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# Community Participation in Ecotourism Project Development: In Wof-Washa National Priority Forest Area

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**Abstract:** *The study focused on investigations of community participation in ecotourism development in Wof-Washa National Priority Forest Areas, using a descriptive design with mixed approach through cross-sectional survey. The study utilized systematic, stratified, and purposeful sampling methods. It also used thematic analysis for qualitative data collected through interviews, and descriptive statistics for quantitative data gathered via questionnaires. Document reviews were used to triangulated this study result with previous findings. The study findings reveal that the current status of community involvement in ecotourism development lean toward degree of tokenism (moderate level), with limited roles, as Arnstein's model, at all stages. Generally, without the participation of community, the development of ecotourism project couldn't be possible. The researcher suggests that collaborative efforts among all relevant stakeholders are crucial to fostering community participation in the successful implementation of the ecotourism project in Wof-Washa National Priority Forest Area.*

**Keywords:** *Ecotourism, Community, Participation, and Wof-Washa National Priority Forest.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries with a global powerhouse for economic, environmental, and socio-cultural sustainability in the world (Kalinichenko & Novikova, 2019; Tahiri et al., 2021; Sofronov, 2018). Despite the global slowdown, Africa's tourism industry has made a remarkable comeback. 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. As a result it plays a great role in socio-economic development (Zegeye, 2016; Pia, 2023).

The concept of ecotourism was well known in the 1980s as a counter to mass tourism, but the idea of travelling to nature-based areas started before long (Bekele, 2020). Ecotourism champions responsible travel by prioritizes protecting nature with empowering local communities. It seeks a win-win-win approach for communities, biodiversity, and the environment. It aims to empower communities, protect biodiversity, and celebrate local cultures (Alam et al., 2022; Noh, 2020). One of the most common forms of ecotourism is community-based ecotourism. It prioritizes environmental protection with greater empowerment of communities (Tesfaye, 2017).

In 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). Their proximity to natural resources makes them a key stakeholder and directly impacted by ecotourism's success or failure (Tesfaye, 2017; Mensah, 2017; Alam et al., 2022; Arifianto et al., 2023). So, ecotourism project highly depends on communities' participation (Kumi et al., 2018).

## 2. RELATED WORKS

Communities are participate at initiation, planning, management, and decision-making processes of CBET project development with various level of influence (Wei et al., 2020). According to Arnstein (1969) Participation is giving power to people who are currently excluded from decision-making processes. It is about giving them a say in how information is shared, how goals and policies are set, and how benefits are distributed. Arnstein developed ladder of participation model for clearly understanding the degree of participation needed to make decisions on several issues. It categorizes community involvement from non-participation (low power) to citizen control (highest power). It has three major levels with eight rungs, and this study used three major participation level, i.e. degree of non-power, tokenism, and citizen power.

Degree of non-participation includes: manipulation means citizens are misled into believing they have power, but decisions are predetermined. Therapy means public officials blame citizen pathologies for problems, using participation to fix them. Degree of tokenism including: Informing, which means one-way communication, and citizens receive information but lack channels for feedback or negotiation. Consultation refers to citizen opinions being sought, but there is no guarantee they will be considered. Placation is token involvement to appease citizens, which means decisions remain largely in the hands of powerholders and there is some influence on the project. Degree of citizen power: Partnership means citizens negotiate, have veto power, share resources, and see their requests partially fulfilled. Delegated power means that citizens manage programs or hold decision-making authority with some oversight. The highest rung (citizen power) occurs when citizens fully govern a project or institution, controlling policy, management, and external influences (Arnstein, 1969).

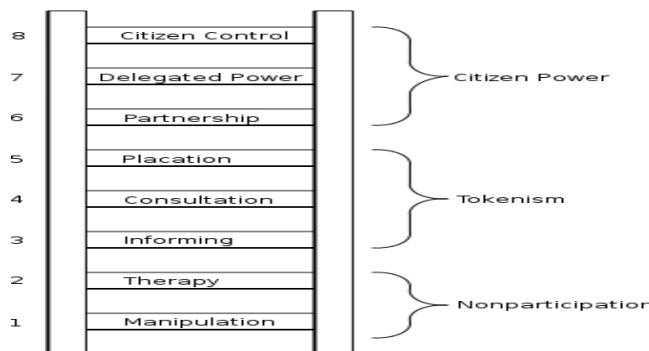


Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation Model (Arnstein, 1969).

