



Capturing Community Participation in Rural Tourism through PRA: A Study in Meghalaya

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ABSTRACT

Rural tourism as an agri-business enterprise has potential for socio-economic development of rural area and yields numerous benefits to strengthen culture, livelihood and technological outlook of communities, for which sustainability in the development venture depends on community participation. The study was taken up in two popular rural tourism centers viz., Mawlynnong (cleanest village of Asia) and Sohliya (Strawberry village) of Meghalaya state that has heavy tourist traffic; to carry out community stakeholder analysis of rural tourism. Through key informant technique, personal interview and observation, 15 categories of community stakeholders were identified. This was followed by a community level meeting of the key stakeholders and few residents in each tourism center where PRA exercises were conducted for information generation and discussion. It was found that community stakeholders organize rural tourism for various reasons through various means. The village council (*Dorbar Shong*) performed multiple roles and had high influence in village. Efforts in mobilizing community to undertake homestays and *dhabas*, emphasis on creation of exclusive tourism cooperatives within village to coordinate vital activities between stakeholders may ensure effective and sustainable participation by community members.

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture alone cannot help farmers to come out of distress (Barbuddhe & Singh, 2014) and help India achieve its goal of Doubling Farmers' Income (Chetan et al., 2020). The need to explore non-farm activities to serve as an alternative source of income has been emphasized many times (Yugang et al., 2021; Kobba et al., 2020). Rural tourism is one such non-farm activity which can be done by individual farmers or on cooperative basis to generate extra income with the same piece of land available. Rural tourism is tourism in rural areas showcasing rural life, art forms, culture and traditions of place, farm activities; by which tourists' share-in village life. With urban population seeking detachment from city life and willing to experience rural lifestyle, closer to nature, rural tourism

is an evolving enterprise (Singh et al., 2016). With abundant natural and human resources available for tourism promotion within the villages of India, rural tourism industry has the capacity for employment to locals in terms of attractions, accessibility, accommodation and amenities regarded as 4A's of tourism (Andrianto & Sugiyama, 2016); to supplement family income, women empowerment, household decision making, enhanced participation in educational activity (Slathia et al., 2015), thereby making all-inclusive rural development possible. Meghalaya, with its charming landscape, cascading waterfalls, rich traditional ethnicity and hospitable locals has tremendous potential to offer rural tourism. However, local community's involvement in rural tourism is important for proper tourism planning and development. Community participation in rural tourism is the involvement of

local people in the planning and development activities, to contribute to solve problems locally with available resources. Resident communities have a major role in the decision-making process (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007) of development programs. The effectiveness of alternate extension model is ensured by addressing the stakeholder's preferences for its validation and further replication. Choi & Sirakaya (2005); Edgell et al., (2008) emphasized the importance of community participation to tourism planning and development for positive economic, environmental and social effects and development of the whole ecosystem.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in two popular tourism destinations in the Khasi Hills Division of Meghalaya viz., Mawlynnong in East Khasi Hills district and Sohliya in Ri-Bhoi district. From each of the tourism centers, community stakeholders with a significant stake in the project were identified using techniques like key informant interview, personal interviews and direct observations. The people contacted in this stage were members of *Dorbar Shnong* (Village Council), taxi drivers, eatery owners, members of farmers' association, were interacted on a one-to-one basis. Through this exercise a list of community stakeholders was delineated, followed by a meeting at the community level where representatives of the stakeholder categories participated. Certain Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises were carried out in the meeting which led to identification of few other stakeholder categories. For Mawlynnong village 27 community members were present in the meeting, while in Sohliya 21 members participated. Their responses were utilized for the analysis of stakeholder items and results were provided. For soliciting the first three categories of information, methodology described in ODA (1995) was employed.

1. Stakeholders' description: The stakeholder categories were characterized through their roles and interests in rural tourism. Roles implied the activity performed with respect to the stake in rural tourism. Interest is a stake or involvement in an undertaking, especially a financial one. The likely impact of these interests on tourism activities project was highlighted.

