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Integrating Environmental and Social Governance into Community-Based Tourism Approaches in Botswana

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This research explores the integration of Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) into Community-Based Tourism (CBT) strategies in Botswana, emphasising the critical role of sustainable tourism practices in preserving natural resources while enhancing social well-being and economic benefits for local communities. By evaluating current CBT initiatives, the research identifies key ESG principles that can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of these programs. Through case studies and stakeholder interviews, the research highlights successful examples and challenges in implementing ESG frameworks within the tourism sector. The findings suggest that a process management-oriented approach to governance that incorporates community involvement, environmental stewardship, and socio-economic development is essential for the long-term success and resilience of tourism in Botswana. This approach significantly contributes to developing a community participatory framework for sustainable tourism development in the country, ensuring that local communities are active participants in decision-making processes and benefit equitably from tourism activities.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a critical driver of socio-economic development for many countries worldwide, and Botswana is no exception. Over the past few decades, Botswana’s tourism industry has seen remarkable growth, largely fuelled by the country’s abundant natural resources. Notable among these are its vast wildlife areas, which include globally renowned sites such as the Okavango Delta and Chobe National Park. These natural attractions not only draw tourists from all over the world but also serve as key contributors to the country’s economic growth and its efforts towards environmental conservation (Mbaiwa, 2003). The expansion of tourism in Botswana has opened up opportunities to leverage these resources for the dual purpose of fostering economic benefits and protecting the environment.

A central component of Botswana’s success in tourism development is the adoption of the Community-Based Tourism (CBT) approach. This strategy is designed to ensure that the local communities who reside in or near the tourist attractions are actively involved in and benefit directly from tourism activities. CBT places significant emphasis on making sure that the benefits of tourism are distributed fairly among the people in these communities. Additionally, it promotes the preservation of both natural and cultural heritage, ensuring that the resources that attract tourists are not only utilised but also protected for future generations (Sebele, 2010). By involving local communities in tourism initiatives, CBT creates a sense of ownership and responsibility, which can lead to better conservation outcomes and improved livelihoods.

As tourism continues to grow, the need for sustainability in its development and operations has become increasingly important. Sustainability is now a fundamental consideration in tourism management, particularly in light of the environmental and social challenges associated with rapid industry expansion. To address these challenges, the integration of Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) principles has gained significant attention. ESG provides a structured framework for promoting ethical and sustainable practices across various sectors, including tourism. Within the context of tourism, ESG principles focus on reducing negative environmental impacts, fostering social inclusivity, and establishing strong governance systems (Dodds & Joppe, 2009). The goal is to ensure that tourism activities not only generate economic benefits but also align with environmental protection and social well-being.

The incorporation of ESG principles into Community-Based Tourism strategies in Botswana presents a promising opportunity to tackle several pressing social issues. For instance, environmental degradation caused by overuse of natural resources or poor management can be mitigated through sustainable practices encouraged by ESG. Similarly, community marginalisation—a common issue when local populations are excluded from the benefits of tourism—can be addressed by ensuring that community members are actively involved in decision-making processes and fairly compensated for their participation. Furthermore, economic inequality can be reduced when tourism revenues are equitably distributed, providing more opportunities for underprivileged groups within the community. By embedding ESG into CBT frameworks, Botswana can achieve a more balanced

and inclusive tourism sector that supports both the environment and the socio-economic development of its people.

Botswana's tourism sector plays a critical role in its socio-economic development, largely due to its natural resources and the adoption of community-centred approaches like CBT. However, this growth has also introduced challenges that must be addressed to ensure the sector's long-term sustainability. The integration of ESG principles into CBT strategies offers a comprehensive approach to tackle these challenges. By promoting environmental conservation, empowering local communities, and fostering equitable economic opportunities, ESG-enhanced CBT can help Botswana address critical social and environmental issues while ensuring that its tourism industry remains a sustainable and inclusive driver of growth.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine how Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) principles are integrated into Community-Based Tourism (CBT) strategies in Botswana.
- To analyse the impacts of ESG-oriented CBT on environmental sustainability, community empowerment, and economic development.
- To identify best practices and challenges in implementing ESG frameworks within CBT initiatives, using selected case studies across Botswana.
- To propose a participatory framework that enhances the sustainability and inclusivity of tourism governance in Botswana.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising both interviews and case studies to explore the integration of Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) principles into Community-

