A tour guide association in Kisumu county: gender equality in ecotourism

Image 1: View over Kisumu from the viewpoint at Abindu.

Introduction

By the time of writing this report, a transdisciplinary project on ecotourism development has been going on in Kisumu for three years. It started in September 2012 when PhD students from Maseno University, Jooust and University of Gothenburg started to work in collaboration with local stakeholders at Dunga beach to develop the site for ecotourism purposes. One of the main goals of ecotourism is to improve the wellbeing of local residents through the creation of sustainable livelihoods and inclusive decision making (Cape Town Declaration, 2002). This goal has been fundamental throughout the project. Community members in Dunga have been involved from the initial stages, and ecotourism services and products have been developed with consideration of the local history and culture in a small scale manner, as to not interfere too much with the existing community.
A while into the project, the need for an organisation that could support local guides in their work arose and a county-wide tour guide association was initiated. The association is open for local guides in Kisumu County, and the aim is to be a forum for knowledge sharing, collaboration and marketing between individuals, local guide groups, and the wider society. In this report, the overarching goal of inclusive decision-making and the creation of sustainable livelihoods is particularly considered regarding the inclusion of both women and men in tourism related development and business. The report is a summary of activities conducted in Kisumu in October 2015, which aimed to get the association up and running. It takes up aspects that are important to continue working on, especially in regards to active participation and further development of the tour guide association.

It should be noted that this report is written by two PhD students, a tour guide, and a program manager of a local NGO, who have all been engaged in the start-up process of the association. Summing up a process with many actors involved can never be objective, which means that our opinions may not necessarily coincide with every aspiring member’s. The summaries made should therefore be seen as our perceptions of what was said and done. Likewise, every recommendation is influenced by our own assumptions and values. The authors encourage readers, especially tour guides in Kisumu and tourism officials from both national and local government, to feel free to use this report and its contents in tourism development, as well as to come back to us with comments and reflections. There are five reports that precede this one. Four of these deal with the participatory process of ecotourism development in Dunga, and one deals with the very initial stages of the setting up of the Lake Victoria Tour Guide Association. Please do not hesitate to contact the authors if you wish to receive these previous reports.

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Lake Victoria Tour Guide Association (LVTGA) was initiated as a response to the many challenges that local guides and guide groups face in their daily work. The association is a forum for professionalization of tour guiding in Kisumu County. This includes, for example, training, sharing of experiences and ideas, cross-selling each other sites, and providing with and following common codes of conduct. The association can give voice in relation to government, tour operators and other stakeholders and more direct contact with tourists through common platforms and marketing activities. In March 2015 the initial stages to form a tour guide association were made, consisting of workshops, training and meetings. The core values of the association were proposed as humanity, cooperation, sustainability, professionalism and security (see the report *Forming a tour guide association: reflections from the start-up process*). One aspect that was noted during this work, which is connected to the core values, is that tour guiding in Kisumu and Kenya is predominantly a male occupation. Incorporating a sound gender perspective in the association was therefore seen as vital. It is important for equality in society, and the Kenyan constitution requires one third of women in the boards of organisations. Further, gender equality is important for visitors. Having both men and women working as guides gives the visitor a more diverse and rich view of the place, since women and men may have slightly different perspectives on things. If the tourists mainly interact with men during their stay in Kisumu they will miss out on a lot of cultural aspects. Children (e.g. school children) can see that it is a possibility for both men and women to work as guides, and that women and men can collaborate professionally. Working towards active participation of both women and men can thus be seen as a way to strengthen the association as well as the guide profession in Kisumu.

At the time of writing this report, sites that have shown an interest in participating in the association are: Dunga beach, Dunga hill camp, Kiboko bay, Hippo Point, Impala part, Tich Kouma, Luagni beach, Kisumu Port, Abindu, Kit Mikayi and Ndere Island. The aim and hope is that more sites will join in the future.
Summary of activities April-October 2015

Since March, the work with forming the association had continued with two meetings where the tour guides continued to discuss challenges they face during their work. The challenges vary from professionalism, lack of standard prices, exploitation by tour operators, misinformation to tourists, negligible number of women participation in tour guiding, and lack of forum for tour guides to air their views. Another key issue that arose was as a result of the death of a tour guide from Dunga. Tour guides from across the attraction sites gathered at his home and resolved to incorporate welfare issues in the association. This would help in times of bereavement, illness and other needy cases.