Communities are involved from initiation to monitoring and evaluation phases of ecotourism project to empower themselves, alleviate poverty, and protect resources (Rogos et al., 2021). The engagement of community at initiation of ecotourism project is crucial to derive sustainability. Building capacity is crucial for beneficiary involvement, promoting the social pillar of sustainability in development initiatives (Joy, 2022; Barasa and Kikwatha, 2020; Gizaw et al., 2018). In the planning, it involves consulting with residents to address challenges in ecotourism development via integrating their knowledge, resources, and team formation. This approach balances development and planning restraint, and emphasizing the natural environment's sensitivity (Garrod, 2014).

Community involvement at implementation is crucial for the success of ecotourism programs, as it ensures sustainability, empowers people, and increases their knowledge, skills, and incomes. They provide raw materials, monetary donations, and support for community-based enterprises that related to ecotourism (Ebrahimi & Khalifah, 2014). Monitoring and evaluation are crucial for project success, sustainability, and policy development. Community participation in monitoring and evaluation significantly impacts project lifetime by providing tools for addressing activities. Community involvement in ecotourism projects aids in identifying social and economic effects, strengthens the relationship between planning, management, and beneficiaries, and increases beneficiaries' accountability for sustainable development (Kyalo et al., 2016; Ojok & Basheka, 2016 ; Ofosu & Ntiamoah, 2016).

Ethiopia possesses tremendous ecotourism resources such as rich history, diverse cultures, stunning landscapes, and unique wildlife (Tesfaye, 2017). Wof-Washa Forest is endowed with tremendous tourism resources and used as a shelter for rare and endangered fauna (Goshme and Yihune, 2018). SUNARMA established CBET project in Wof-Washa Forest by collaborate with communities and government official in 2006 to reduce the overexploitation via offer job opportunities (Spooner, 2022).

Scholars have studied about Wof-Washa Forest's potential for CBET project, community overexploitation threats, and resident attitudes towards HWC and problematic wildlife. However, comprehensive research on community participation in ecotourism development is lacking. Additionally, Garrod (2014) and Sunu et al. (2019) studied the role of community participation in ecotourism development. Garrod (2014) found that effective leadership, empowering communities, linking economic benefits to conservation, and allowing community involvement at all stages of the project cycle were best practices, but it didn't explore their role at each phase. Sunu et al. (2019) described the role of communities at



planning, implementation, and evaluation stages, but overlooked the initiation phase. So, the researcher motivates to addressed the current status of community participation in ecotourism development with their roles at each stage of ecotourism project development at Wof-Washa Forest.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Description of Study Area**

Wof-Washa Priority National Forest is a state forest in central highland 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 Basonawerena districts, and distributed across 14 subdistricts. Residents are known for their agricultural activities and livestock production with beekeeping (Tilahun, 2018).

#### **3.2. Research Design and Approach**

The study employed a descriptive design with a mixed approach to analyse community participation in ecotourism growth at Wof-Washa Forest. The reason to used descriptive design was to identify and describe the current conditions and characteristics of community involvement in ecotourism development. The study's credibility and reliability were ensured through a mixed approach, i.e. utilizing various data collection tools to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

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

The study targeted 2996 household heads who reside 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 involvement in the Wof-washa forest, comfort for CBET development, proximity to the forest, and household life depend on it. Besides, the researcher also targeted the manager of Basonaworena, Tarmaber, and Ankober districts tourism offices for semi-structured interview.

#### **3.4. Sampling Technique**

The study utilized stratified sampling to categorized households into homogenous groups based on geographic settlement, and dividing them into Goshu-Ager, Keyit, Mescha, and Wof-Washa Genet Kebeles. The proportional allocation method was used to divide sample sizes to each kebeles based on their size of population. Systematic used to select sample from each kebeles and purposive to select manager of the tourism office.

#### **3.5. Sample Size Determination**

The researcher used the rule of thumb 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). Rule of thumb formula 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 study utilized 300 household heads from selected forest-touched kebeles as representative samples for collecting data using questionnaires. The study used stratified sampling to divide respondents into homogenous groups based on geographic settlement. The 300 sample were distributed among each kebele in proportion to their size using a proportional allocation formula.