Based Tourism (CBT) in Botswana. The dual approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of various stakeholders involved in CBT, while also examining real-life examples of ESG application within community projects.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of key stakeholders. These included community leaders involved in tourism initiatives, representatives from tourism-related NGOs, government officials in the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, and private sector operators collaborating with CBT projects. In total, 12 participants were interviewed. The selection criteria were based on their active involvement or influence in CBT activities across Botswana's major tourism regions.

Case Study Design

Three key case studies were selected based on their prominence, maturity, and representation of different geographic and ecological contexts. These were the Okavango Delta, Chobe National Park, and Khama Rhino Sanctuary. Data for these case studies were collected through document analysis, including management plans, reports, and previous evaluations, as well as site visits and stakeholder interviews. Each case provided insights into how ESG principles were operationalised in different contexts, focusing on environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and governance mechanisms.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes emerging from the interview transcripts and case study documentation. Data were coded using NVivo software, or manually where applicable, allowing for triangulation of findings between stakeholder perspectives and real-world implementation cases. All participants provided informed consent.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL GOVERNANCE IN TOURISM

The Concept of ESG

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) refers to the three central factors used to evaluate the sustainability and societal impact of an industry or organisation. ESG's environmental component focuses on conservation and sustainable resource use, the social component emphasises the well-being of people and communities, and the governance component addresses ethical management and accountability practices (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2019).

In tourism, ESG principles help ensure that tourism development aligns with global sustainability goals, including the preservation of biodiversity, climate change mitigation, equitable economic opportunities, and community empowerment (Spenceley, 2008).

The Role of ESG in Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism practices are those that minimise negative environmental, social, and economic impacts while maximising benefits for local communities (Goodwin, 2008). ESG frameworks in tourism can support the development of sustainable practices by embedding accountability in environmental protection, promoting social inclusivity, and ensuring transparency in governance.

ESG's environmental principles encourage tourism operators to adopt eco-friendly practices such as reducing carbon emissions, implementing water and waste management systems, and conserving wildlife habitats (Gössling & Hall, 2006). Social principles focus on ensuring that tourism benefits are shared equitably among local communities, promoting inclusivity, and protecting cultural heritage. Governance principles ensure that tourism ventures are managed ethically and transparently, with a focus on accountability to stakeholders, including local communities (Jamieson & Nadkarni, 2009).

COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN BOTSWANA

The Importance of CBT in Botswana

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in Botswana has emerged as a key strategy for promoting sustainable tourism that directly benefits local communities. CBT projects are typically operated by or in partnership with local communities, ensuring that revenues generated from tourism are reinvested into community development, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Monkgogi & Stone, 2020).

These projects are often centred around wildlife conservation, cultural preservation, and eco-tourism, making them ideal candidates for the integration of ESG principles. In Botswana, CBT initiatives are often located in areas where tourism is linked to natural resources, such as national parks, wildlife reserves, and cultural heritage sites. These initiatives not only provide economic benefits but also contribute to the preservation of the country's unique ecosystems and cultural heritage (Manyara & Jones, 2007).

Case Studies of ESG Integration in CBT

Case Study 1: Okavango Delta

The Okavango Delta is one of Botswana's most significant tourism destinations and a prime example of the successful integration of ESG principles into CBT. The Delta is a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its biodiversity and importance to wildlife conservation. Many tourism ventures in the Delta are community-owned or operate under joint management agreements between local communities and private operators (Okavango Research Institute [ORI], 2019).

