

# Opportunities and Challenges of Community Participation in Community-Based Ecotourism Development: Wof-Washa National Priority Forest Area

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## Abstracts

The involvement of community is the lifeblood to Community-Based Ecotourism development in the destination. The study focused on investigate opportunities and challenges to community participation in the development of the Community-Based Ecotourism. The study employed descriptive design with a mixed approach via cross-sectional survey. The target population were community members and tourism experts. It used systematic, stratified, and purposeful sampling methods. Primary data collected via questionnaires, interview, structured observation, and secondary data by document review. The analysis method was thematic for qualitative, and descriptive statistics for quantitative data. The study indicated, communities are motivated to participated in ecotourism development due to income, employment, infrastructure, and cultural revitalization benefits. However, unfair distribution of benefits, HWC, shortage of skilled manpower, and absence of coordination among stakeholders are hampered their involvement. In concludes, the participation of community stimulated by opportunities, but limited by bottleneck factors. The author recommend that all stakeholders should be working in collaborative way to reduced obstacles by improving motivators elements of community participation for develop an impactful community-based ecotourism project in Wof-Washa National Priority Forest Area.

**Key Words:** Ecotourism, CBET, Community Participation, Wof-Washa National Priority Forest, opportunities, and challenges.

**DOI:** 10.7176/JTHS/68-01

**Publication date:** January 30<sup>th</sup> 2025

## 1.Introduction

Tourism has become a global powerhouse for driving economic expansion, environmental concerns, and sociocultural aspects in worldwide (Kalinichenko & Novikova, 2019; Tahiri *et al.*, 2021; Sofronov, 2018). It contributes 6% of global GDP and 1 in 11 jobs (WTTC, 2022). Despite the global slowdown, Africa's tourism industry has staged a remarkable comeback. It injected USD 119 billion into GDP and created 21.3 million jobs. This rapid resurgence underscores the immense potential of tourism as a driver of development across the continent (WTTC, 2022). Ethiopia's rich tapestry of natural wonders, historical sites, and cultural gems has solidified its position as a major tourist draw. It contributed a hefty 5.6% to GDP and 3.2% of total employment. This booming sector is proving crucial for both economic growth (Zegeye, 2016; Pia, 2023).

In the 1980s, ecotourism emerged as a solution to the negative impacts of traditional mass tourism (Arifianto *et al.*, 2023). Ecotourism is defined as ethical travel to pristine locations that prioritize environment and resident welfare (Tesfaye, 2017). Ecotourism has been recognized at the local and national level as a strategy with the potential to yield social, economic, and ecological advantages (Alam *et al.*, 2022). It integrates community development and welfare, and gaining popularity as a means of conserving biodiversity (Noh, 2020). Both service providers and tourists share the responsibility of promoting the true essence of ecotourism (Alam *et al.*, 2022).

One of the most common forms of ecotourism is community-based ecotourism. It prioritizes environmental protection and empowers local communities near natural attractions. CBET ensured benefits directly flow to their communities, improving livelihoods and promoting conservation goals. This sustainable approach involves diverse stakeholders and fosters responsible tourism practices (Tesfaye, 2017; Mensah, 2017; Alam et al., 2022; Arifianto et al., 2023). In the CBET context, community is defined as a collective of individuals with shared values who inhabit a specified area and work together to common goals (Afenyo-Agbe and Mensah, 2021).

Generally, sustainable CBET flourishing hinges on active community participation (Wei *et al.*, 2020; Kaur *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, their involvement affected positively and negatively by opportunity and challenges respectively. Communities are involved in the decision-making processes of ecotourism project development (Wei *et al.*, 2020). Their involvement is motivated by opportunities such as cultural preservation, livelihood advancement, and environmental conservation, respects indigenous rights and customs, fostering mutually beneficial relationships (Alam et al., 2022; Teshome et al., 2021; Kumi et al., 2018; Rogos *et al.*, 2021). However, it challenged by unequal sharing of benefits, a centralized tourism administration, lack of coordination among stakeholder, low financial resources, inadequate information (Kumi *et al.*, 2018; Bello et al., 201) . This study aimed to investigate the opportunities and challenges of community involvement in ecotourism project development.

