

Article

## Multifaceted causes of conflict in the world heritage site of Simien Mountains National Park community- based ecotourism, Ethiopia

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess the causes of conflict in community-based ecotourism at the World Heritage Site of Simien Mountains National Park. A cross-sectional study design with a mixed method was used. Two hundred thirty-nine participants were included by systematic random sampling. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 22. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage and mean were computed and qualitative data were triangulated. A high proportion of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the stated items as a cause of conflict with the cumulative mean of 4.21. The majority, 88.7% agreed with inappropriate use of power, 87.5% of respondents agreed with a lack of transparency and 86.6% believed corruption as causes of conflict. Improper implementation of systems and unequal participation were agreed by 84.1%. The statement “inequitable benefit sharing in community-based ecotourism is a cause of conflict” and “weak co-operation in community-based ecotourism is a cause of conflict” were agreed by 82.4% and 80% of respondents respectively. Unsuitable use of resources was also believed as a cause of conflict by 78% of respondents. It is therefore essential to develop a standard guideline to prevent conflict in community-based ecotourism and to resolve conflict should it occur.

**Keywords** community; community-based ecotourism; conflict; Simien Mountains National Park.

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### 1 Introduction

Community-based ecotourism (CBET), sometimes called community-based tourism (CBT), is an alternative form of tourism development intended to create maximum benefit for the local community, and environmental sustainability (Yanes et al., 2019). CBET is managed and owned by the community for the community (Teshome et al., 2020), and it is proposed to deliver ample community benefit (Menbere et al., 2018). It has a specific economic development initiative and has positive social and environmental benefits if managed

appropriately (Asker et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2019; Teshome et al., 2020). In CBET initiatives, local communities should have a high level of participation in the decision-making process.

CBET has emerged as a valuable tool for poverty alleviation and wildlife conservation (Agyeman et al., 2019). In the study area, CBET initiatives support Government plans to reduce poverty in involved communities by enabling them to generate income by creating jobs in hotels, restaurants and transport services; and by souvenir selling and by providing services such as scouts, cooks, porters, muleteers, and guides (Melak et al., 2016). The number of tourists visiting the Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP) increased from 14,016 in 2009/2010 to more than 25,000 in 2018/19. Income generated from this tourism paid to the central treasury in 2018/2019 was about 7 million ETB and more than 27 million ETB to locally established community businesses (Simien Mountains National Park Office, 2020).

Currently, the positive impacts of community-based tourism are facing challenges in developing countries. Challenges which lead to conflict among stakeholders are reported to be inequitable distribution of benefits, improper implementation of the system, weak stakeholder cooperation, lack of transparency, poor leadership / corruption, inappropriate use of power, unequal participation, weak law enforcement, unsustainable use of resources, and lack of awareness (Ketema, 2015; Melak et al., 2016; Yanes et al., 2019). In some tourist destinations local communities do not benefit equally from the introduction of CBET; for example when only a few selected individuals keep benefits for themselves (Okazaki, 2008). Power-related dominance in tourism development can also negatively affect the collaboration of the communities if local people are banned from participation (Saito and Ruhanen, 2017). If CBET is controlled only by local politicians, local community members may not gain benefit from projects (Mensah, 2017). These challenges often cause conflict that limits the full potential of CBET.

Causes of conflict in community-based ecotourism were also reported to be benefits gained, implementation capacity, power relations, transparency, resource management, and participation (Curcija, 2016). The local community around the park may have insufficient awareness about the importance of community-based ecotourism even though the revenue they might gain from such tourism is very high (Mohammed and Handiso, 2018). Currently, community-based ecotourism creates employment and generates revenues for the SMNP community (Iori, 2012; Melak et al., 2016; Teshome and Demissie, 2018c). Communities who live adjacent to the national park often rely on the park for forest products, firewood, thatching, and grazing and have shown disengagement or hostility to project initiatives. Community-based ecotourism and tourism sectors were affected by community hostility (Nicolaidis, 2020).