2. Stakeholders' prioritization: The identified stakeholders were prioritised based on their 'influence on' and 'importance to' rural tourism. 'Influence' was measured as formal or informal power possessed by a stakeholder category in terms of socio-economic status, leadership and degree of resource control whereas, 'importance' was referred to the priority of needs, expectations and benefits that are to be addressed first for a stakeholder category in relation to rural tourism. Participants were asked to rate community stakeholder categories in terms of their importance and influence in rural tourism on a scale of 0-10. Scores assigned to the stakeholders by the participants were plotted on a graph with influence on X-axis and importance on Y-axis. With the mid-point 5 as the criteria for dividing the score as high or low, a 2X2 matrix was constructed with 4 quadrants.

3. Stakeholders' participation: Stakeholders' participation was defined in terms of degree of involvement of the stakeholder in an event/activity related to rural tourism. In order to assess the involvement of community stakeholders, a total of 5 tourism related activi-

ties in each village were identified during community meeting. The level of participation of the stakeholders in the activities was ascertained through the perception of concerned stakeholder participant(s).

4. Stakeholders' interrelationship: To show interrelationship among stakeholders, Actor Linkage Matrix developed by Biggs & Matsaert (1999) was used which allows for the exploration of linkages among actors. All the stakeholders were asked to indicate the presence or absence of relationship among each other and those having relationship were to indicate strength of linkage as strong (S), medium (M) and weak (W), especially business relations of tourism operations. In each of the exercises the responses generated were arrived at a consensus through deliberation among the participants so that a data which was in agreement by one and all was finalised and recorded. The exercises were conducted during February 2020.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 15 categories of community stakeholders who operate locally at the community level with or without any significant aid from external agencies were identified along with their interest and impact on rural tourism (Table 1), of which 14 and 11 categories were spotted in Mawlynnong and Sohliya villages respectively. In community meeting, stakeholders reported that the tourist traffic ranged between 300 to 1000 persons per day all-round the year in Mawlynnong while it was around 100 persons per day in peak seasons in Sohliya. In the former village 40-45 households had constructed homestay facilities depicting typical *Khasi* lifestyle while in the later boarding and dining facilities were absent. Though there were Self-help Groups (SHGs) operational in both the villages but they were in no way related to the tourism activities. Forest produce collectors who lost livelihood, due to cut down of forest area for rapid tourism development as expansion of residential area and policy measures restricting their rights to collect forest produce, were the only stakeholder category to be affected negatively. Rakesh (2011) reported similar roles of tourism stakeholders. Among all the categories, the village council was found to perform multiple roles since it is the key nodal organization at village level responsible for village governance. Although certain stakeholder groups like farmers, local residents, farmers' cooperatives and forest produce collectors do not play direct role, they have an indirect impact with certain interest held that affect rural tourism activities. The category 'tourist' though not a community stakeholder has been included in the list since they form the central element in any rural tourism enterprise.

Stakeholder's prioritization

The stakeholder prioritization matrix for Mawlynnong and Sohliya are presented in Figure 1 and 2 respectively. The matrix results show that tourist though form the central element rural tourism, does not have much power. Fruit and vegetable vendors and handicraft vendors provide their services in tangible form, which serve as souvenir for the tourists. The home stay providers, restaurants, dhabas, recreation providers and hotels provide services to tourists in intangible form. Though their operation was independent, without them, tourism cannot flourish. Recreation providers offer attractions like tree house, trekking, boating, etc. in

