from the youths. Many have withdrawn from the practice and this has affected the number of Ekpos that are paraded during the festival to about 8 or 10. Some believe the festival has some ungodly or devilish connotation to it which is against their Christian faith (Respondents 9 -13, Isingwu community).

young people have abandoned their culture to adopt foreign cultures thereby affecting the cultural activities. Most of them no longer wear the cultural attire that is meant to be our culture during the celebration period but choose the Western way of dressing while the old people still put on the attire (Respondent 13, Isingwu community; Respondents 2 – 7, Umunkpeyi community).

The question now is: with these nonchalant attitudes of the young people toward Igbo culture, what is the fate of *Ekpe* festival in future? Secondly, what is the future of event tourism development in Abia State? Could event tourism foster sustainable development in Abia State? To answer these questions, it is argued in this study that there is a need for awareness creation both in households and the community at large. Awareness creation was also noted by Bello et al (2016) as one of the strategies for enhancing community participation in tourism.

Lack of Tourism Skills

Lack of tourism skills was another constraint observed from the data analysed. Generally, tourism is a new area of study in Nigeria, and event tourism is similarly nascent in Abia State. Thus, many of the local people are not well informed on what event tourism is about. This explains why the local people might find it difficult to harness *Ekpe* festival on their own for tourism development. The local people may also not be well informed to make a meaningful contribution to tourism development if not well sensitised. Breugel (2013), Michael, Mgonja & Backman (2013), and Tosun (2000) noted lack of tourism skills as an inhibitor to community participation in tourism planning and development.

Mistrust Among Stakeholders

Lack of trust between the government and the local people is an issue of concern in the study area. Lack of trust could be a consequence of the government not recognising the local people in other tourism development projects in the community. This informs why (Bramwell & Lane, 2000) argued that trust is one of the basic components of collaboration among stakeholders in tourism planning. In this regard, where trust is absent, there will be no cooperation for a collective action plan. Respondents from the local communities and tourism parastatals believed that awareness should be created to help inform stakeholders through sensitisation programmes to foster trust.

We would like the government to participate in the festival, but the fear of making the festival theirs and reaping the benefits that are supposed to be ours is one of our fears. This is our culture which we inherited from our forefathers; therefore, it means a lot to us. So, we would not be happy if the government will come and modernise some aspect of it because of tourism. Even if they do, we will still guide our 'Oke Ishi Ekpe' jealously (Respondents 12 & 13 from Isingwu community).

Mistrust amongst the stakeholders exists and the local people no longer trust the government because they (government) have not been supportive of the tourism activities going on in the State. But then, the government should get involved to enable the communities to enjoy the benefits that accrue from tourism since cultural activities and tourism sites are mostly located in their domain. This will help in providing jobs for the local people and help create room for the development of the tourist sites as well as also participate in their cultural activities such as Ekpe festival (Respondent 15, ATB).

The issue of mistrust among the local people, ATB and the government could be addressed if all the stakeholders are sensitised. As earlier noted, addressing the issue of sensitisation and collaboration are prerequisite to understanding what tourism and event tourism are. Through collaboration and sensitisation, each stakeholder will have an opportunity to present their concerns and have a collective vision. Such strategies will foster trust and ensure events tourism sustainability. As asserted by Jamal & Getz (1995); McComb, Boyd & Boluk (2016); Saito & Ruhanen (2017), stakeholder collaboration is complex because of factors such as time-consumption, power limitation and mistrust, which can hinder the implementation process. However, stakeholder collaboration aids in sharing of ideas in a tourism destination (Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005).

Poor Implementation of Policies

Abia State has sound tourism policy which could help in transforming tourism into a money-spinning industry. However, currently, the implementation of the tourism policies has become an issue of concern which could jeopardise the development of event tourism in the State. The implementation issue is not peculiar to the tourism sector but is prevalent in other sectors in Nigeria. This is captured below by one of the respondents from the tourism parastatals.

the government has good policies that could help in the development of tourism in the State, but the implementation has really been an issue of concern. For instance, many of our tourism sites have not been properly developed because of poor implementation of policy and government insensitivity to tourism. We pray and hope that in future, someone who understands the importance of tourism will be in governance to help implement those policies in order to develop the industry proper (Respondent 16, MoTAC).

Poor Road Network

The issue of poor road networks in Nigeria, especially in South-eastern Nigeria where Abia State is located is an age-long problem. The poor road network has affected most of the tourism activities going in the State. Respondents explained that bad roads have affected the number of visitors coming to witness Ekpe festival which usually draws their sons and daughters in the Diaspora back home. The following comments were made by the respondents.

The visitors are drawn from various communities, neighbouring villages and towns. Some years back, say in 2015, we experienced the attendance of international tourists in this Isingwu community. Neighbouring communities such as Obowo in Imo State, Ngwa people, Aba, as well as our sons and daughters in the Diaspora were in attendance because it is a big event that surpasses Christmas. However, owing to the bad roads, there were few people in attendance during the festival this period (Respondent 13, Isingwu community).

Because the festival is a cultural entertainment, there is no restriction for attendance as those living abroad were also in attendance in previous years. People from Aba, Port Harcourt, Umuahia, even sons and daughters living in Diaspora, were in attendance

during the festival. But, the government should help construct good roads to allow more visitors next year (Respondent 4, Umunkpeyi community).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Event tourism has indeed been acknowledged as a viable tool for tourism development. However, just as with other aspects of tourism, event tourism is faced with many challenges and constraints. This study has highlighted several constraints and challenges of event tourism development in emerging economies such as Nigeria, using Abia State as a point of focus. These constraints if not properly addressed and handled as a matter of urgency might continue to hamper the sustainability of event tourism development in Nigeria.

Whilst the Nigerian government has supported tourism development through the enactment of policies and establishment of institutional bodies charged with tourism development, more support is needed to transcend to staff empowerment/training, provision of adequate funding and above all, the implementation of the tourism policies. Also, awareness creation, construction of good access roads, provision of security and willingness to collaborate are vital to strengthening tourism and event tourism growth both at the regional and national levels. When these are neglected, the implication is that event tourism will not develop responsibly in the study area.

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