Several studies have been conducted in the SMNP, focusing on biodiversity, human-wildlife conflict, tourism potential, land degradation and livelihood, the impact of fire in species regeneration, service quality, tourist satisfaction, and tourism development trends (Mohammed and Handiso, 2018; Teshome and Demissie, 2018a, 2018c; Teshome and Glatzel, 2018). None of these previous studies have addressed conflict-related issues in existing community based ecotourism development. Hence, causes of conflict in SMNP community based ecotourism developments are unknown, and data regarding this is vital for sustainable tourism development in and around the national park. Therefore, to fill this gap, the study objective was to assess the major causes of conflict that occurred in a community-based ecotourism development project implemented in the beautiful SMNP in Ethiopia. The findings of this study will highlight the main causes of conflict in this area, and could be used as baseline data for future large scale studies in similar sites in the developing world. The results could help managers introduce and maintain sustainable tourism in these tourist destinations.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Conflict in natural resource use**

Natural resource conflicts are disagreements and disputes over access to, and control and use of, natural resources. These conflicts often emerge because communities may have different uses for resources such as forests, water, pastures, land or simply want to manage them in ways that are different from those program objectives (Vesco et al., 2020). Indeed conflict is an inevitable part of life where a combination of scarce resources, division of functions, unequal power relations and role-differentiation occurs (Anjali, 2020; Pranit, 2010). Conflicts can arise if user groups are excluded from participating in community based ecotourism business project, and resources management. Many publications in tourism literature discuss conflict in relation to community-based ecotourism (Curcija et al., 2019; Tesfaye, 2017; Teshome et al., 2020). The most frequently mentioned type of conflict described the literature reviewed included inequity in resource distribution and other benefits, poor policy and program implementation, power relations, participation, disagreements, and disputes over access to, and control and use of natural resources (Worku and Feyssa, 2016). Conflict may also occur if there are: contradictions between local and introduced new management systems; misunderstandings and lack of information about program objectives. In developing countries these conflicts often occur because people have conflicting needs for resources such as forest products, water, grazing land and cultivation. These conflicts can result in violence and denial of access to natural resources to an extent that significantly diminishes human welfare (Wang and Yotsumoto, 2019).

### **2.2 Inequitable benefit sharing**

Inequitable benefit-sharing related conflict is frequently mentioned in community-based ecotourism literature (Curcija et al., 2019; Ketema, 2015; Pius et al., 2019; Tesfaye, 2017; Zacarias and Loyola, 2017). Benefit-sharing is a practical policy tool to provide opportunities and empowerment of the local community on the ground (Arjjumend, 2018). It enables local government to deploy and to better balance the environmental and socioeconomic aspects of communications service provision (Wang et al., 2016). However, a clear guideline is required to ensure transparent decisions about how revenue sharing will be used to support poverty reduction, local community development, and cultural activities (Spenceley et al., 2017). A transparent fund utilization procedure managed by a benefit-sharing committee with local community representation is required to achieve transparent fund utilization (Munanura et al., 2016; Snyman and Bricker, 2019). Inequitable benefit distribution occurs when benefits and foreign investment are kept by local elites only (Dabla-Norris et al., 2015; Schroeder et al., 2020). Although local residents' participation in community based ecotourism benefit-sharing is essential to tourism development, inequitable benefit distribution causes conflict among community members in many tourist destinations (Spenceley et al., 2017; Tekalign et al., 2018).

### **2.3 Improper implementation**

The SMNP community-based ecotourism project has well-structured guidelines (Teshome and Demissie, 2018c). Rules and regulations that are written in a simple and easily understood language may help improve stakeholders' responsibility and participation (Melak et al., 2016). These guidelines also help key stakeholders to understand what is right and what is not right for sustainable tourism development in their areas.

Appropriate implementation of such guidelines in a community-based ecotourism project can positively influence community members (Curcija et al., 2019). CBET activities that are designed and implemented through community consensus rather than imposed from above can also reduce negative responses from of rural communities (Siakwah et al., 2020). Improper implementation of management systems into an ecotourism project can cause conflict (Asuk and Nchor, 2018).

### **2.4 Inappropriate use of power**

Power is a tool used every day in organizations; organizations cannot exist without power relations (Singh, 2009; Xue and Kerstetter, 2018). Leaders who use their power effectively in tourism development should accomplish tasks without having to rely on their position / job title (Hampton and Jeyacheya, 2015).

Community leaders' powers that can affect a set of decisions in the project are those which can influence policy, opinion, or action in a community because of their roles and positions in the community (Ejimabo, 2015; Garfield and Hagen, 2020). Inappropriate use of power due to deficiencies in capacity leads to mismanagement and conflict among communities why try to defend their rights in community-based ecotourism property (Xue and Kerstetter, 2018). Inappropriate use of power can negatively influence a community-based ecotourism project and dissatisfy local communities (Hampton and Jeyacheya, 2015). Inappropriate use of a leader's power can also occur when local community voices are not listened to and acted on in the decision-making process (Marzuki, 2015). Local control of community-based ecotourism is not always in the best interest of the community, particularly when politicians are leading the way (Wang et al., 2016). The use of improper leader power leads to conflict and decreases local community cooperation in community-based ecotourism projects (Zielinski et al., 2020).