These ventures adhere to stringent environmental standards to minimise their impact on the Delta's delicate ecosystem. For instance, lodges in the Delta use renewable energy, recycle waste, and implement water conservation measures to reduce their environmental footprint. Community members are

actively involved in these tourism operations, ensuring that they benefit economically while also contributing to conservation efforts (Mbaiwa & Stronza, 2010).

Case Study 2: Chobe National Park

Chobe National Park is another key tourism destination where ESG principles have been successfully integrated into CBT. The park is known for its large elephant population and its importance to Botswana's wildlife tourism industry. Community-based tourism initiatives in Chobe focus on wildlife conservation and cultural preservation, with local communities managing several lodges and campsites within the park.

The social governance aspect of ESG has played a critical role in ensuring that tourism benefits are shared equitably among community members, particularly women and youth. CBT initiatives in Chobe have empowered marginalised groups by providing them with employment opportunities, training, and leadership roles in tourism management (Saarinen, 2010).

Moreover, environmental governance practices have been implemented to protect the park's wildlife and ecosystems. Tourism operators are required to follow strict environmental regulations, such as limiting the number of visitors to sensitive areas and ensuring that waste is properly managed (Scheyyens, 2002). These practices help preserve the park's natural resources while allowing local communities to benefit economically from tourism.

Case Study 3: Khama Rhino Sanctuary

The Khama Rhino Sanctuary is a community-based wildlife conservation project that exemplifies the successful integration of ESG into CBT. The sanctuary was established to protect Botswana's endangered rhino population and to provide a source of income for local communities through tourism. ESG principles have been integrated into the sanctuary's operations to ensure that both

conservation and community development goals are met (Sebele, 2010)

Environmental governance at the Khama Rhino Sanctuary focuses on protecting the sanctuary's wildlife and habitat. Strict conservation measures are enforced to prevent poaching and to promote the sustainable management of natural resources. Social governance principles ensure that local communities are involved in the management of the sanctuary and that they benefit from the revenues generated by tourism (Spenceley, 2008). The sanctuary also provides employment opportunities for community members, particularly in areas related to conservation and tourism management.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING ESG IN CBT

Capacity Building

One of the primary challenges in implementing ESG principles in CBT initiatives in Botswana is the lack of capacity among local communities to effectively manage tourism operations. Many communities lack the necessary skills and knowledge to implement sustainable tourism practices, particularly in areas related to environmental management and governance (Saarinen, 2010).

Financial Constraints

Another significant challenge is the lack of financial resources needed to implement Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) principles effectively. Many Community-Based Tourism (CBT) projects face difficulties in securing the funding required to develop and maintain sustainable infrastructure. These include essential elements such as renewable energy systems, waste management facilities, and conservation programs. Without adequate financial support, it becomes challenging for communities to adopt and sustain the environmental and social governance practices that are important for ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourism initiatives (Zulu, 2009).

For instance, renewable energy systems, such as solar panels or wind turbines, can significantly reduce the environmental impact of tourism by minimising reliance on non-renewable energy sources. However, these systems often come with high upfront costs, which many CBT projects struggle to afford. Similarly, waste management facilities are essential for reducing pollution and ensuring that the natural environment remains clean and attractive for both wildlife and visitors. Yet, setting up and maintaining these facilities can be expensive, particularly in remote areas where transportation and infrastructure development costs are higher. Conservation programs, which aim to protect biodiversity and preserve natural resources, also require substantial funding for activities such as anti-poaching efforts, habitat restoration, and community education on environmental stewardship.

Without adequate funding, essential components of sustainable tourism may be overlooked or poorly implemented. Communities may resort to cheaper but less sustainable practices, which can lead to environmental degradation and undermine the long-term viability of tourism in the area. Furthermore, the absence of proper financial support can limit the ability of CBT initiatives to attract tourists who increasingly seek destinations that prioritise sustainability and ethical practices. This creates a cycle in which the lack of funding prevents the implementation of ESG principles, which in turn limits the revenue potential of tourism projects, further exacerbating financial challenges.