SUNARMA developed ecotourism project in Wof-Washa Natural Forest in collaborate with residents and other responsible bodies in 2006. The fund obtained from the Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund. This project developed for the purpose of reduce the illegal overexploitation of forest resources by provide alternative income generating chances. It builds various tourism amenities such as campsites, trekking routes, as well as day visitor facilities. This is creating new economic opportunities for communities and also raising awareness of the importance of forest conservation (Spooner, 2022).

Studies on Wof-Washa Natural Forest have been done by a variety of academics in relation to the following topics: the community's knowledge and attitudes regarding HWC and problematic wildlife (Tadesse & Zewde, 2020), the threat of illegal overexploitation activities by the community (Woldie & Tadesse, 2018; ANRSEFPA, 2021), and the potential, opportunities, and suitability of the forest for the CBET project (Woldie & Tadesse, 2018; Teshome 2018). Nonetheless, a dearth of thorough studies and evidence exists regarding opportunities and challenges of community involvement in ecotourism projects growth. Therefore, the researcher was inspired to tackle these problems in order to offer suggestions that would aid to establish a well-organized CBET project at Wof-Washa Forest.

Furthermore, scholars stated that community members are motivated to participate in CBET development for economic, socio-cultural, environmental, improved destinations, sustainable development, and community empowerment benefits (P.M. & B.T., 2023; Wei *et al.*, 2020; Kummitha & Osiako, 2020; Bhatta, 2023; Rogos *et al.*, 2021; Indiarthi & Munir, 2016 ;Afenyo & Amuquandoh., 2014; Jaafar *et al.*,2020). However, income generation, employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and cultural revitalization issues are often overlooked. Additionally, researchers inferred that community participation in ecotourism development limited by lack of interest, marketing, promotional activity, competition from foreign investors, safety and security , lack of capital , conflict on ownership, and mismanagement, operational, structural, and cultural limitations obstacles (Kunjuraman, 2022; Kumi *et al.*, 2018; Tosun, 2000). However, they have not touched factors like unfair benefit distributions, HWC, shortage of trained human resources, and lack of coordination issues.

## **2. Research Methods**

### **2.1. Description of The Study Area**

Wof-Washa Priority National Forest is a state forest, which is located in central highlands of Ethiopia, and containing unique plant and animal species. Covering 3197 hectares, it ranges in altitude from 1900 to 3700 meters. Located in Tarmaber, Ankober, and Bassonawerena districts, and it is distributed across 14 subdistricts.

### **2.2. Study Design and Approach**

To address the issues in this study, entitled opportunities and challenges of community participation in CBET development in Wof-Washa Forest, the researcher employed descriptive design, because it used to identify and describe the significant existing conditions and variable relationships. With regard to the approach taken, mixed approaches were used to gather information through different data gathering instruments for triangulation purpose.

### **2.3. Target Population of the Study**

The study targeted household heads that resided in Goshu-Ager and Keyit from Basonaworena, Mescha from Ankober, and Wof-Washa Genet from Tarmaber Districts. The selected kebeles were chosen based on their

benefits from the forest, comfort for tourism development, proximity to the forest, and dependence on household life. It also targeted staff from Basonaworena, Tarmaber, and Ankober woredas' tourism offices.

#### 2.4. Sampling Technique

The study utilized stratified sampling to categorize households based on geographic settlement, and systematic sampling to select samples from each kebele, and purposeful methods to select tourism office manager for semi-structured interview, and kebeles.

