

## Tourism's Impact on Human Wellbeing in Caprivi (Namibia)

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"We liked what you did because you are giving us information. And you gave us lifts," a local chief from Ngonga village told me. What he meant was that after conducting research there for 6 months, I did not just leave without a trace after getting the data: I organized sessions with villagers to present preliminary results. It seems simple and obvious, but sadly happens much less often than it should. And the second part of his statement? Well, I had a car to do my research and when I had free space, I would give rides to people. It was the least I could do to start giving something back to the communities, and still seemed insufficient. However, I've seen many cars simply zoom by leaving sand clouds behind. So, my little contribution was very much appreciated. It was good to hear that because, at times, I get frustrated being "just" a Ph.D. researcher witnessing the challenges of life in the Caprivi. Indeed, that's part of my research focus.

I am trying to understand how nature-based tourism impacts the wellbeing of local residents living around national parks in the Caprivi province of Namibia. Namibia gained its independence in 1990, and is home to 2 million people unevenly distributed over the country's 824,000 km<sup>2</sup> (almost 6 times the size of Florida). It has abundant mineral resources but a harsh climate, which represents a challenge for people living from the land. This has contributed to extreme income disparity, and most rural people struggle

to make a living. In the mid-1990s, communities were granted rights to benefit from wildlife within communal lands. Improving the lives of rural people entails finding a balance between use and conservation of natural resources. Such strategies often incorporate tourism activities to spur local economic development, because tourism success depends on intact natural resources. However, does tourism actually improve local residents' lives?

Most assessments of tourism impacts rely on relatively easily



measured, but limited indicators, such as income or employment. I wanted to consider the issue more holistically. Following focus group discussions and a pilot survey in 2007, I designed a study focused on human wellbeing to capture multidimensional socioeconomic impacts. It provides a more accurate, albeit complex, representation of how tourism impacts people's lives. With the help of local research assistants, I conducted 468 interviews in 5 communal areas between March and July 2008. Preliminary results suggest that while tourism may improve the wellbeing of individuals directly involved in the industry, community-wide impacts seem fairly limited. However, it is possible that differences exist between real and perceived impacts. Tourism is unlikely to be the silver bullet to reduce poverty in the region, but it does have a role to play. After completing the data analysis, I hope to return to Namibia to share final results with the communities, NGOs and government agencies in order to strengthen tourism's contribution to local people.

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