Addressing the issue of inadequate financial resources requires a collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders. Governments can play a significant role by providing grants, subsidies, or low-interest loans to support the development of sustainable infrastructure in CBT projects. International organisations and NGOs can also contribute by offering financial assistance or technical expertise to help communities design and implement cost-effective ESG solutions.

Partnerships with private sector companies, particularly those that are committed to corporate social responsibility, can provide additional funding and resources. For example, eco-tourism operators or renewable energy firms may be willing to invest in CBT projects that align with their sustainability goals.

In addition to external support, communities themselves can explore innovative ways to generate funding for ESG initiatives. This might include introducing visitor fees or eco-taxes that are specifically earmarked for sustainability projects. Crowdfunding and community-based fundraising efforts could also be used to raise awareness and gather financial contributions from individuals who support sustainable tourism. Capacity-building programs that train community members in grant writing and financial management can further empower them to seek funding opportunities and manage resources effectively.

Ultimately, overcoming the financial challenges associated with implementing ESG principles is essential for the success of CBT initiatives. By securing the necessary funding, communities can develop the infrastructure and programs needed to promote environmental conservation, enhance social inclusivity, and ensure ethical governance. This, in turn, will help to create a tourism industry that is not only economically beneficial but also sustainable and resilient in the face of future challenges. By addressing these financial barriers, Botswana can strengthen its position as a global leader in sustainable tourism and ensure that its natural and cultural heritage continues to thrive for generations to come.

Balancing Tourism Development with Conservation

A significant challenge in implementing ESG in CBT is balancing tourism development with environmental conservation. While tourism provides economic benefits, it can also put pressure on natural resources and lead to environmental

degradation if not managed carefully. Ensuring that tourism development remains sustainable requires ongoing monitoring and evaluation of environmental impacts, as well as the enforcement of regulations that limit the negative effects of tourism on ecosystems (Scheyvens, 2002).

FINDINGS FROM STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

In addition to the case studies, qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 key stakeholders involved in Community-Based Tourism (CBT). The participants included representatives from local community tourism trusts, private sector tourism operators, government officials from the Ministry of Environment, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in sustainable tourism and conservation. The aim was to understand stakeholders' perceptions of Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) integration within CBT initiatives and to identify challenges and opportunities from a grassroots perspective.

Awareness and Understanding of ESG Principles

Stakeholder awareness of ESG principles varied significantly. While most government and NGO representatives demonstrated a clear understanding of ESG frameworks, several community leaders and tourism operators admitted to having limited exposure to the term, although they recognised the relevance of sustainable practices in their work. One community member explained,

"We have always tried to protect our environment and include our people, but we didn't know it was called ESG," explained one community member, highlighting an implicit understanding of ESG principles despite limited formal exposure."

This suggests a need for more structured education and awareness campaigns to bridge the knowledge gap, especially at the community level.

Challenges in ESG Implementation

Interviewees highlighted several recurring barriers to effective ESG integration. These included a lack of technical skills, limited funding, and weak policy enforcement. A tourism operator noted,

"We want to adopt solar energy and better waste management, but the initial costs are too high and there's little support."

Community leaders also expressed concerns about inconsistent stakeholder coordination and the marginalisation of local voices in tourism development processes. These issues align with challenges identified in the literature and emphasise the need for a more inclusive governance approach.

Opportunities for Strengthening ESG in CBT

Despite the challenges, stakeholders identified multiple opportunities for strengthening ESG practices in Botswana's CBT sector. These included building local capacity through targeted training programs, creating incentive mechanisms for eco-friendly tourism operations, and fostering public-private partnerships to share resources and expertise.

An NGO respondent suggested,

"With the right training and investment, communities can lead in conservation and benefit directly. ESG should not be an external imposition. It should be rooted in the community."