### **2.5 Lack of local community participation**

In heritage tourism Arnstein (1969) developed eight-tier ladder of community participation i.e. citizen control, delegated power partnership, placation, consultation, informing, therapy and manipulation were categorized in three groups: Therapy and manipulation as manipulative participation group mean no participation; placation, consultation and informing as passive participation group mean more or less citizen tokenism; and citizen control, delegated power and partnership as self-mobilization mean degree of citizen power (Cornwall, 2008). The typology of participation in all African countries which were identified in the review fit into the three categories i.e. passive participation; participation by consultation and functional participation (Chirenje et al., 2013). This means either communities are notified of conservation action taken by outsiders; provide information to external managers; or their views are only heard and external agents incorporate these views into planning decisions (Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2010).

Participation is the most important factor in sustainable community-based ecotourism (Teshome et al., 2020). If local people participate in decision making, tourism developments can achieve their intended objectives (Idrissou et al., 2018). Sustainable ecotourism can be achieved through active participation of the local communities and other concerned stakeholders (Wondirada and Ewnetub, 2019). Participation can sometimes result in instances of conflict due to "external pressures, conflicting stakeholder interests, power struggles, and the growth of artificial hierarchies; hence, undermining potential benefits to the community" (Mgonja et al., 2015).

Previous studies in African countries show that a lack of community participation in CBET projects can be caused by failure to adopt a bottom-up participatory approach, inadequate community empowerment, inequitable distribution of benefits, a lack of trust in the implementing agencies, and corruption among local officials and community leaders by mismanaging project funds (Chirenje et al., 2013; Melak et al., 2016; Menbere et al., 2018; Mensah, 2017; Munanura et al., 2016). Lack of local community participation and misrepresentation were shown to be the cause of conflict in a community based ecotourism product by (Ramón-Hidalgo et al., 2018).

### **2.6 Lack of transparency**

Community based conflict can also arise due to a lack of transparency between community members and managers of such projects (Curcija, 2016). When local communities gain insufficient benefits they can develop negative attitudes towards community-based ecotourism development (Kim et al., 2019; Menbere et al., 2018). Many complex issues related to transparency in community-based ecotourism can cause conflict (Yanes et al., 2019), as can a lack of clear benefit-sharing processes being implemented during the first stages of community-based ecotourism (Mgonja et al., 2015). As Ethiopia is a developing country, it is difficult to

discuss issues such as transparency and equality when everyone is subjectively fighting for their own livelihood (Gooden and 'tSas-Rolfes, 2020; Iori, 2012).

### **2.7 Weak law enforcement**

Weak penalties, ambiguous governance and regional protectionism all contribute to weak law enforcement (Iori, 2012; Pang et al., 2017). Associations' members are given no right to supervise law enforcement activities, which encourages the lawbreakers. Absence of a formal relationship and lack of cooperation between the community-based ecotourism enterprises and other stakeholders due to weak law enforcement to legally register community-based tourism enterprises and a lack of support from government offices also leads to conflict (Tesfaye, 2017). Lack of benefit-sharing mechanisms for local communities is the main issue for community members; similarly the effects of bureaucracy and corruption because of weak law enforcement are crucial (Iori, 2012; Melak et al., 2016; Schroeder et al., 2020). Powerful local leaders can create inequalities between community members, and power relations in tourism development can influence the outcome of collaboration with communities (Pang et al., 2017). Gaps in the law and weak law enforcement created challenges in operating a community-based ecotourism initiative (Altes, 2018).

