

CASE STUDY 73

Strengthening identity and economic development of the Somba ethnics in the North of Benin through community-based ecotourism

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Country & Sector: Benin, Tourism

Context

SNV Benin started only recently (2010) its intervention in tourism sector as part of a SNV West Africa Regional Tourism Program after an absence of several years. In the framework of this program SNV Benin wants to catch-up together with SNV Mali and Guinea Bissau on the experiences with Pro Poor Sustainable Tourism of other SNV countries (Ghana and several East African countries)

Following the SNV strategy to 'localise' interventions, much of the work in tourism sector – the shaping and execution of the intervention–is carried out in close collaboration with local services providers.

The following case is drawn from the experience of the NGO ECO-BENIN, our local service provider and partner with which we work on the development of the Atacora-Donga destination in the North of Benin. The destination is accommodating on of the best wildlife parks in West Africa, the Pendjari Park, and several sites of natural beauty (waterfalls) and of cultural value scattered in the beautiful landscape of the Atacora mountain range. The site, Koussoukoingou (shortly Koussou), from which the experience is drawn, has a number of well-preserved traditional dwellings – Tata Sombas - renowned for their typical architecture.

The Koussoukoingou experience is also a good example of sustainability of SNV work since the site has benefited in the past from SNV interventions in the framework of a rural development programs located in the district and got some specific support in the framework of the SNV BATOB program.

The case study seeks to inform the reader on an experience with community-based ecotourism as a driver for local economic development.

Context and objectives

The Beninese architectural heritage is composed of a variety of dwelling types of which the most famous is the one commonly known as Tata Somba. As a matter of fact the Tata Somba regroups a number of dwellings with similar overall architectural features but specific details according to Somba ethnic subgroups. The Somba people are known for their particular methods of construction and their rich traditions. Their homes resemble small castles. They often have a variety of floors, a roof terrace and very thick walls, to protect the inhabitants from intruders in a not so long ago past. Their villages are constructed in contrast to what is considered a more typical way of building in Africa, as the houses are built far apart from each other spread out over the land, rather than close together in the form of a village.

Nowadays, Tata Somba dwellings are veritable witnesses of the past and the first identity of the Somba ethnic. Somba people however have begun to copy modern architecture and now the combed oblong slots of sheet metal leaves covered houses are changing in rapid tempo the appearance

of the region. This has caused the traditional dwellings to be abandoned and which holds a high risk that these long-established techniques might be lost for ever. Growing poverty, as result of ongoing destruction of the natural resources through farming and hunting activities, leading to rural exodus, was stated to be the main reason for increasing abandonment of the Tata Somba dwellings. To find appropriate answers to the continuing loss of this cultural heritage, ECO-BENIN conducted a survey in 2006 and the findings of this survey underscored the need to include Tata Somba dwellings as a central element of an ecotourism scheme.

In 2007, ECO-BENIN has set up a community-based organisation (CBO) called "la Perle de l'Atacora" in Koussou village in order to give lead to the development of ecotourism products owned and managed by villagers. The village of Koussoukoingou is part of the Commune of Boukombé, situated in the department of Atacora in the North-West of Benin. It is located on the overland route that links the district town of Natitingou (25 km) to the town of Boukombé (14 km) and further on to the border with Togo. The district of Koussoukoingou is composed of 10 villages with an approximate surface of 278 km² and counts approximately 5200 inhabitants. Population is very young in spite of massive emigration with less than the 49% of the population older of less than 40 years. Koussoukoingou village is composed of 45 households of which 35% are member of the CBO and involved in the community-based ecotourism project.

Being situated in the Atacora region, a region experiencing a growing interest by tour operators, and being located right on the border of the route from Togo to the renowned Pendjari National Parc, Koussou has seen the number of its visitors increasing steadily.

When the ECO-BENIN team arrived in the village for the preliminary diagnostics, they noted three points more or less characteristic for the rural ecotourism planning context: 1) People overestimated the positive material and non-material effects of tourism; 2) People underestimated the negative impacts on environment, society and culture of tourism; 3) Just one person among the villagers had experience in tourism and catering. This man later became the president of the CBO giving the association a professional foundation.