Site tour
Although in good progress, the information about the association had not yet spread successfully to all tour guides at the different sites. Therefore, a tour to some of the sites was made in October, to inform about and discuss the association. The first report about the association was handed out. The trip was also a way to invite to the coming activities: an inspirational exchange trip to Kakamega forest, a workshop for female tour guides and a meeting with the officials of the association. Moreover, the tour was a way for the chairman of the association and the PhD students to get to know some sites better and the people working there. A lot of people came to the meetings at the sites, and were eager to collaborate, support each other and work for heightened professionalism.

The first stops on the tour were at Abindu shrine and Tich Kouma. At Abindu shrine, the view of the lake is spectacular and the rocks and caves are interesting from a geological, spiritual and legendary point of view. The guides arranged with a tour and told some intriguing stories. They expressed a will to document the stories and to get signs, from both the main road and at the site. At Tich Kouma CBO in Kisumu there are fish ponds, plant cultivation and environmental training in for example composting, which are features that would be very interesting for the many students that visit Kisumu. The guides at Tich Kouma saw the legal aspect with the association as very important, as a common voice in relation to government. They also appreciated the social point: to come together and talk as tour guides who have a lot in common, as well as the possibility to have a consistent message to visitors. A request was to get some identification of tour guides from the association.
The trip continued to Kit Mikayi and Luangni beach the following day. Kit Mikayi (the rock of the first wife) has a very interesting surrounding landscape and some interesting stories about the man who named the stone. Women from the area contribute to the tours by local dancing and by serving porridge in calabash bowls. At Luangni beach it was mentioned that the association is important since it enables guides to share ideas with each other, as well as to meet challenges together. A woman (widow of one of the tour guides) has recently joined the tour guide group and learned how to drive a boat. The other guides are confident that women can do a good job as guides but a key challenge is security. They pointed out the importance of working not only with tourist safety but also safety for men and women working at the sites. This also includes general safety issues in Kisumu, where the association can partner with other organisations and the local government and work towards safer street life.
Exchange trip to Kakamega

An important aspect that was raised in earlier discussions was that ‘things must happen’. Groups like this have been initiated before, but unfortunately they have died out. The focus for the continued work on the association was therefore put on activities that aimed to provide opportunities for training, networking and knowledge sharing. The first activity was the tour guide workshop held in March 2015, which was now followed up with an inspirational exchange trip to Kakamega and a workshop for female guides.

Kakamega was seen as appropriate to visit since they have local and highly skilled male and female guides. An exchange trip would also give an experience of another tourism site, and provide with opportunity to see how other guides conduct their work. In Kakamega 33 male and female guides from Kisumu county got the opportunity to meet with the forest manager and three guides. The visit began with an inspirational talk from the local guides, followed by a question and answer session. The discussion revolved around how the guides in Kakamega manage their association, what it means to be a guide in ecotourism, and how the female guides deal with challenges that they face. One of the female tour guides from Kakamega stated clearly the need of women to come in to tour guiding as a source of income. This is because some tourists prefer female guides to men. She also stressed on being passionate with the work and doing practice to know better the environment you are working in. She noted that the key to professionalism and mastery of one’s ecology is to develop interest and work towards it. Read widely and be ready to learn from others!

The discussion was followed by a tour in the forest where the guides from Kisumu could see how the Kakamega guides act, talk and move when guiding. The Kakamega guides also continued to talk about how they conduct their work. After the tour it was proposed that the Kisumu guides could come back for a longer period of training. The guides from Kakamega were also inspired by the initiative to start a county wide association. The Kakamega trip gave female guides an insight into what tour guiding is. The female tour guides inspired the women...
and made them believe that they too can do it at their respective areas of work. From the exchange visit the guides were inspired and energized by the high skills, professionalism, passion and energy displayed.