Table 1: Four selected kebeles population size and their sample. Source: Author survey, 2024

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%

### 3.6. Methods of Data Analysis

The study used descriptive statistics to analyse 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, and providing a general interpretation of the mean score based on rule of thumb ranges. The numerical values of these options are strongly disagreed (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.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Demographic Descriptions

Table 2: Demographic feature of survey respondents. Source: Author survey, 2024

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

As table 2, the majority of respondents aged between 26-35 years, it denoted that they are experienced and younger. So, they provide reliable information about the area to the study.

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 project challenging.

#### 4.2. The Current Level of Community Participation in Ecotourism Project Development

The researcher applied Arnstein's Ladder of Participation model to assess current level of community involvement in ecotourism development by using mean value of participation levels and the sum of rating scales of items. The model consists three major levels (degree of non-participation, tokenism, and citizen-power). Respondents were asked to rate their level of participation using a five-Likert scale. Based on mean score, the level that has high mean value represent the current level of participation in the destination. The analysis shows that the current level of community participation is moderate, because the high mean value of tokenism (Moderate level) (3.66), surpassing citizen power (2.43), and non-participation (2.4). Look at the following Figures.

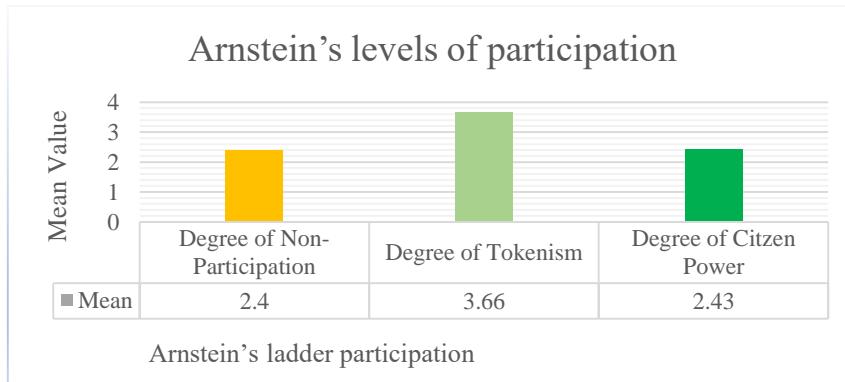


Figure 2: The difference among mean value of each participation level. Source: Author's survey, 2024

On the other hand, the researcher utilized the sum of rating scales to assess community participation in ecotourism development.

Table 3: Level of community participation based on sum values of items. Source: Author survey, 2024

Level of Participation	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Low (16-36)	25	10.4	10.4	10.4
Moderate (37-58)	192	80.0	80.0	90.4
High (59-80)	23	9.6	9.6	100.0
Total	240	100.0	100.0	
Valid	240	100.0	100.0	

Note: Level of participation is measured by Likert scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) for each 16 items; the minimum rating was 16 and the maximum was 80.



Table 3 shows that 80% of Wof-Washa Forest residents believe their participation in CBET development is moderate, with 10.4% and 9.6% feeling low and high levels respectively. This result similar with interviewees, it indicates a medium level of community involvement in ecotourism development. According to the findings, the current level of community participation in Wof-Washa Forest ecotourism project is degree of tokenism (moderate). This implies that local residents have some influence but the final decision is made by high-hierarchy personnel. Community involvement can be categorized into three levels: informing, consultation, and placation. Informing involves a one-way flow of information from decision-makers to residents, while consultation allows local communities to express their views. Placation involves consultation with decision-makers but retains the final decision. Despite these levels of community involvement, these groups have minimal influence over decisions, making them obliquely involved in ecotourism initiatives.

#### **4.3. The Role of Community Participation in Ecotourism Projects Development**

##### **4.3.1. The Role of Community Participation at Initiation of Ecotourism Project**

Table 4: Role of community participation at initiation of the ecotourism projects. Source:

Author survey, 2024

<b>Descriptive Statistics</b>			
<b>Statements/ Items/ Parameters</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Identification resource for CBET project.	240	3.57	1.122
Identification of social and economic needs from CBET.	240	3.86	1.003
Initial discussions and needs assessments for ecotourism.	240	3.78	1.068
Raising awareness about CBET programs	240	3.80	1.068
<b>Initiation Phase</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>3.7531</b>	<b>0.8692</b>
Valid N (listwise)	240		

As table 4, the average mean and standard deviation value each item that described about community role in ecotourism development at the initiation stage is ranged 3.4 and 4.2, and close to 1.1 respectively. It refers, the Wof-Washa Forest community played a moderate's role in the development of CBET project, through identifying potential resources, addressing social and economic needs, participating in initial discussions, and raising awareness. This concurs with interviewed response, the community discussed with government officials and NGO employees on ecotourism projects by focusing on economic, social, and environmental aspects of ecotourism project (Interview, April, 2024).