### **2.8 Lack of stakeholders' cooperation**

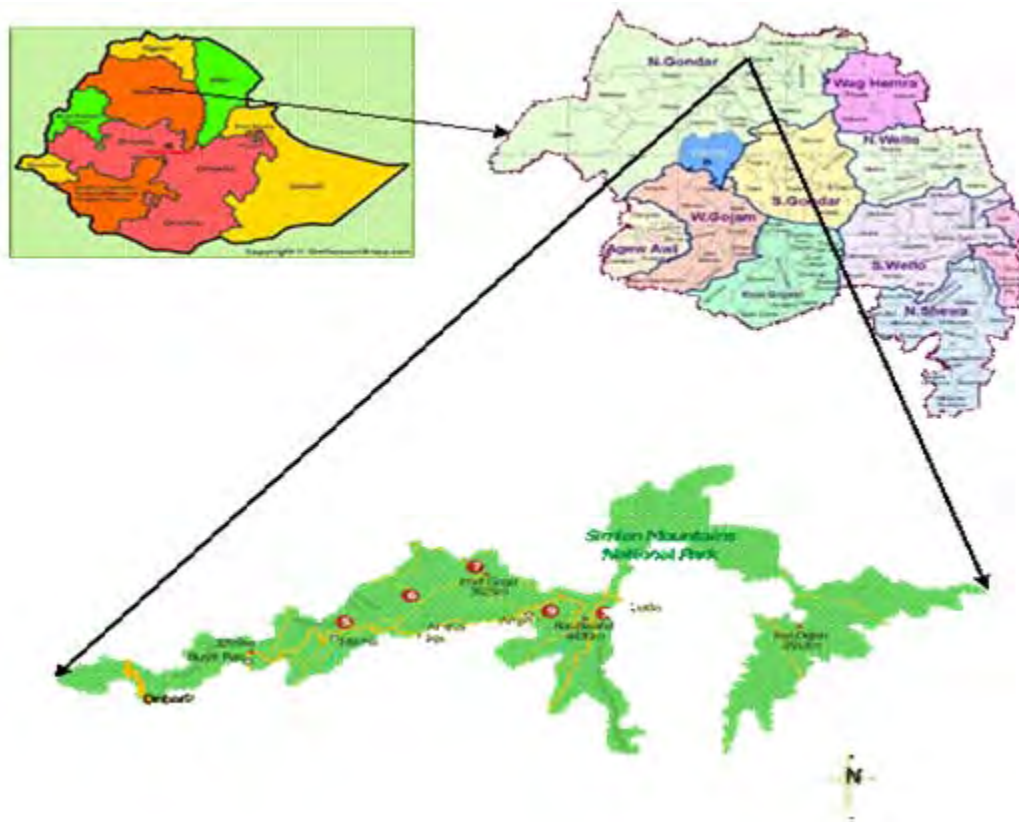
The concept of stakeholders is complex and dynamic because it is not generally homogeneous (MacDonald et al., 2019). The tourism industry in the SMNP is multi-sectoral, incorporating a range of stakeholders including governments, local communities, religious leaders, tourists, tour operators, the tour guide association, cooks association, ecotourism association, rental association, service providers, foreign researchers, local researchers, locally owned private lodges, foreign-owned private lodges, and NGOs (Iori, 2012; Melak et al., 2016; Teshome and Demissie, 2018c). Conflicts can occur because planners and managers identify stakeholders' roles inadequately, or they refuse to acknowledge a group's interest in a resource (Wang and Wu, 2020). Collaboration can be used effectively to resolve conflict or advance shared visions, where stakeholders recognize the potential advantages of working together. Stakeholders often failed to play their crucial role of challenging, stimulating, even criticizing firm managers. However, in many developing countries collaboration has been found to be a solution to avoiding conflict amongst stakeholders (Wondirad et al., 2020). Similarly, a lack of collaboration has been reported as a cause of conflict in community-based ecotourism projects (Mensah, 2017; Stone, 2015; Tesfaye, 2017).

## **3 Materials and Methods**

### **3.1 Description of the study area**

The Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP) was added to the world heritage list in 1978. However, the environment was damaged by the expansion of agricultural land and grazing, and the park was once put on the list of the World Heritage sites in danger in 1996.

The Park is located in North Gondar Zone of the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS), with the entrance at *Limalimo* campsite, 7 km from the town of Debarq where the park headquarters are located. It lies within the five administrative districts of *Adiarkay*, *Beyeda*, *Debarq*, *Janamora*, and *Telemt*, and borders 42 *Kebeles* (Melak et al., 2016). The Park has international significance because of its rich biodiversity, its endemic species, and its outstanding bio-physical features. Geographically the park has a magnificent landscape, stretching from the tip of lowland forest (at 1900 masl) to the Peak of Ras Dejen Mountain (4543 masl).



**Fig. 1** Map of the study area (Source: AWF, 2018).

As a result of the World Heritage Site listing, the SMNP has huge potential to attract visitors from all over the globe (Teshome and Demissie, 2018b). There are several private tour operators who organize trekking tours to the SMNP. To benefit local residents and deliver high quality services to park visitors, community-based ecotourism was established in 2002. However, a majority of the local communities who reside in and around the park complain about their association leaders service provision and the SMNP office. This leads to conflict among the leaders and user groups. This conflict results in damage to tourism resources and affects visitors' satisfaction.