“You must have the passion! Passion is the qualification for this job”

- view, expressed during the Kakamega visit

Women workshop
The women’s workshop was held as a continuation of the workshop in March, where only men were present, and it focused on training and empowerment. Women from Hippo point, Luangni beach, Kisumu port, Kit Mikayi, Dunga, Ndere islands, Kiboko bay and Tich Kouma were represented. The day started with a presentation of the process in Dunga, and how you can work with for example community involvement, packaging, interaction between guide and visitor, and how you can test tours on each other. A professor from University of Gothenburg held a talk on extraordinary experiences, a doctor, also from Gotthenburg, talked about challenges with ecotourism and a PhD student from Maseno University connected this to empowerment. The day also included an exercise where the women got the task to think about an activity during a tour and perform this in a short drama.

Officials meeting
By this time in October the association was in the process of being registered and it was therefore important to put together an interim committee. This issue was discussed in an officials meeting held in Dunga. There were representatives from Dunga beach, Dunga hill camp, Hippo point, Kiboko bay, Impala park, Kisumu port, Luangni beach, Tich Kouma, Kit Mikayi and Abindu present at the meeting. In order to work with gender inclusion, two of the elected members of the committee are women, appointed as deputy coordinator and secretary general respectively. The positions of the coordinator, deputy secretary and finance are held by male guides, giving a total of five members of the committee. It was also proposed that the association should have a board that can support the association, and give a bit of an outside perspective. This board can include representatives from Ecofinder Kenya, KLIP and the universities connected to KLIP, Ministry of tourism and Tourism county government.

Meeting between guides
In Dunga, the work with gender inclusion in tourism development and tourism business has taken a couple of steps forward. In March 2015, two master students from Chalmers Institute of Technology, some members of Dectta and a group of women from the community engaged in some initial training and the design and implementation of a test tour for female guides. The women group now includes 16 members, and are very interested in learning more about guiding. However, as a new group they experienced some challenges in getting started, which is why a
meeting with Dectta, the women guide group and the two PhD students was held. The discussion focused on setting a schedule for guiding, to make sure that both men and women will get the chance to conduct guided tours. It was decided that as a start, the women would be main responsible for guiding one day each week. They would then act as lead guides, whilst the men act as backup. In order to learn the profession, the women are also free to join any tour including boat rides to learn to handle a boat and to listen and learn about tour guiding. They are also welcome to join the internal bird-watching with Dectta held every other Friday morning. Both groups recognized the importance of working together.

**Recommendations and way forward**

The aim with this report is not merely to explain what has happened so far (although that is important) but also to provide with some support for the future. Therefore the focus in this section is on recommendations and ways forward for the association.

**A knowledge network**

It is crucial that the association is seen and used as an opportunity to learn from each other, treating it like a knowledge network. All members have their own personal experiences from guiding which others can learn from, and each and every site have their specific challenges and advantages that are useful for guides from other sites to know.

*Exchange trips*

The power of learning from each other was exemplified during the exchange trip to Kakamega, where members from the association got the opportunity to experience another site and its touristic features. They also learned how the Kakamega guides manage their organisation, view their role as guides, address challenges they face and how they perform their guiding practically. At the same time the guides in Kakamega could see the positive sides of guides coming together to collaborate, and we think that they themselves were inspired by the initiative taken by the guides in Kisumu county.

The inspiration and learning that came from the Kakamega trip shows that exchange trips are good vehicles for learning and for widening of horizons, and it could very well also be done within the association. There are members from eleven (at the moment of writing) different sites, all with their own specific characteristics. This makes an opportunity to learn from each other by visiting each other’s sites, take a guided tour with the guides working there and then round up with a discussion, giving input to each other.

*Acting scenarios*

Another way of learning from each other was tested during the women’s workshop. The method was scenario acting, where the participants got the task to think about how to act and talk during a certain moment in a guided tour. This is an easy way to train tour guiding skills, especially for
new guides since it can feel safer to act in a ‘mock up’ setting before engaging with tourists. It can be conducted within the smaller guide groups as well as in the larger association. Start by choosing certain moments of tours that may be specifically challenging, and continue with testing a whole tour. By engaging in the tour with your mind and body whilst acting, you get a first-hand experience of what works and what may not. This format is also exemplary when trying out storytelling: ask your fellow guide partner to act as visitor and perform a story, and then round up by asking for feedback.