Table 1. Stakeholders' roles, interest and impact

| S.No. | Stakeholder | Role | Interest | Impact |
|-------|---|--|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | Homestays | Rent their home for stay of tourists/Create local hospitality and home like feeling the tourists | Loans or subsidies from local government for housing Stable income without fluctuations | (+) (+) |
| 2 | Hotels | Provide accommodation for tourists. | Long term profits Networking and collaboration with travel agencies | (+) (+) |
| 3 | Resorts | Offers holiday experiences for tourist along with food and accommodation facilities. | Long term profits Set up adventurous and unique holiday experiences to engage tourists | (+) (+) |
| 4 | Restaurants | Offer dine-in services with wide range of dishes. | Increase sales margin Loan and credit facilities Long term profits | (+) (+) (+) |
| 5 | <i>Dhabas</i> | Local cuisine and take-away provider | Promote local cuisine Increase sales margin | (+) (+) |
| 6 | Recreation providers | Staging events for tourists. | Ensure memorable experiences to tourists Insurance coverage for constructions | (+) (+) |
| 7 | Freelancers | Assist tourists as local guides/language translators. | Alternate source of livelihood Fixed charge per hour basis More foreign tourists | (+) (?) (+) |
| 8 | Village Council (<i>Dorbar Shnong</i>) | Administration; Advisory; Facilitation; Community mobilization | Cleanliness promotion Community livelihood improvement Capacity building Sustainable use of resources | (+) (+) (+) (+) |
| 9 | Agricultural & allied farmers | Cultivation practices and agri. allied practices. | More productivity/unit Market linkages Additional source of income Low cost inputs | (?) (+) (+) (?) |
| 10 | Fruits & vegetables vendors | Collect and sell local fruits and vegetables. | Technical expertise and storage facilities Branding and marketing | (+) (+) |
| 11 | Handicrafts vendors | Sell local handicrafts. | Uninterrupted electricity Separate shopping area Market linkages | (+) (+) (+) |
| 12 | Tourist | Service taking consumers. | Time for leisure Experience rural lifestyle Easy transportation | (+) (+) (+) |
| 13 | Local residents | Represent local community interests | Infrastructure development Better sanitation and cleanliness Less tourist mobility Less noise and disturbance in regular lifestyle | (+) (+) (-) (?) |
| 14 | Farmers' cooperative | Organize grouping of farmers for collective trade. | Lower involvement of middlemen Better prices Better market Branding and storage facilities | (?) (+) (?) (+) |
| 15 | Forest produce collectors | Collect and sell minor forest produce. | Protect tribal forest dwellers rights. Adequate compensation. | (-) (?) |

Legend: (+)=desirable impact; (-)=undesirable impact; (?)=unknown/ undecided

Mawlynnong but in Sohliya these are very little and unorganised. Debatably, the village council, farmers and local residents were classified to have high influence but low importance as their interests were not project targets, corroborating the findings of Timur and Getz (2018). Their interests are to be satisfied regularly, by consulting them for any tourism related activities and sensitising them with the pros as well as cons of rural tourism development. The *dhabas* were usually less preferred by tourists as the facilities and hygiene condition needed improvements. In Sohliya (Figure 2) resorts although owned and managed by people living in towns and cities, were influential and important as they were the only source of accommodation of tourists and offer many recreational activities in package form. Farmers' cooperative worked parallel with rural tourism development, with a view of tourists as the customers. The freelancers and forest produce collectors had low levels of

importance and influence. Freelancers worked part time as tourist guides and sometimes for free without realising the job potential. Stakeholders which fall under each of the four quadrants were given the following recommendation. Box A: This category needs special initiatives to protect their interests; Box B: These are key stakeholders with whom strong relationships need to be maintained regarding project activities; Box C: Regular monitoring and management were recommended as they might be a potential risk source; Box D: Less priority stakeholders and need limited monitoring and evaluation.

Participation of community stakeholders

In each of the centers, 5 tourism related activities were identified by the participants of PRA. The results of the stakeholders' participation in these activities are presented in Table