Intervention logic and methods

In the diagnostic and planning phase of the project, ECO-BENIN team paid considerable attention to awareness raising and opinion building. First of all, population had to be made aware of the technical feasibility of (eco)tourism but also of the risks local realities were presenting: unique attraction in process of disappearance, poor living standards, low education level, no running water and electricity. Given those facts, the only realistic option seemed to be the development of small-scale and low-budget type of tourism based on catering and housing in families (home stay), short hiking trails within the village and in the surrounding nature and day-long handicraft workshops. The presentation of this model as the most suitable and also desirable model went along with numerous village meetings, explaining again and again the idea of community-based ecotourism and expected outcomes from it. The support team and the president of the CBO invested a lot of time and work in convincing the population that tourism is a high-risk business, that it can highly volatile with its development often depending on external factors nobody can influence. With the capacities and means on the spot, big and quick money resulting from tourism wasn't realistic. However, as experience in Koussou showed, a little money can make a big difference for the rural people, living with less than 1US\$ per day. To be on the safe side, the population agreed to

set up tourism services as a complementary income source and with a minimum of investment and maintenance costs.

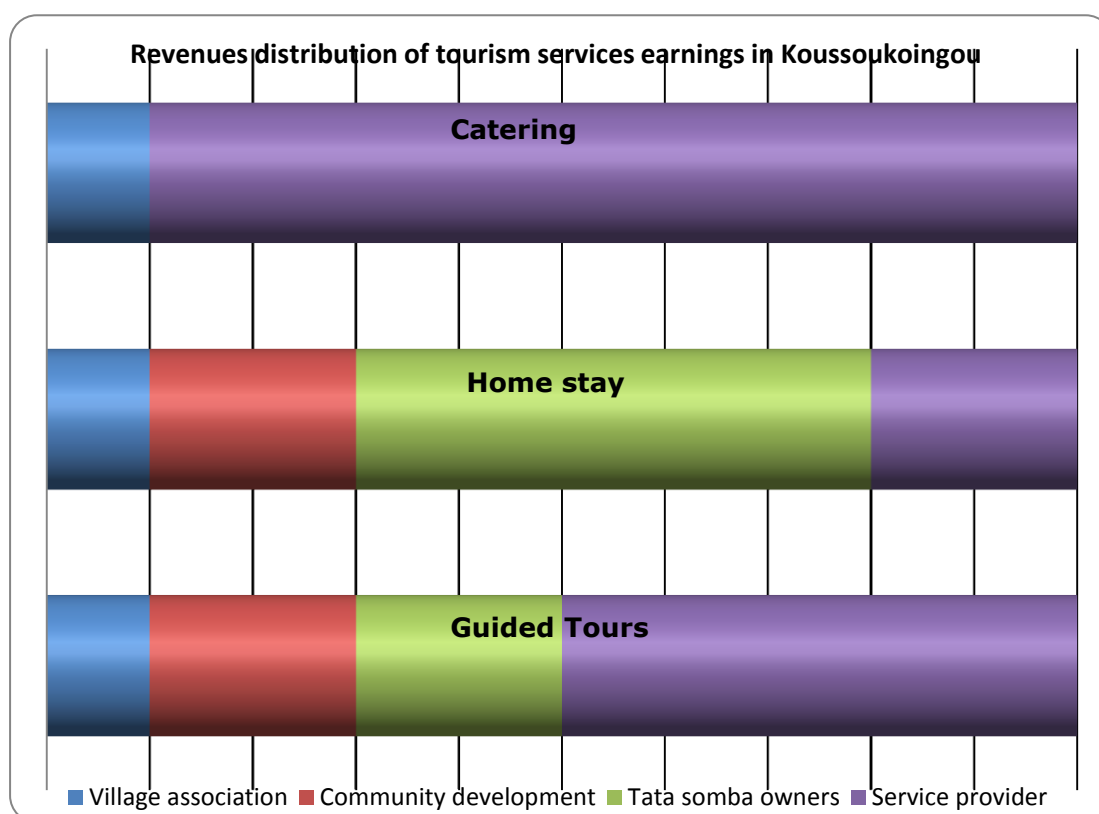
The preconditions for subsequent participatory planning and implementation steps were created by systematic community training and empowerment in close collaboration with the CBO. Originally composed of 18 men and 15 women from the village, the association now unites Tata Somba- and land-owners, eco-guides, caterers as well as craftspeople, being all interested in the development eco-touristic products and services in the villages. After a first series of meeting and training workshop, further planning steps were discussed between support team and CBO to integrate aspects of sustainability, simplicity and adaptability in the products and services.