Forest fires instigated by local people are one example of the results of conflict in the study area. To reduce conflict and improve visitor satisfaction the causes of conflict between stakeholders (i.e., park management, user groups, and the existing service delivery associations) must be identified.

### **3.2 Research design**

A cross-sectional study design with a mixed (quantitative and qualitative) research approach was used to describe the major causes of conflict in the SMNP community based ecotourism. Researchers used both quantitative and qualitative. Qualitative research to get a better understanding through firsthand experience, truthful reporting, and quotations of authentic conversations, and quantitative method to quantify the collected and analysis data (Antwi and Hamza, 2015).

### **3.3 Target population**

The target populations in this study were community based ecotourism user groups. During the month of the survey a total 8,161 community based ecotourism project users were approached. They were: guide association members (89), cook association members (71); community based ecotourism union members (7200), equipment rental association members (9), scouts and militia (720), campsite facilitator/tent builder group

members (45) and tourist police members (27) (Melak et al., 2016). Key informants were included from different stakeholders and service providers: the community based ecotourism cooperative union, guide association leader, the tourism and culture office, and hotel owners and travel agents.

### 3.4 Sample size determination and sampling techniques

A systematic random sampling technique was used to include participants for the quantitative study and a combination of purposive and snowball sampling schemes were used to select key informants for qualitative data, where a researcher selects a sample based on their knowledge about the study and population. According to Melak et al. (2016), a total of 8,161 community based ecotourism projects users existed in the SMNP. In order to determine the sample size for this study, a single population proportion formula was used to cluster the research participants. This was the Cochran formula (Cochran, 1977).

$$no = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

where:

$no$  = the sample size

$z$  = the selected critical value of desired confidence level

$p$  = the estimated proportion of an attribute that is present in the population,  $q = 1 - p$

$e$  = the desired level of precision.

Previous findings from the Wonchi Crater Lake community based ecotourism project depicted that challenge/cause of conflict was 20% (Ketema, 2015), and taking 95% confidence level with  $\pm 5\%$  precision, the calculation for required sample size will be as follows:

Therefore,

$$\frac{no = (1.96)^2 (0.2)(0.8)}{(0.05)^2} = 246$$

Then, when the population is small (less than 10,000) the researcher can adjust the sample size by using the formula:

$$nspz = \frac{n}{1 + \left(\frac{n}{spz}\right)} \quad (\text{Aboobakur and Samarakoon, 2019})$$

where

$nspz$  = minimum sample size when the population is small

$n$  = minimum sample when the population is large

$spz$  = population size (small population)

$$nspz = \frac{246}{1 + \left(\frac{246}{8161}\right)} = \frac{246}{1 + (0.2794)} = \frac{246}{1.2794} = 239$$

Furthermore, Kothari's (2004) formula was used for proportional sample size allocation as

$$n_i = \left(\frac{NI}{N}\right) n$$

where:

$n_i$  = required number of participants from each group

$NI$  = total population of each strata

$N$  = total population

$n$  = sample size of total population

**Table 1** Proportional sample allocation to each stakeholder.

| No.          | Association name                                      | Total sample population | Number of members in each association<br>$n_i = \left(\frac{NI}{N}\right) n$ | Sample size |
|--------------|---|-------------------------|--|-------------|
| 1            | Guide association members                             | 89                      | (239/8161)89   | 3           |
| 2            | Cook association members                              | 71                      | (239/8161)71   | 2           |
| 3            | Community based ecotourism union members              | 7200                    | (239/8161)7200   | 210         |
| 4            | Equipment rental association                          | 9                       | (239/8161)9  | 1           |
| 5            | Scouts and militia                                    | 720                     | (239/8161)720  | 21          |
| 6            | Campsite facilitator/tent builder association members | 45                      | (239/8161)45   | 1           |
| 7            | Tourist police  | 27                      | (239/8161)27   | 1           |
| Total number |   | 8161                    | 8,161  | 239         |

Source: Researcher own survey 2018.

### 3.5 Data collection techniques and tools

Quantitative data were collected using self-administered structured questionnaires. For the qualitative parts of the study, data was collected using open-ended questions and interview guides to capture data which could not be addressed by the survey. In this research, a pre-designed questionnaire was given to study participants after informing them of the purpose and procedure of the study, and obtaining oral consent for participation. It used ten items (Yanes et al., 2019) with a five point Likert rating scale to indicate participants' level of agreement, employing the following ratings: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree. For the qualitative aspects of the study, the informant was contacted to schedule a convenient time for interview, and a semi-structured interview guide was used.