Figure 1. Stakeholder prioritization matrix of Mawlynnong village

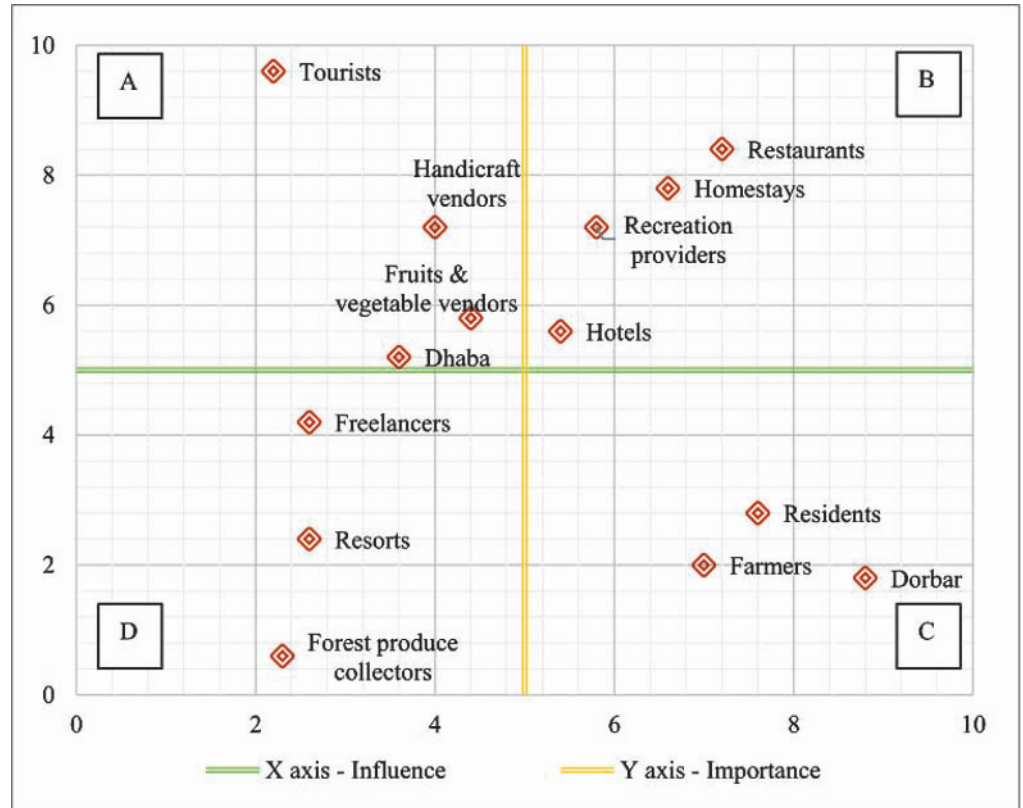
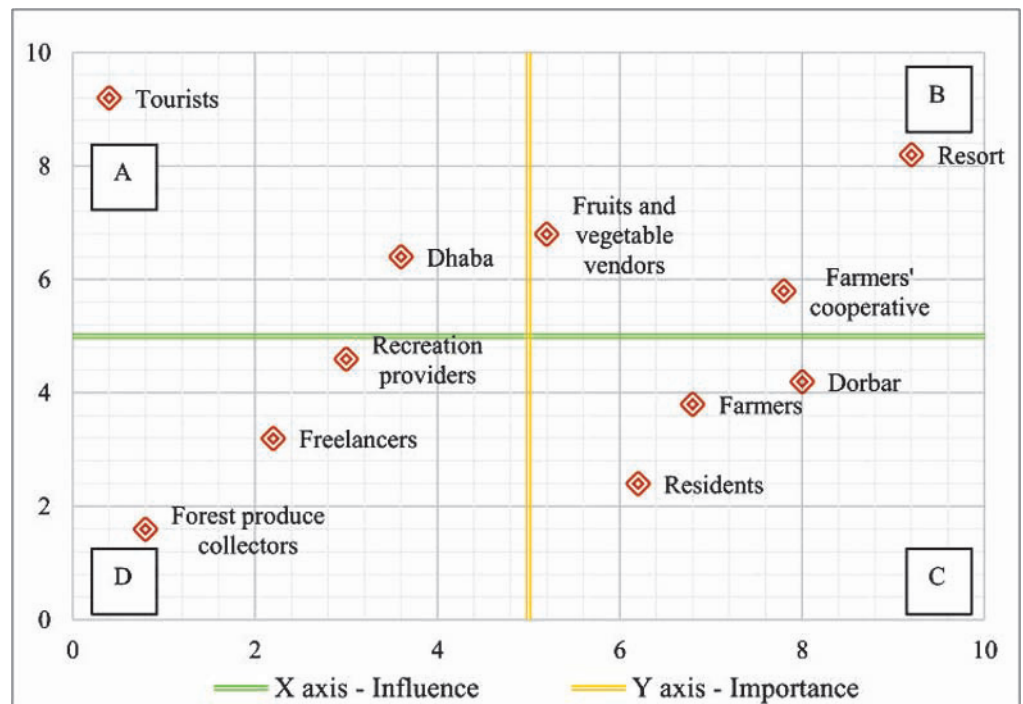


Figure 2. Stakeholder prioritization matrix of Sohliya village



2 and 3 respectively. All the stakeholders were informed about any activities of village through community meetings organized through or by the village council. The council was reported to be involved in all activities at various levels of participation and forms the major decision-making body in both the villages. In parking area construction of Mawlynnong village, residents and handicraft

vendors were involved in resource sharing by contributing money and land. Since there was no per tourist charge, a sum of INR 50/- per vehicle per day was fixed as charge to visit the village. Cleanliness meetings are held for households twice a week in Mawlynnong, during which they were also taught hospitality towards tourists. Every resident irrespective of age and gender was