During the implementation phase in the beginning of 2007, it was decided that CBO should take charge of creating a visitor centre and should conceive hikes and villages tours. In the following period, while the technical implementation was rather in the hands of the CBO, the support team provided trainings (guiding, housekeeping, catering, first aids, hygiene, small business management, waste management) and a some small material support (dry toilets, mattress, sheet of bed, covers, robust mats, mattresses, rechargeable lamps). After this the CBO became the official and only management and administration body for ecotourism in Koussoukoingou.

With the build-up of local planning and management capacities and its experience and lessons-learnt throughout the last years, the CBO members have developed a growing self-confidence and enlarged its intervention to the mobilization of resources for locally initiated micro projects.

Results and success factors

Broad effect



There are direct and indirect economic benefits and nuisances that arise from community-based ecotourism in Koussoukoingou. A jointly setup and

adapted revenue distribution scheme is therefore key in order to avoid conflicts. In that sense, individuals, households and the community should benefit from ecotourism according to their contribution to developed product and services. The opposite graph illustrates the current revenues distribution schemes.

An eco-guide taking a group of visitors on a Tata Somba tour in the village would therefore get 50% of the fees, whereas the Tata Somba-owners receive 20% as compensation and encouragement to maintain their buildings. Hence, with each guided tour a significant part of the revenues is shared between eco-guides and Tata Somba owners respectively. The latter can even maximise their benefits if visitors stay overnight in their dwellings. Eco-guides and Tata Somba owners reported in unison that living conditions of their families substantially improved with the additional income arising from tourism. With most of the population living from agriculture, the tourism-related revenues, helps them to balance losses and income gaps in the dry season (which is at the same time the high season for tourism in the region). The revenue gained from tourism is usually invested in food security, household and schooling equipment.

Other economic effects arise from the serving of meals in the Tata Somba. As most of the food ingredients are purchased on the spot, local retailers benefit from additional turnover visitors bring about. Moreover, local craftsmen and women benefit increasingly from the purchase of their products by visitors (such as bracelets, slingshots etc.).

Indirect economic benefits are created by the 20% revenue share from any ecotouristic service or product delivered (except catering) allocated to "Community Development Fund". The fund is administered by the CBO who also acts as a village development organization and whose functionality is assured by a separate 10% share of revenues from all guided tours. The money is saved for investments in a variety of local development initiatives like the help to the enrolment of kids to school through the financing of school supplies and homework support, the improvement of the access to water by the installation of an impounding device linking the village to a water source and the drilling of a well and by improving the sanitation through the construction of toilets. All these development initiatives and more were co-financed by tourism revenues.

A landmark step towards food security and livelihood stability is demonstrated by the garden project "les Jardins de Koussou", initiated in 2009. The idea for this project was advanced by the female CBO members, mostly working in catering services for visitors. They were looking for greater autonomy in the access to vegetables for their catering activities and for their proper families. The general shortage of vegetables in the village is worsened by the distance to local markets. The funding of the initiative was a joint action of the CBO and "La Via Natura", a French organization for sustainable camping-sites. On several plots, 29 participants organised in 11 groups are now cultivating peppers, potatoes, cauliflowers, tomatoes, onions, spinaches, green beans, carrots, salads and aubergines. Having achieved a remarkable 6.160 kg harvest in 2009, the project is being intensified.



Some members of the CBO working in their potato garden

The growing reputation that Koussoukoingou gained from its successful ecotourism scheme also facilitated other infrastructural improvements in the village such as electricity and ICT. In April 2010, a rural school electrification system is successfully providing photovoltaic electricity to the two boarding schools of the village. In addition, the CBO benefited of 10 computers and 2 printers in order to introduce the young village population to modern information and communication technologies.