### 3.6 Methods of data analysis

Data were coded, cleaned, and then entered into statistical software (SPSS, version 22) for analysis. Descriptive analysis such as frequency, mean, and percentages were computed, and tables and texts were utilized to present the result. Content analysis was used to present qualitative data in triangulation with quantitative findings in accordance with research objectives.

### 3.7 Ethical considerations

During data collection, all respondents and key informants were informed about the purpose of the study. Due consideration was given to the culture, social norms and values of the community. Oral consent was taken from the research participants and confidentiality of the information was assured.

## 4 Results

Analysis has revealed that the community believes that inequitable benefit sharing is a cause of conflict in the SMNP community-based ecotourism project. The majority, 197 (82.4%) of respondents, agreed or strongly



agreed to the statement about “inequitable benefits”. However, 23 (9.6%), of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (Table 2).

Findings from qualitative data confirmed that an inequitable / inequitable benefit-sharing mechanism for park entry fees, income, employment from mule rental services, guiding services, cooking provision, tent and cars rental services and NGO donations were causes of conflict among the user groups/association members in SMNP community-based ecotourism. A 28 year old guide interviewee said: “*although there is conflict among guides to choose wealthy tourists and groups (who usually give good bonuses for good services), the most serious conflict occurs among the community based ecotourism union members who live in different park locations. Members who live on and near the park boundary are the most affected by wildlife and park conservation, and those communities need more benefits compared to other members*”. His explanation proves that a lack of benefit-sharing mechanisms and of compensation for property damage is a source of conflict.

The majority, 188 (78% of respondents) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “unsuitable use of resources is a cause of conflict”. However, 24 (9.1% of respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed (Table 2). Interviews with key informants also generally agree, and gave examples of unsuitable resource utilization leading to conflict as:- use of land for livestock grazing and cultivation; use of forest wood for fuel, charcoal, construction materials and agriculture tools; use of grass for thatching and livestock feed; use of water for their livestock to drink, and the use of medicinal plant species for traditional healers.

**Table 2** Causes of conflict.

| Items                                    | Mean | 1  |      | 2  |      | 3  |      | 4  |      | 5   |      |
|--|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|-----|------|
|  |      | F  | %    | F  | %    | F  | %    | F  | %    | F   | %    |
| Inequitable benefit sharing              | 4.28 | 15 | 6.3  | 8  | 3.3  | 19 | 7.9  | 51 | 21.3 | 146 | 61.1 |
| Unsuitable use of resource               | 4.16 | 11 | 4.6  | 13 | 5.4  | 28 | 11.7 | 61 | 25.5 | 126 | 52.7 |
| Improper implementation<br>of the system | 4.33 | 15 | 6.3  | 7  | 2.9  | 16 | 6.7  | 48 | 20.1 | 153 | 64.0 |
| Inappropriate use of power               | 4.44 | 14 | 5.9  | 5  | 2.1  | 8  | 3.3  | 47 | 19.7 | 165 | 69.0 |
| Unequal participation                    | 4.35 | 11 | 4.6  | 10 | 4.2  | 17 | 7.1  | 48 | 20.1 | 153 | 64.0 |
| Lack of transparency                     | 4.42 | 9  | 3.8  | 2  | 0.8  | 19 | 7.9  | 58 | 24.3 | 151 | 63.2 |
| Weak law enforcement                     | 4.30 | 15 | 6.3  | 9  | 3.8  | 16 | 6.7  | 49 | 20.5 | 150 | 62.8 |
| Weak collaboration / Cooperation         | 4.19 | 12 | 5.0  | 10 | 4.2  | 26 | 10.9 | 63 | 26.4 | 128 | 53.6 |
| Corruption                               | 4.47 | 11 | 4.6  | 5  | 2.1  | 16 | 6.7  | 35 | 14.6 | 172 | 72.0 |
| Lack of awareness                        | 2.97 | 46 | 19.2 | 47 | 19.7 | 55 | 23.0 | 49 | 20.5 | 42  | 17.6 |
| Group mean                               | 4.21 |    |      |    |      |    |      |    |      |     |      |

Source: own survey data (2019).

Note: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= Undecided, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree, F= Frequency.

A greater proportion, 201 (84.1% of respondents), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “Improper implementation of systems is a cause of conflict”. Another 22 (9.2% of respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed, with mean values of 4.33 (Table 2). The greatest proportion, 212 (88.7% of respondents), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “inappropriate use of power is a cause of conflict” in a community-based ecotourism project. The greater proportion, 201 (84.1% of respondents), agreed or strongly agreed about: “Unequal participation”. A few, 21 (8.8% of respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed on this statement, and the mean value was 4.44 (Table 2).