#### 2.5. Sample Size Determination

The researcher used the rule of thumb formula to determine the sample size of 2996 household heads in four kebeles. Based on rule of thumb, descriptive studies typically use a sample size of at least 10% of target population (Vanvoorhis & Morgan, 2007). Sample size formula based on rule of thumb for descriptive studies:

$$\text{Sample size} = 10\%(\text{Population}) = 0.1 \times \text{Number of Population}$$

Total population of four kebeles is 2996 households' heads, then the sample size =  $0.1 \times 2996 = 299.6$ . So, the sample size (n) is 300 household heads. The researcher used 300 household heads from selected forest-touched kebeles as representative samples for the study. The study used stratified sampling to divide respondents into homogenous groups based on geographic settlement. These 300 household heads divided by each kebele in proportion to their size using proportional allocation formula.

Table 1: Four selected kebeles population size and their sample.

No	Kebeles	Household heads	Sample Selected	Percentage Selected
1	Mescha	782	78	26%
2	Wof-Washa Genet	552	54	18%
3	Goshager	684	69	23%
4	Keyit	978	99	33%
Total		2996	300	100%

Source: Author survey, 2024

#### 2.6. Methods of Data Analysis

The study utilized descriptive statistics analysis to analyze quantitative data collected through questionnaires using SPSS version 26. The researcher utilized a Likert scale with five points to measure respondents' opinions or attitudes in surveys, providing a general interpretation of the mean score based on rule of thumb ranges. The numerical values of these options are strongly disagree (1.00-1.80), disagree (1.80-2.60), moderate (2.60-3.40), agree (3.40-4.20), and strongly agree (4.20-5.0). Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data from semi-structured interviews.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Table 2: Demographic Descriptions

Demographic Profile								
Age	Frequency	%	Education	Frequency	%	Livelihood	Frequency	%
18-25	53	22.1	Illiterate	55	22.9	Agriculture	161	67.1
26-35	103	42.9	Adult-education	74	30.8	Trade	31	12.9
36-55	71	29.6	1-8	72	30.0	Tourism	22	9.2
>55	13	5.4	9-12	27	11.3	Salary	12	5.0
Total	240	100	Graduate & above	12	5.0	Other	14	5.8
			Total	240	100	Total	240	100

Source: Author survey, 2024

The study reveals that the majority of respondents aged between 26-35 years are experienced and younger, providing reliable information about the study area. Most household heads are educated from adult education to graduate, making them easily understand ecotourism when explained by experts. Agriculture is a dominant livelihoods activity, but tourism is low makes the development of ecotourism challenging.

#### 3.1. Opportunities of Community Participation in Ecotourism Development

Table 3: Opportunities to Community Participation in Ecotourism Development at Wof-Washa Forest.

Descriptive Statistics			
Attributes	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ecotourism development are created new income for the community.	240	4.00	.989
Ecotourism project provide sustainable source of income.	240	3.85	1.012
Ecotourism programs offer new jobs in the community.	240	3.99	.983
Ecotourism project provide a variety of employment options.	240	3.83	.943
Improvement of infrastructure within destination.	240	3.76	1.143
Planned to minimize negative impacts on the environment.	240	3.80	1.032
preserve and promote the traditional culture.	240	3.99	.884
Facilitating exchanging culture with visitors.	240	4.05	.971
Creating a sense of pride in the community to their cultural identity.	240	4.05	.947
Valid N (listwise)	240		
<b>Average Mean</b>		<b>3.9236</b>	<b>0.7378</b>

Source: Author survey, 2024

##### 3.1.1. Employment Opportunities

Table 3 shows that most respondents agreed on the items that described about ecotourism project's generate sustainable income for the community through providing several employment opportunities with diverse skills and interests. This implicated that the community was motivated to participate in ecotourism development because of obtaining income via engaged in various tourism related jobs activities. As observation and interview, community has engaged in different ecotourism projects employments including seed breeding, forest protection, hospitality service, selling cultural goods, and aiding tourists during trekking. Besides, some members also collect dry fuel-woods and sell them in Debre Berhan town.