Among the social and cultural effects of tourism in Koussoukoingou, it first of all has to be mentioned that villagers feel honoured by the visitors coming from far away only to experience their lifestyle and culture. Population reports that this significantly fostered their self-esteem. This is an important effect especially with regard to the younger generation who increasingly consider their culture and way of life as "primitive" or "backwards" compared to urban and Western culture. A "Youth Nature Club" has been founded, involving children and youths from the village. The members of Youth Nature Club in Koussoukoingou receive environmental education and awareness training and participate in environmental campaigns e.g. for proper waste disposal, re-forestation, targeting in particular the adult population.

Qualified jobs in tourism

Without any touristic structures present, the project literally had to start from zero. With an emphasis on ecotourism as a complementary income source - although with a growing importance - service providers are only partly dependant on tourism activities, pursuing a variety of different other livelihood strategies. Eco-guides, home owners and caterers were all trained and eventually certified. Without a license, local people are not allowed to guide tours or host visitors, in order to assure service quality and fairness to those who had to make investments in terms of time and efforts to get their own license. In 2009, the Koussoukoingou-project lists the following trained and certified ecotourism service providers:

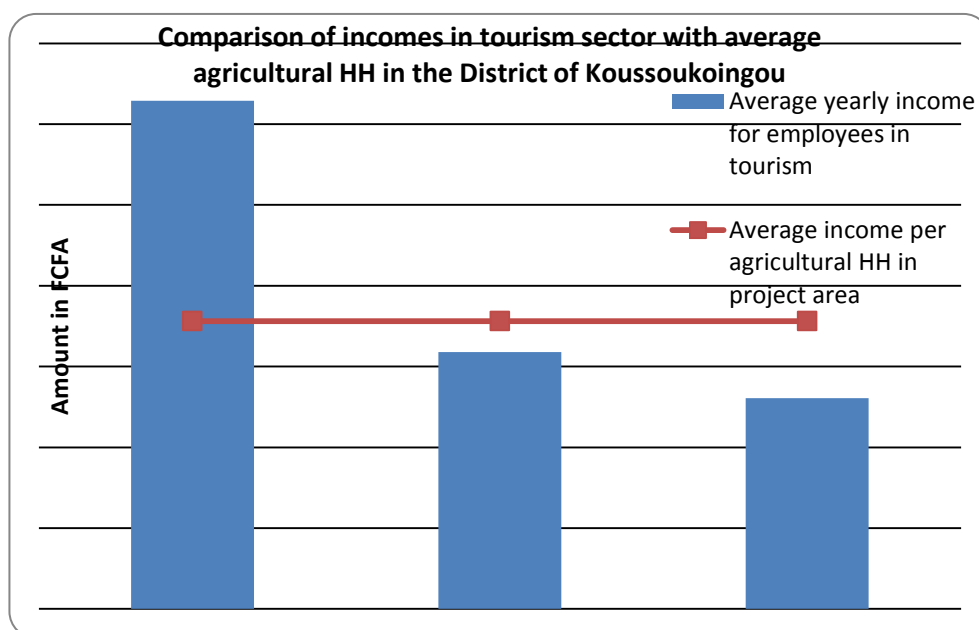


Certified eco-guides with their badges

- 9 eco-guides trained in welcoming and guiding visitors ;
- 4 women specialized in catering and 1 professional cook;
- 6 Tata Somba owners trained in welcoming and hosting visitors;
- 4 Tata Somba owners who open their houses to visits;
- 5 craftsmen and women who offer their handicraft to tourists;
- 8 women for house-keeping and house maintenance services.

The revenue generated from different services exceeds by far the average agricultural income in the area, providing a financial buffer to compensate income shocks. Comparison between agricultural and tourist incomes shows that guides earn nearly twice the average annual income of agriculture HH in the district, while the earnings of caterers and home-stay providers stay a little bit below. Figures confirm the importance of ecotourism activities to villages HH and its important to stress that tourism is an additional income source and most of the villages working in tourism are still continuing their farming activities (see graph below). In addition,

touristic service providers enjoy a high reputation as they interact with the generally well-respected visitors. With the Tata Somba ecolodge currently under construction, it is expected that an important number of additional tourism related jobs in management, marketing, guiding and catering will be created in near future.