Table 2. Stakeholder participation matrix of Mawlynnong village

| Activities | In | C | DM | RS | Im | C |
|--|---|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------|----------|
| Parking area construction – Infrastructure development | o All | o Dorbar o Vendors o Residents o Farmers o Resort | o Dorbar o Vendors o Residents | o Residents o Vendors | o Dorbar | o Dorbar |
| Cleanliness maintenance | o All | o All | o Dorbar o Residents | | o All | o Dorbar |
| Vehicle parking meetings | o Dorbar o Vendors o Residents o Farmers o Resort | o Dorbar o Residents o Vendors | o Dorbar o Residents | o Dorbar | o Dorbar | o Dorbar |
| Sustainable management of local resources and village development activities | o All | o Dorbar o Residents o Farmers | o Dorbar | | o Dorbar | o Dorbar |
| News story coverage/documentary shootings. | o Dorbar | o Dorbar o Restaurant o Homestays o Resorts o Vendors o Residents | | | | |

Note: In=Informed; C=Consulted; DM=Decision Making; RS=Resource Sharing; Im=Implementation; C=Control

Table 3. Stakeholder participation matrix of Sohliya Village

| Activities | In | C | DM | RS | Im | C |
|--|---|--|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Tourism infrastructure development meetings | o Dorbar o Residents o Farmers o Resort o Dhaba | o Dorbar o Resort | o Dorbar | o Dorbar | | o Dorbar |
| Sohliya strawberry festival | o Dorbar o RBSGA o Residents o Farmers o Vendors o Resort o Freelancers | o Dorbar o RBSGA o Residents | o RBSGA | o Farmers | | |
| Cleanliness/sanitation maintenance | | o Residents | o Dorbar | | | o Dorbar |
| Sustainable management of local resources and village development activities | o All | o Residents | | | o Dorbar | o Dorbar |
| News story coverage/documentary shootings. | o Dorbar o RBSGA | o Dorbar o Residents o RBSGA o Resort | | | | |

Note: In=Informed; C=Consulted; DM=Decision Making; RS=Resource Sharing; Im=Implementation; C=Control

voluntarily involved for cleanliness maintenance. The village maintains cleanliness on a strict basis, with the area to be cleaned clearly demarcated for each household. Tourism in Sohliya is concentrated around agriculture activities and tourists spend most of their time in fields, so farmers and vendors sell their produce directly to tourists. The strawberry festival in Sohliya is celebrated every year on 14th of February (Valentine's Day), as the fruit is considered as the 'symbol of love'. Technology Mission in Horticulture and Strawberry tourism were operating in the village under the guidance of Meghalaya State Departments of Horticulture and Tourism respectively. A farmer's cooperative named Ri-Bhoi

Strawberry Growers Association (RSGA) was set up for effective marketing of produce. The festival was organised almost every year since 2004 to promote business and sales through provision of trade platform to growers. Resources were shared by strawberry growing farmers that make required contributions to arrange for the festival. Tourists can visit farmers' fields for fruit pickings or can also buy packaged fruits in stalls. Efforts are being made to introduce value added strawberry products with proper packing and shelf life. Krishna et al., (2021) also reported changes in social participation of stakeholders as one of the most important components of the socio-economic impact of agri-tourism. Iqbal et al., (2021) reported

Table 4. Actor linkage matrix of Mawlynnong village

| S.No. | Stakeholders | Strength of linkage | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|--------------------------------|---------------------|--------|---------|-------------|-------|----------------------|-------------|-----------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| | | Homestays | Hotels | Resorts | Restaurants | Dhaba | Recreation providers | Freelancers | Village council | Agriculture & allied farmers | Fruits & vegetable vendors | Handicrafts vendors | Tourists | Local residents | Forest produce collectors |
| 1 | Homestays | | S | M | S | S | M | S | S | S | M | W | S | S | W |
| 2 | Hotels | S | | S | S | M | S | S | M | S | S | S | S | W | - |
| 3 | Resorts | S | S | | W | - | W | W | - | S | - | M | W | W | - |
| 4 | Restaurants | S | S | S | | S | M | S | M | S | W | S | M | W | W |
| 5 | Dhaba | M | M | M | S | | M | M | S | S | M | S | S | W | W |
| 6 | Recreation providers | M | S | M | W | W | | M | - | - | S | M | M | W | M |
| 7 | Freelancers | M | S | S | - | M | S | W | - | M | S | S | M | M | - |
| 8 | Village council | S | S | M | S | S | S | S | M | S | M | S | S | S | W |
| 9 | Agriculture and allied farmers | M | W | - | S | S | W | W | - | S | S | W | - | S | S |
| 10 | Fruits and vegetable vendors | W | M | W | S | S | S | S | S | S | M | W | W | S | S |
| 11 | Handicrafts vendors | W | W | - | - | M | S | S | W | W | M | W | W | S | M |
| 12 | Tourists | S | S | S | S | M | S | S | M | - | S | S | W | - | - |
| 13 | Local residents | M | W | - | M | S | M | M | S | S | S | S | W | W | M |
| 14 | Forest produce collectors | - | - | - | W | W | M | M | M | M | S | W | - | W | - |