These findings agree with the studies conducted by Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, (2019), Butler (2017), P.M. & B.T., (2023) and Mensah, (2017). They concluded that ecotourism activities generate income through fees for facility use, service providers, sales, royalties, contributions, and taxes. In underdeveloped nations, it helps eradicate poverty by providing new revenue streams for families. Additionally, tourist has generated income for food vendors, craftspeople, small merchants, and owners of lodging establishments. This helps diversify the local economy (Interview, April, 2024).



Figure 1: Afforestation and reforestation Project and hospitality service (Author observation, 2024)



Figure 2: Tourism-related activities in Wof-Washa Forest (Author observation, 2024).

### 3.1.2. Infrastructure Development

Based on table 3, most of respondents agreed with the item's about ecotourism programs are improved infrastructure like trekking route and tourist campsite and also planned various strategies to minimize negative impacts on the environment while improving infrastructure. This implies that, communities are participating in the Wof-Washa forest ecotourism project, improving infrastructure which is used by community members both directly and indirectly like trekking routes and lodges, and planning activities to minimize environmental impacts. It supported by the interview response and author observation.

This finding consistent with Sivannavong & Wibisono, (2022), Mensah, (2017) and Afenyo & Amuquandoh (2014) findings. The found out that CBET initiative contributes to infrastructure development by providing cash for societal use, funding projects like highways and bridges. Ecotourism projects offer education programs in building, maintenance, and hospitality, equipping communities with necessary skills for infrastructure development and upkeep. The tourism sector plays a crucial role in infrastructure advancement.





Figure 3: Infrastructure and social service provide by CBET program (Auther observation, 2024).

### 3.1.3. Cultural Revitalization

As table 3, the majority of respondents had a positive opinion with the parameter's about ecotourism project helps to community for preserving, promoting, and exchanging of their culture with tourists. In addition, it creates a sense of pride in the community to their cultural identity. This implies that the local residents motivated to participate in ecotourism project growth to exchange their unique culture, way of life, heritage, and other aspects with tourists in the destination. It also fosters community pride and identity through sharing of their cultural heritage and traditions with visitors.

This supported by interview, local people offer different traditional handicrafts like hats and Zitets which are made from sheep hair, sculptures, and other goods to tourists, especially a culture of hospitality is attracts tourists. Additionally, some community members invited tourists especially foreign travelers to their homes, even if they trek with them to the forest (Interview, April, 2024). It also concurs with Abukhalifeh & Wondirad (2019) and Afenyo-Agbe & Mensah (2021) findings. They found that meeting new people from within and outside a community is interesting and beneficial for communities. CBET important to improving quality of life, fostering community pride, and ensuring environmental and cultural sustainability. In addition, it provides fund for seminars and cultural events, this help to preserve traditions for future generations.



Figure 4: Tourists experience with the local communities (Author observation ,2024).

### 3.2. Challenges of Community Participation in CBET Development

Table 4: Challenges of Community Participation in Ecotourism Development at Wof-Washa Forest.

Descriptive Statistics			
Attributes	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Uneven-sharing of benefit ecotourism programs.	240	3.90	.995
No transparent financial records available about ecotourism.	240	3.85	1.008
The cause of HWC is overexploitations.	240	3.98	.989
HWC is hampered community participation.	240	3.88	.971
No enough personnel in the community with ecotourism skills.	240	3.98	1.039
Absence of ecotourism training chance to develop skills.	240	3.90	1.061
No prioritize hiring and training local community members.	240	3.97	1.024
Community are not conducting discussions with other stakeholders.	240	3.97	1.022
No transparent decision-making process that involves all stakeholders.	240	4.13	1.054
Valid N (listwise)	240		
<b>Average Mean</b>		<b>3.9519</b>	<b>0.7478</b>

Source: Author, 2024

#### 3.2.1. Uneven-Sharing of Benefit

As table 4 shows that majority of respondents agreed on Wof-Washa forest communities have not gained fair advantages from the ecotourism project and have no transparent financial records regarding income and expenditures. This implies that the local community's involvement in CBET development is hindered by the uneven distribution of profits from ecotourism activities in the Wof-Washa Forest. This supported by interview, the profit generated from the ecotourism project was distributed to some community members who were a member of the representative committee, but the mass peoples did not benefit from the ecotourism project based on their contributions. Besides, the financial record is not presented to the broader community members (Interview, April, 2024).