It also concur with Sunu et al., (2019) findings, the initiation phase of ecotourism development is crucial, when stakeholders like beneficiaries and the host community participate. This helps the community understand the project and increases their commitment. Community can serve as a source of information and a resource for gathering information about the state of the resource base, existing tourism activities, protection measures, and local concerns about ecotourism development.



Figure 3: Public meeting between community and other stakeholders. Source: Tourism Office, 2024

#### 4.3.2. The Role of Community Participation at Planning of Ecotourism Project

Table 5: Role of community participation at planning of the ecotourism project. Source: Author survey, 2024

Descriptive Statistics				
Statements/ Items/ Parameters	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	
Shaping of the CBET project.	240	3.91	.953	
Setting clear goals and objectives for CBET project.	240	3.85	1.029	
Evaluated ecotourism plan reflects community inputs.	240	3.82	.951	
Clearly defined the community roles and responsibilities.	240	3.75	1.011	
Make decision about design and implementation of the CBET.	240	3.86	1.021	
<b>Planning Phase</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>3.8375</b>	<b>0.7674</b>	
Valid N (listwise)	240			

Table 5 indicated, the mean and standard deviation values of the parameters that stated about role of communities in ecotourism development during the planning stage is lied between 3.40 and 4.20, and near to 1 respectively. This implies that the community that settled within Wof-Washa forest actively participated in shaping the CBET project, in setting clear goals and objectives for the ecotourism project, evaluate ecotourism project plan whether reflects the input and priorities of community, defining the roles and responsibilities of community members in project implementation, and make decision about the design and implementation of the ecotourism projects.

The interviewees response also supported, residents were involved in the planning of ecotourism establishments by providing suggestions on the goals and objectives of CBET, identify responsibilities of the various stakeholders, and making decisions on the way of ecotourism practicing, but their involvement was not significantly influenced (Interview, April, 2024). In line with this Joy (2022) and Garrod (2014) stated that communities are participate in ecotourism programs in numerous ways by providing information or ideas that are utilized as planning input, such as resource status, protection, scope, and major stakeholder groups.

Sunu et al., (2019) also concluded that incorporating communities' viewpoints into ecotourism planning and development is a crucial component of sustainable ecotourism development. They have done several activities, such as providing evidence to the public regarding the planned development of the ecotourism project, shaping ecotourism project objectives with community priorities, formulating the development goal, and defining the problem. Generally, the engagement of the local community in the planning of the ecotourism project is essential.



Figure 4: Public discussion among community, experts, and NGO bodies. Source: Tourism office, 2024.

#### **4.3.3. The Role of Community Participation at Implementation of Ecotourism Project**

Table 6: Role of community participation at the implementation of ecotourism. Source: Author survey, 2024

<b>Descriptive Statistics</b>			
<b>Statements/ Items/ Parameters</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Provide voice on decisions throughout the ecotourism operation.	240	3.90	1.097
Incorporated local knowledge and skills into the design of ecotourism.	240	3.73	1.021
Actively provide labour and resources to CBET project.	240	3.93	1.020
Managing the day-to-day operations of the ecotourism initiative.	240	3.82	.982
Marketing and promoting the ecotourism project to potential visitors.	240	4.00	1.023
<b>Implementation Phase</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>3.8767</b>	<b>0.8377</b>
Valid N (listwise)	240		

Based on table 6, the average mean and standard deviation values of the items that stated resident role during the implementation of ecotourism is ranged 3.40 to 4.20, and close to 1.1 respectively. This indicated that the local community that reside in and around the forest were actively involved in ecotourism growth through: provide voice on essential decisions throughout the operation, applied local knowledge and skills into ecotourism operation, actively providing labour and other resources. In addition, managing the day-to-day operations and also marketing and promoting the ecotourism project to potential visitors.

This result is consistent with expert's response, community are moderately participated in the operation of the ecotourism project by coordinating with SUNARMA via offered labour force,

raw materials, and generating ideas. Besides, promoting the ecotourism project through offered local and traditional products in specific market site for example at Menelik Window, followed day to day operation, as well as solved conflicts via traditional way (Interview, April, 2024). It concur with Sunu et al., (2019) findings, community participation is necessary for the success of ecotourism programs throughout the implementation phase. They help through provision of raw materials, monetary donation, handling possible conflicts of interest, ensured equitable rewards, supplying skilled labour, creating community-based enterprises associated with ecotourism, and moral support. Involving them in planning and execution ensures sustainability, empowers people, and boosts knowledge, skills, and incomes.