The majority, 209 (87.5% of respondents), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “lack of transparency in community based ecotourism projects is a cause of conflict”. However, 11 (4.6% of respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed (Table 2). Weak law enforcement was a cause of conflict in the study area and 199 (83.3%) of respondents attested to this fact. A 32 year old community based ecotourism union member said: *“position holders use their power improperly to benefit themselves and their relatives. He added that without transparency, leaders assign pack and riding animals, muleteers and guards to accompany tourist on mountain trekking”*

The majority, 191 (80% of respondents), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement about “weak cooperation in community-based ecotourism projects”. However a few, 16 (6.7% of respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and the mean value was 4.47. The greater proportion, 207 (86.2% of respondents) agreed or strongly agreed that: “Corruption is a cause of conflict”. A few, 22 (14.9% of respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed on the statement, and the mean value was 4.19. Less than half, 91 (38.10% of respondents), agreed or strongly agreed that: “Lack of awareness in implementing community-based ecotourism is a cause of conflict”. However, another 93 (39 % of respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the mean value 2.97 (Table 2).

## 5 Discussion

Analysis shows that the community feels that an inequitable benefit-sharing mechanism is the major cause of conflict among the user groups/association members in SMNP community-based ecotourism. Such benefits includes park entrance fees, income from service delivery (i.e. mules, horses, cars, tents trekking gear rental); NGO donations; employment (such as tour guiding, cooking, guarding, muleteer loading/carrying trek baggage, and employment in the hospitality sector). These benefits were not equitably distributed to the local communities and among user groups (Melak et al., 2016). At the result, local community receives limited tourism benefits but fair and effective community tourism governance approach may bring positive. A 34 year old key informant said: *“all park entrance fees and car parking fees collected from visitors go straight to the federal Government while local communities and other user groups affected by wildlife and tourism activities receive none”*. This practice goes against the ecotourism manual guidelines which state that income generated from ecotourism should be used for conservation programs and for the economic benefit of communities living in rural and remote areas (Leung et al., 2018)

Apart from obtaining little benefit from community-based ecotourism project activities, many local communities living in and around the park suffer from crop raiding animals (e.g., Monkey (*Cercopithecus aethiops*), Anubis baboon (*Papio cynocephalus Anubis*), Hamadryas baboon (*Papio hamadryas*), Gelada baboon (*Theropithecus gelada*), Bush pig (*Potamochoerus porcus*), and many rodents and birds). In addition to crop damage it is not unusual for carnivore species to kill their livestock, again with no compensation from the project. Moreover, local community lacks share of socio-economic benefits of tourism is needed to encourage cooperation and bottom-up developments. Obtaining little benefit from community -based ecotourism project activities was also reported as a source of conflict in the study area (Melak et al., 2016). At the result, local

communities have an ambivalent attitude towards the national park. A similar result was reported in other tourist destinations where inequitable benefit-sharing was the primary cause of conflict in community-based ecotourism development. One example is at Wonchi Crater Lake (Ketema, 2015).

Unsuitable use of resources such as land and forest was also a major cause of conflict in the SNMP study area. Such land is not only an important economic asset and source of livelihoods but also closely linked to community identity, history and culture. Natural forest products are essential for firewood, charcoal, construction materials, agriculture tools; grasses for thatching and livestock feed; and medicinal plant species used by traditional healers for these subsistence farming communities. Prohibiting use of these valuable resources could be a source of conflict within SMNP. Similar issues are reported in many community based ecotourism projects such as Bale Mountains National Park (Menbere et al., 2018), Borena Sayint Wureyimenu National Park (Eshetu, 2014) and Maichew Cluster, a Case of Ofla Woreda (Gebremariam, 2018). This type of conflict typically occurs when individuals attempt to get more for themselves at the expense of others.

Improper implementation of community-based ecotourism guidelines was another cause of conflict in the study area. A 45 year old key informant from the community based ecotourism's union said: "*the existing rules and regulations are not properly implemented by leaders when assigning members for trekking with tourists*". Inappropriate selection and assignment of members from this union resulted in ill-feeling and conflict among the communities in the study area. The confirmation that weak guideline implementation causes major challenges in community based ecotourism developments is also reported in south Ethiopia (Menbere et al., 2018; Tesfaye, 2017).