**Mentor programme**

Another way to learn from each other, as well as to build strong relationship is to start a buddy or mentor programme within the association. A guide with long experience in guiding can pair up with someone who is new as a guide. These pairs of two are then assigned to support each other, where the experienced guide shares his or her knowledge, whilst the newer guide might come with a new way of looking at things, which can be inspirational for the more experienced guide. Other types of pairs or groups can be set up, for example equal peer-to-peer programmes where guides with similar experience support each other, or where a woman and man make a pair.

**Knowledge library**

Exchanging ideas and experiences is crucial for the association, but this can be complemented with knowledge from outside. For example, the association could set up a ‘knowledge library’. Some of the common funds in the association could be used to buy a couple of relevant books (there are some already in Dunga on storytelling). These books could then rotate between the different sites, so that everybody gets the chance to read them. If someone feels uncomfortable with reading, an idea would be that those who like to read conduct a seminar for other members after reading a book.

**Mutual responsibility and being active**

For an association like this to function well, all members need to feel that they are an important piece of the association, and that the “association is everybody’s business”. This means that everybody needs to be active and have a desire to collaborate. All members are of equal value and have a say in matters that concern the association, just like all members have a responsibility to make the association work. It is a democratic organisation, where it is not the chairman, the board or the steering committee that make all the decisions, nor is it only they who needs to make sure that things happen.

**Forming groups**

It can be complicated to get an association up and running, and to make it active in the sense that activities are set up and conducted, rather than only having meetings. Suggestions on activities that have come up include in-house and external trainings, exchange trips to each other’s sites, and mentor programme activities. One way to get things going is to form groups, which each have an area of responsibility. This should not be about administrative tasks, but operative groups, for instance one group could be responsible for marketing, one for training, one for keeping relationships with external partners, one for ethics, prototyping etc. The
groupings will help members get engaged and busy with the association’s activities hence an “active” association.

Sharing information
It is of mutual interest to share information within the guide group. A person that attends a meeting with the association (big or small), or talks to someone, comes up with a new idea or thinks that someone else could benefit from one's knowledge, has a responsibility to share this information with others for the common welfare and development of the association.

Equal access
An association can only become successful if there is a mutual respect between all members, which in turn makes it important to ensure that all members get an equal opportunity to actively participate in events and meetings. Otherwise, there is a risk that they will feel there is no need to work towards the development of the association. To make people engaged they need to feel that they are part and parcel of the process. A guide from one of the associated sites expressed this nicely when he mentioned that he does not feel that he himself needs to participate in everything, but that it is also important to allow others to step forward. The man and woman from the same site who joined the Kakamega trip expressed that they now felt that they also had a part in owning the process.

Alternate locations and people
Members may find it difficult to travel to a meeting that is held far away from his/her own site. Therefore the places for meetings, trainings etc. need to alternate. Another possibility would be to have some members present via for example Skype. However, it then needs to be discussed how the association can support those who may not have access to internet, a computer or smartphone. Also, support may be necessary, such as setting up email and/or Facebook accounts. Further, there are many guides at each site, which means that all members from each site cannot participate at each and every event. It is therefore important that each guide group have some form of rotating schedule so that everybody gets the chance to go to something. As mentioned earlier, it should also be mandatory for those who go to an activity to report back to the rest of the group at their site.