Stakeholder Interview Thematic Summary

Theme	Key Findings	Sample Stakeholder Quote
Awareness and Understanding of ESG	Mixed awareness; community members are often unfamiliar with the 'ESG' term, but understand sustainable practices.	"We have always tried to protect our environment and include our people, but we didn't know it was called ESG."
Challenges in ESG Implementation	Barriers include a lack of technical skills, limited funding, and weak stakeholder coordination.	"We want to adopt solar energy and better waste management, but the initial costs are too high and there's little support."
Opportunities for Strengthening ESG in CBT	Training, incentives for sustainability, and partnerships are identified as opportunities to improve ESG integration.	"With the right training and investment, communities can lead in conservation and benefit directly. ESG should not be an external imposition—it should be rooted in the community."

The interviews affirmed that while ESG concepts are broadly aligned with community values and aspirations, operationalising these principles requires a tailored, context-specific approach. The findings highlight the critical role of stakeholder engagement, capacity building, and financial support in embedding ESG into CBT initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

This research emphasises the critical role of integrating Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) principles into Community-Based Tourism (CBT) initiatives as a pathway toward achieving sustainable tourism development. The study highlights how a governance-focused approach that centres on environmental protection, social inclusion, and ethical decision-making can contribute to the long-term success and resilience of tourism in Botswana. By adopting practices that prioritise these areas, the tourism sector can operate in a way that benefits not only the economy but also the environment and local communities. This integration is especially important for ensuring that tourism activities remain sustainable over time and continue to generate positive outcomes for the people and ecosystems involved.

The importance of this integration is further illustrated through case studies of some of Botswana's most prominent tourist attractions,

including the Okavango Delta, Chobe National Park, and Khama Rhino Sanctuary. These examples demonstrate the potential of ESG frameworks to significantly enhance the sustainability of CBT projects. In these locations, CBT initiatives have been instrumental in addressing key social and environmental challenges. For instance, they have helped to curb environmental degradation, support the protection of biodiversity, and empower local communities by providing economic opportunities and fostering participation in decision-making processes. At the same time, these projects have contributed to economic development by attracting tourists and generating revenue, much of which is reinvested into the communities and conservation efforts.

Despite these successes, there are still notable challenges that need to be addressed to maximise the potential of CBT initiatives. One of the main challenges is building the capacity of local communities to manage and benefit from tourism activities effectively. Many communities require additional education and training to develop the skills needed for tourism management, environmental conservation, and hospitality services. Another significant challenge is the need for increased financial support to ensure that CBT projects are adequately funded. Without sufficient resources, it becomes difficult to implement the

necessary infrastructure, training programs, and conservation efforts that are essential for the success of these initiatives. Finally, balancing the goals of development and conservation remains an ongoing issue. While it is important to promote economic growth through tourism, this must not come at the expense of the environment or the cultural heritage that makes these locations unique.

Addressing these challenges will require a multi-faceted approach. Investment in education and training programs is essential to equip local communities with the knowledge and skills needed to participate meaningfully in tourism activities. Such programs should focus on areas like sustainable resource management, customer service, and entrepreneurship to ensure that communities can thrive in the tourism industry. Additionally, greater financial resources must be allocated to CBT projects, whether through government funding, partnerships with private investors, or international support. These resources will enable communities to improve infrastructure, enhance conservation efforts, and expand tourism services. Collaboration between stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and local communities, will also be critical to achieving a balance between development and conservation. Open dialogue and inclusive decision-making processes can help ensure that all voices are heard and that tourism projects are designed to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

By continuing to integrate ESG principles into tourism development, Botswana has the opportunity to create innovative solutions to social and environmental problems. These principles provide a framework for addressing the complex challenges associated with tourism growth while ensuring that the benefits of tourism are shared equitably among communities. When ESG is applied effectively, it can lead to more resilient and sustainable tourism practices that protect the environment, empower local communities, and contribute to economic growth. In doing so, Botswana can position itself as

a leader in sustainable tourism, setting an example for other countries to follow. Furthermore, by prioritising ESG principles, the country can ensure that its tourism industry remains a source of pride and prosperity for future generations. The integration of these principles into CBT initiatives is not only a strategy for addressing current challenges but also a way to build a more sustainable and inclusive future for Botswana's tourism sector.

Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials. Additional data or specific details, if required, can be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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