Figure 5: Community participation during lodge building. Source: Tourism Office, 2024.

#### **4.3.4. Role of Community Participation at Monitoring and Evaluation of CBET Project**

Table 7: Role of community at the monitoring and evaluation of ecotourism. Source: Author survey, 2024

<b>Descriptive Statistics</b>			
<b>Statements/ Items/ Parameters</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Provide feedback on the progress and effectiveness of ecotourism.	240	3.84	.982
Identify challenges and propose remedy for improvement of CBET.	240	3.88	1.019
Evaluating social, economic, and environmental impacts of CBET.	240	3.79	1.043
Evaluate whether community's input is considered at ecotourism.	240	3.75	1.056
<b>Monitoring and Evaluation</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>3.8135</b>	<b>0.8223</b>
Valid N (listwise)	240		

As table 7, the mean average and standard deviation of parameters that describe resident responsibilities in monitoring and evaluation of ecotourism is ranged from 3.4 to 4.2 and close to 1.05 respectively. It implies that the local resident who resided in Wof-Washa forest partly participated in the development of ecotourism by: provide feedback on the progress and effectiveness of the project, identify challenges and propose solutions to improve of the CBET project, evaluating the social, economic, and environmental impacts of ecotourism. Additionally, through analysing and evaluating the community's input was considered.

As key informants, residents are participated by conducting public meetings with professional bodies, and employee of SUNARMA, and selecting their representatives from each kebeles to meet with other responsible bodies. In addition, they discussed each other by focusing on the outcome of the ecotourism project and providing suggestions about its prospects. However, experts often overlook the community input, a major issue (Interview, April, 2024).

Kyalo et al. (2016) also stated local people's involvement in the monitoring and evaluation phases of ecotourism growth is crucial for sustainable ecotourism development. Because, they possess valuable knowledge and can be excellent information gatherers, this allowing for better observation of wildlife and identifying economic and social impacts. This involvement strengthens the link between ecotourism planning and management and its beneficiaries, typically local residents. Involving locals in ecotourism monitoring and evaluation also gives them a stronger incentive to plan and manage activities sustainably. Resident participation in this stage is crucial for the sustainable development of ecotourism projects in the destinations.



Figure 6: Public discussion between community and experts. Sources: Tourism Office, 2024

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the level and role of community participation in ecotourism project development. Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis, the level of community involvement leans towards a degree of tokenism (moderate level), as described by Arnstein's model. Therefore, communities were participating in ecotourism growth through either informing, consultation, or placation ways. This implies that most decisions about ecotourism project are made by higher-level officials with little community influence. The communities were moderately involved at every phase of ecotourism project via accomplished several activities. Generally, community has played several roles in the development of ecotourism projects in any destinations.

This study makes some significant and insightful theoretical contributions. First, it made a comprehensive review of the existing body of knowledge about community participation in ecotourism development. This attempt was help to successfully identify research gaps that pave the way for future research. Second, its findings build on the existing evidence, i.e., without the participation of the community, CBET project cannot be achieved.

Third, the study indicated that Sherry Arnstein's model is an essential instrument to describe and determine the participation level of the community in ecotourism development. As this model indicated that the current status of community involvement in ecotourism development leans towards a degree of tokenism in Wof-Washa Forest, i.e. communities are engaged in



ecotourism initiatives, but only superficially. Therefore, Sherry Arnstein's model is a useful tool for clearly understanding the level of community participation in ecotourism development by providing understandable description to each participation levels.

Fourth, the study highlighted the numerous roles and responsibilities of community that carried-out at each stage of ecotourism project development, and bridging the existing research gaps (Sunu et al., 2019; Garrod 2014; Joy, 2022). This implicated that the community involvement at every phase of ecotourism development is crucial. Additionally, it also makes some insightful practical contributions by provides empirical evidence on community participation in ecotourism project development. It also offering mitigation strategies for policymakers and industry experts to increase community involvement from tokenism to citizen power. i.e. policymakers should be working cooperatively with other stakeholders to increase the role of community from moderate to significant influence on ecotourism project by improving opportunity aspects via reducing challenging factors.

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