Participation by ‘all’
When talking about equality it is easy to fall into broad generalisations by saying, for example, that ‘everybody’ should get the chance to participate. The risk with this is that there are groups that will be forgotten. For instance, elders are good storytellers since they know local stories well and people trust their experience. The inclusion of only elderly people may however lead to that young people don’t get the chance to be involved. They will go somewhere else and the association misses the opportunity of getting a broad repertoire of different kinds of stories and storytellers that can cater to a wide variety of visitors. Thus, it is important to clarify that by all you mean both young and old, both experienced and less experienced, and both men and women. Challenges like this could be worked on by setting up and following guidelines stating that activities should have equal distribution in terms of gender, age and professionalism.
Active female participation
In previous meetings when discussing gender inclusion, it was mentioned as a challenge that women who participate in groups sometimes find it hard to be active members. It is therefore important to support women so that they feel comfortable with for example speaking in meetings. In order to support female members, a support group could be initiated. However, that does not mean that women should not also be included in other groups in the association, since it is important to find a good collaboration between men and women.

Connecting with external partners
It is important that an association like this has good connections to both private and public external stakeholders, such as the various departments at the county government, Ministry of tourism, tour operators and associations, stakeholders from academia, and community-based organisations. These connections can partly be established through inviting them to be members in the board of the association. Other important actors to involve, which have been mentioned in previous reports, are those that interact with tourists, such as hotel and restaurant owners. You could for instance invite them to come to your site for a guided tour, which will give them a first-hand experience and enable them to market your site. External stakeholders that you find particularly inspiring could be invited to act as mentors for the whole association. This could for example be an entrepreneur that has managed to build up a business that they are truly compassionate about.

Sustainable tourism
This report have focused on guidelines for the overall association, however we would also like to share our thoughts on some practical challenges, taking into consideration the work with sustainable tourism.

Intruding on places, property and environment
If your site is located in connection to a local community, make sure that the residents are involved in the tourism discussion and that you respect them and their property by not walking across it with visitors if they have not given their consent. Even if consent is given, caution still needs to be taken in regards to where you walk so that for example no crop is destroyed. The visitors should be informed that the owners of the land have given their permission, as a way to be ahead of visitors thoughts or questions, and as education in responsible action. In relation to this, it could also be mentioned that the worshippers that are present at some sites need to be respected and given privacy. It can be experienced as intruding by both worshippers and visitors if you as a guide stand and talk to visitors right next to them. It could be appropriate for sites such as Kit Mikayi and Abindu to jointly discuss this matter, or to discuss it within the association. For instance, should there be certain spots in the rock formations that are only available for worshippers who wish to have privacy, and that should be excluded from the guided tours? Likewise, should there be certain spots where worshippers are not allowed? Further, think about keeping the site in itself safe from damage caused by tourism or tourists. This could for example mean that it is better to put up signs as opposed to painting directly on
the stone, or that visitors are only allowed to walk on specific paths, to save the environment from tearing.

Security
The association is also a meeting point for discussing and taking actions regarding safety issues. For instance, how should you inform visitors that there may be snakes on the ground and what a security measure does that mean you have to take? What can you do to make it easier for a visitor to climb a hill or get into a boat without getting wet or hurt him/herself? How can you protect yourselves as guides, and is there a plan if something happens to you so that you cannot fulfil your work? Discussions around welfare have been frequent during the initial stages of forming the association. It is however important to keep such accounts separated from the association’s activity accounts, since welfare issues risk to undermine the development of the association.

Tourism as change agent
Visitors often find it interesting to hear good stories, told by dedicated and knowledgeable guides. There are some nice religious and cultural stories about the sites in Kisumu County. However, a guide also have the responsibility to let the visitors experience how to think and act sustainably. Furthermore, the guide should be able to talk about the geology and ecology of the place, the political situation in the country and other matters that the visitors are interested in. In ecotourism, and sustainable tourism, the educational aspect is vital, and it can be significantly enhanced through tourism experiences. When visitors immerse in other worlds, they are able to reflect on their lives, expand their consciousness, and change their values and assumptions (Kottler, 1998; Reisinger, 2015). Thus, travel as a human activity has great potential to transform people. Also, host populations’ beliefs and assumptions can be reshaped by travel and tourism, which change the hosts’ world perspectives (Reisinger, 2015). Therefore, what is included in tours and how the guide acts and talks are very important in ecotourism. Framing important matters such as environmental, moral and ethical issues in a way that is well connected to the context, but also in a general sense, gives better opportunities for tourists to change their mindsets.

References


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