It also concurrent with Su & Wall, (2014) and Bello *et al.*, (2017) results, it stated that local community involvement in ecotourism is motivated by the need to maximize its benefits for the local population. However, communities are often discouraged from participating in ecotourism project due to uneven distribution and lack of access to ecotourism advantages, as they are unable to fully benefit from protected area management and planning activities.

#### 3.2.2. Human-Wildlife Conflict

Table 4 shows that most respondents agreed with the statements about HWC problems, including encroachment, farmland expansion, livestock grazing, and settlement, hinder community involvement in ecotourism development. This implies that community involvement in CBET flourishing is impeded by HWC problems in the Wof-Washa Forest. However, the key informant response opposed this finding, but based on Tadesse & Zewde (2020) findings and author observation there is HWC problem in Wof-Washa Forest that raised from population pressure, timber production, and increased demand for agricultural land (ANRSEFPA, 2021). So, in the area, the community involvement is hindered by HWC.

This finding is supported by Bello *et al.*, (2017), Tadesse & Zewde, (2020), Biset *et al.*, (2019), Mbise *et al.*, (2018), Seoraj-Pillai and Pillay, (2017), and Agyeman and Baidoo, (2019) study's results. They inferred that, HWC is a significant issue in protected areas, leading to crop raiding, property damage, and attacks on humans. This creates obstacles for community participation and can result in property destruction, deaths, and home demolition. Local populations are often hostile towards park management and government representatives due to wildlife killings and damage. There is no legislation or regulatory framework for compensation for HWC-related losses. To address this, the government, organizations, and stakeholders must work together to reduce conflict and build stronger relationships with local populations.

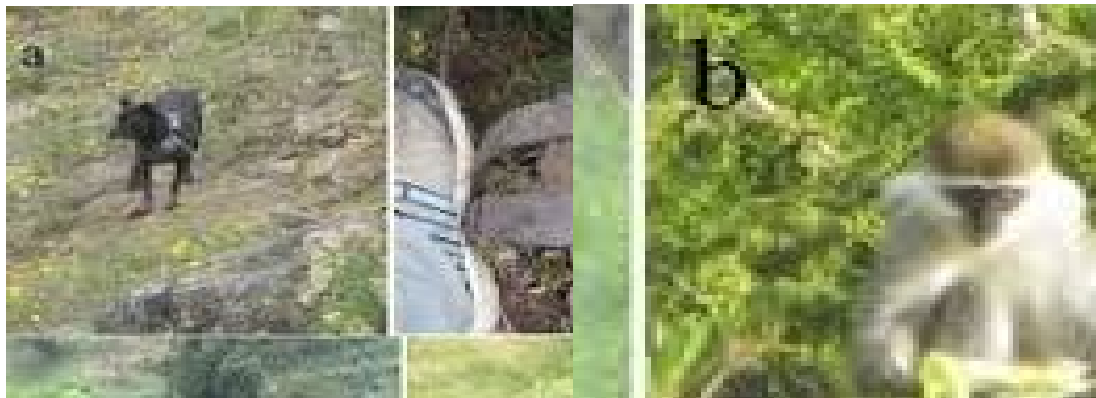


Figure 5: Human-wildlife conflicts and measure to preventing (Author Observation, 2024)

### 3.2.3. Lack of Skilled Personnel

Based on table 4, the majority of informants agreed with the item's insufficient skilled personnel with necessary skills for ecotourism jobs, lacking opportunities for skill development through training programs, and ecotourism projects not prioritizing hiring and training local community members. It implicated the community involvement in ecotourism development limited by lack of skilled personnel in Wof-Washa Forest. According to key informants, it stated that in the study areas, most communities were educated from adult education to graduate, nevertheless they haven't knowledge about ecotourism concepts. So, SUNARMA hired employees from Addis Ababa such as tour-guide, and promoters (Interview, April, 2024).