Increasing economic impacts

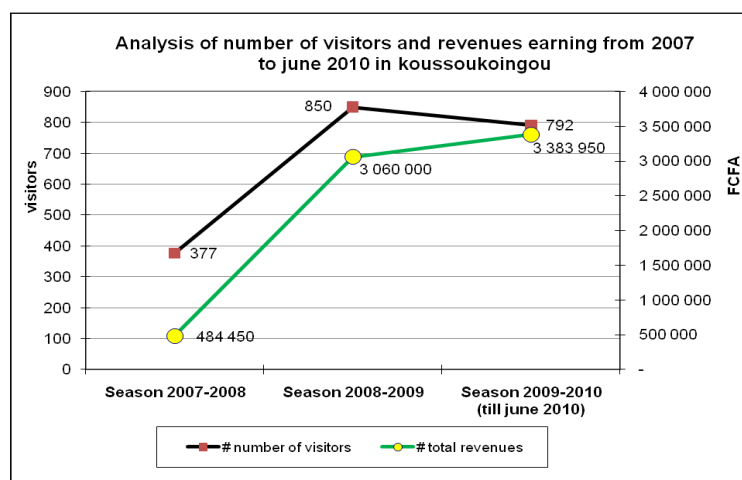
The opposite graph shows the development of the number of visitors and revenues. It is impressive to see that tourism revenues are increasing while the number of visitors has decreased in 2010, meaning visitors are spending more money through longer stays and/or the additional consumption of services and products, justifying the efforts put into the diversification of the touristic offer by Koussoukoingou CBO.

With the current ecotourism structures established in Koussoukoingou, all tourism-related services create a profit. There are no loans or investments to be paid back, and all services are carried out on demand.

Lessons Learnt

Strengthen identity

By welcoming visitors to experience local lifestyle and tradition, the Koussoukoingou population became more and more aware of their social and cultural richness. People report to recognize the value of their cultural heritage, all ahead the famous Tata Somba that serve as a prime example of how cultural identity can be enhanced by responsible tourism. With the steady increase of tourism from 2007 on, lodging options for visitors became scarce. This motivated community members to build two new Tata Somba houses in 2008 where none had been built for 30 years. The owners of these new Tata Somba have already joined the CBO to offer home-stays and signs are numerous that this



project will continue to stimulate the conservation of local building traditions through the added value that can be gained by tourism.

Minimise damage and environmental compatibility

In order to avoid begging and to facilitate a healthy relation between hosts and visitors, it is strictly forbidden to give money and small gifts to the village children. Instead, the latter are strictly advised to donate their gifts to the CBO who records all monetary and non-monetary donations from visitors and subsequently ensures a balanced distribution, primary to deprived families and schools. "Walking and watching" characterizes most the guided tours offered by the CBO. Concerning the housing of the visitors in the Tata Somba, comfort is kept very basic and natural. Visitors sleep open air on the roof, using robust mats, mattresses as well as oil- and rechargeable lamps. Environmental compatibility of sanitation is sought by combustible dry toilets for the visitors. For other tourism-related waste, a village waste agent is considered to supervise the established measures. Beyond the minimization of negative environmental impacts, the project in Koussoukoingou also aims to foster pro-actively environmental reconstitution. As an ideal consequence, the usually negative ecological balance of tourism would not only be neutralized but even turned into positive in Koussoukoingou. Since June 2008, the association members have already planted about 1100 seedlings (local tree species) on the land around the future Tata Somba ecolodge.

Deal with gender Justice

45% of the CBO members are women. They are involved in all of the activities. Two of them even guide tourists. In addition they reported to have gained more self-esteem and respect among family and community members. It is also worth noting that in the beginning, their husbands tried to put their wives off from engaging in tourism. But with the first revenues arising from their work, those women reported that now they become even encouraged by their husbands to do some side-work in tourism! The women who have already been in the village association from the beginning additionally reported to be considered by other women to be forerunners. As a consequence, those women are increasingly and seriously asked by other women about the way their engagement in the CBO and ecotourism works out and how to participate. This indicates that changes are under way, enhancing the self-confidence and respect of the women in the village, going along with an economic autonomy. A remarkable change in the self-confidence and empowerment of the village women is also illustrated by the successful garden project that has been initiated by the female members of the CBO. Even if assistance is still necessary, the prior self-mobilization of the women states a high degree of participation and empowerment a development unthinkable a couple of years ago.