Inappropriate use of power was also a major cause of conflict in SMNP community-based ecotourism project. This mainly exists when members are assigned by association leader to deliver services/duties to visitors in job rotation. Although power is a very important tool in achieving organizational objectives, community based ecotourism leaders use coercive power to defend their self-interests rather than to reach the common goal of the group. Inappropriate use of power has also been reported as a cause of conflict in other tourist destinations (Ketema, 2015). Power includes budgetary judgment, personal influence, information, time, space, staff size and dependence on others; when these are misused it can generate conflict. When power is used inappropriately it can negatively influence community-based ecotourism project development, and dissatisfy local communities (Saito and Ruhanen, 2017). Inappropriate use of power by community leaders was also mentioned as a cause of conflict in a community-based ecotourism project in (Hampton and Jeyacheya, 2015).

Unequal stakeholder participation, lack of cooperation, and lack of transparency in community based ecotourism projects were also a cause of conflict. The community based ecotourism union head said: "*although we understand the values of members' active participation, it is difficult for all union members to participate equally in every event, because members live scattered around five districts and about 48 kebeles. Those kebeles are found in remote geographical regions and it is very difficult to move easily from one place to another*". Participation is vital for sustainable tourism development. If affected stakeholders are excluded from participation, they are likely to remain disengaged because they believe their interests are ignored. Lack of local community participation in decision-making is a major source of conflict in the study area. Failures of participation were sources of conflict in many other community based ecotourism project areas (Curcija, 2016; Curcija et al., 2019; Mensah, 2017).

Collaboration is the best method of minimizing conflicts, as it strives to satisfy the needs of both parties. Even the two most important parts of the SMNP office and five districts' culture, tourism and sport offices (which have responsibility for the development of the tourism sector), lack sufficiently good relationships to ensure collaboration. District officials such as *Janamorra, Beyeda, Telemt and Adrkay* are not happy with

current tourism benefits. These district officials have grievances, and believe they are being ignored in terms of park tourism benefits (i.e., scout/guard recruitment, tour guide recruitment, cook selection and other tourism employment related benefits). This, plus weak collaboration, were causes of conflict. Lack of stakeholder collaboration/cooperation within community-based ecotourism projects, and weak implementation of law enforcement were reported as sources of conflict in community-based ecotourism sites (Gebremariam, 2018; Iori, 2012).

Lack of transparency between community members, community leaders and managers were another cause of conflict in the study area. How and why members are assigned for temporary employment with hiking and trekking visitors (i.e., guards, muleteers carrying and loading baggage, and packing and riding mules) is not clear. Conflict arises due to a lack of transparency between community members and managers of the community based projects (Schütt et al., 2019).

Sometimes local community leaders supply members inequitably for tourism benefits; some powerful community members breach the rules and regulations of community based ecotourism, and the only penalty is exclusion from his/her next turn. Weak penalties and poor law enforcement is encouraged by unscrupulous and selfish people who violate the rules and regulations of SMNP community based ecotourism. Enforcement is usually necessary to ensure that agreements arising from a conflict resolution effort are implemented. Gaps in the law and weak law enforcement create a challenge to the operation of the community-based ecotourism initiative (Altes, 2018).

Corruption is also a cause of conflict in the study area. Benefit sharing between local communities is a sensitive issue, and corruption is a major source of grievance and conflict in community-based ecotourism projects. In the study area a similar finding was reported by researchers that leaders are asking for bribes in order to use member's pack animals and muleteers for visitors out of their turn (Demssie, 2015). Such conflicts are intensified by the contradictory nature of personnel, dispersion of authority, and varying perceptions. Members also have concerns about common resources management. For example, the ecotourism union has cars and mules to provide transport services for the local community and tourists but the revenue generated from these services is not regularly audited.

## **6 Conclusion**

The major causes of conflict reported in SMNP community based ecotourism were: inappropriate use of power, lack of transparency, corruption, improper implementation of systems, unequal participation, inequitable benefit sharing, weak stakeholder cooperation, and unsuitable use of resources. Lack of awareness was less reported as a cause of conflict in study area. SMNP community-based ecotourism project shall formulate a clear policy and code of conduct based on consensus and with the active participation of the local community. To sustain community-based ecotourism projects with minimal conflict the ecotourism associations union shall be directed and managed by properly trained staff. It is essential to develop appropriate guidelines to enhance transparency, prevent corruption and build accountability among user groups. To reduce local community grievances about inequitable benefits, a benefit sharing mechanism shall be developed. Further research shall be conducted on a collaborative approach towards sustainable conflict management in the study area.

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