These findings are consistent with studies conducted by Bello *et al.*, (2017), Baum, (2018), and Afenyo-Agbe & Mensah, (2021). It shows that educated people are crucial for ecotourism development. However, protected area management organizations often lack trained personnel in ecotourism planning, limiting community engagement. Offering jobs in tourism can involve community members, but without necessary training, locals may work in janitor positions and foreigners may be hired in higher positions.

### 3.2.4. Absence of Coordination Among Stakeholders

As table 4, the majority of respondents agreed with the statements the community not conducting discussions about ecotourism development with other stakeholders and ecotourism program does not facilitate a transparent decision-making process that involves all stakeholders. This implies that a lack of coordination among several responsible bodies was a hampered the involvement of local inhabitants in ecotourism development in Wof-Washa Forest. As a key informant, there are different discussions made with several responsible bodies, but they were not changing into practice. These discussions were held among community, government officials, and SUNARMA by focused on ecotourism issues like equitable benefits, project status, improvement activities, protected area demarcation, and infrastructure development, but they have not been implemented into practice (Interview, April, 2024).

This finding concurs with the study conducted by Bello *et al.*, (2017) and Afenyo-Agbe & Mensah, (2021) outcomes. They concluded that tourism sector involves various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, landowners, small enterprises, community organizations, and tour operators. Ineffective coordination among these stakeholders can lower the efficiency of participatory tourism development and endanger the quality of the tourism offering. Communities' participation in ecotourism developments is hampered by lack of coordination among government agencies, NGOs, and community-based groups. Establishing systems for coordination among stakeholders is crucial for optimizing resources during tourism planning in developing nations.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate opportunities' and challenges of community participation in ecotourism development. The quantitative and qualitative analysis indicated, the community's participation in ecotourism developments driven by income, employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and cultural revitalization advantages. However, it is limited by obstacles such as unfair-sharing of benefits, HWC, shortage of trained personnel, and lack of coordination among stakeholders. Generally, community has carried-out several activities in the development of the CBET project motivated by stimulants force, i.e., opportunities, but their engagement is impeded by challenging issues. This indicated that the participation of community in CBET development motivated and limited by opportunity and challenge factors respectively.



## Implications

This study makes the following insightful theoretical contributions. It made a comprehensive review of the existing body of knowledge on opportunities' and challenges of community participation in CBET development at different destinations. This attempt was help to successfully identify research gaps that pave the way for future research.

It also highlighted opportunity factors that motivate communities participation in ecotourism development like income, employment, infrastructure, and cultural revitalization benefits and filled the previous studies gap (Wei *et al.*, 2020; Kummitha & Osiako, 2020; Bhatta, 2023; Rogos *et al.*, 2021; Indarti & Munir, 2016 ; Afenyo & Amuquandoh., 2014; P.M. & B.T., 2023 ; Jaafar *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, it emphasized limited factors to community participation in CBET development such as unfair benefit distributions, HWC, shortage of trained manpower, and absence of coordination, and bridged the past study gaps (Kunjuraman, 2022; Kumi *et al.*, 2018; Tosun, 2000).

Additionally, it makes some imperative practical contributions. The study provides empirical evidence by focused on opportunity and challenge issues, as well as mitigation strategies for policymakers and industry experts. Policymakers should be working cooperatively with other stakeholders to increase the community influence on ecotourism project by promoting opportunity aspects through reducing challenge factors. It also affords a practical contribution to responsible bodies: the community was driven to engage in CBET development due to income, job, infrastructure, and revitalization of cultural advantages, but it was hampered by unfair sharing of benefits, HWC, shortage of trained personnel, and lack of coordination challenges. So, the stakeholders should be working together to improve motivator aspects through eliminate the existing bottlenecks.

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