Note: S = Strong; M = Medium; W = Weak

Table 5. Actor linkage matrix of Sohliya village

| S.No. | Stakeholder | Strength of linkage | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|------------------------------|---------------------|-------|----------------------|-------------|-----------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---|---|---|
| | | Resort | Dhaba | Recreation providers | Freelancers | Village council | Agriculture & allied farmers | Fruits & vegetable vendors | Tourists | Local resident | Farmers cooperative | Forest produce collectors | | | |
| 1 | Resort | | - | W | M | S | - | W | S | W | S | - | - | - | - |
| 2 | Dhaba | - | | W | M | S | M | W | S | S | W | M | W | W | W |
| 3 | Recreation providers | W | W | | S | M | W | W | M | W | M | M | W | - | - |
| 4 | Freelancers | M | - | S | | W | M | M | M | M | M | S | - | W | W |
| 5 | Village council | M | S | S | W | | S | S | S | S | S | S | S | S | S |
| 6 | Agriculture & allied farmers | W | S | W | - | S | - | W | S | S | - | S | S | S | S |
| 7 | Fruits & vegetable vendors | M | S | M | W | W | S | W | S | S | S | S | S | S | S |
| 8 | Tourists | S | W | M | S | W | - | M | W | M | W | W | - | - | - |
| 9 | Local residents | - | S | S | M | S | S | S | S | M | W | W | S | S | S |
| 10 | Farmers' cooperative | - | W | - | W | S | S | W | S | S | S | S | S | S | M |
| 11 | Forest produce collectors | - | M | W | - | M | M | M | M | M | W | W | W | W | W |

Note: S = Strong; M = Medium; W = Weak

JFM (Joint Forest Management) platform to increase forest tourism in rural areas for enhancing the employment opportunities and income of the communities residing in close proximity of forests.

Stakeholder's interrelationship

The stakeholder interrelationship matrix of Mawlynnong and Sohliya are presented in Table 4 and 5 respectively. Tourists and local residents had weak linkages in both the villages indicating less interaction. *Dhabas* also had weak linkages with tourists and other tourism service providers, signifying less preference. However, restaurants had strong linkages with tourists, accommodation providers and vegetable vendors in Mawlynnong. The village council and freelancers had medium to strong relationships with tourism service providers since most of them had alternative livelihood means apart from tourism activities. Farmers, vendors and residents had strong relationships amongst them and function within the control of RBGSA and the village council in Sohliya. Strong linkage with tourists was maintained by almost all the stakeholders because they form the customers of tourism industry. Pavlovic et al., (2015) found out that stakeholders had stronger relations with visitors and their interactions with others offering services was also significant. These findings mapped the scenario of stakeholders' linkages and functioning, which in turn will help to frame necessary action measures for promoting coordination amongst them.

CONCLUSION

Participation of stakeholders at all the levels of project ensures successful and sustainable rural tourism venture. All the stakeholders identified had a significant place in the community. In both the villages studied, the tourism activities had positive impact on almost all stakeholders' interest except few. However, the participation of the key stakeholders in the tourism related activities were limited with the village council exhibiting maximum influence in most activities. Many weak linkages were found among stakeholders that need to be strengthened. The findings of the study will help the stakeholders to plan their business policy and also provide valuable feeds to key external stakeholders for strategic planning and policy making for development with optimum participation and benefit to the community members. Mobilizing residents to establish tourism enterprises in forms of homestays and dhaba and integration of the community stakeholders by constitution of grass roots level tourism cooperative (working body) within each village to ensure sustainable participation and livelihood is required

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