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# **Stakeholder collaboration as a major factor for sustainable ecotourism development in developing countries**

## **Highlights**

- The nature of interactions and relationships among ecotourism stakeholders determine their collaboration.
- Effective stakeholder collaboration is needed to sustainably develop ecotourism in developing countries.
- Ensuring community participation is critical to warrant sustainable ecotourism development in emerging destinations.
- Strategies are outlined for effective stakeholder collaboration based on research findings.
- A cohesive stakeholder collaboration framework for sustainable ecotourism development is also proposed.

## **Abstract**

Ecotourism has been widely championed by academics and practitioners as a potential contributor of conservation and development. However, others have questioned whether sustainability goals can be achieved through this form of tourism. Of the various factors reported in the literature as hindering the success of ecotourism, the lack of effective stakeholder collaboration features prominently. This study draws upon stakeholder and collaboration theories and on triple-bottom-line principles, to investigate the contributions of stakeholder collaborations to sustainable ecotourism. The researchers adopted an exploratory research design and conducted stakeholder in-depth interviews and focus group discussions between 2016 and 2018. The findings revealed poor interactions and collaborations amongst ecotourism stakeholders. Consequently, ecotourism in Southern Ethiopia accelerates the degradation of natural resources, neglecting communities while benefiting other ecotourism stakeholders. Therefore, in poorly resourced and remote destinations, failure to empower and participate communities undermines ecotourism and jeopardizes the long-term survival of ecosystems and communities themselves.

## **Introduction**

Ecotourism emerged as a component of alternative tourism development in the 1980s in response to the view that conventional mass tourism was detrimental to destinations (Koens, Dieperink, & Miranda, 2009; Mondino & Beery, 2018; Weaver, 2006). It was anticipated that alternative tourism would enhance positive environmental, economic and socio-cultural

outcomes from tourism. Ecotourism rapidly gained popularity as a form of alternative tourism development that would advance the dual aims of conservation and sustainable development (Jamaliah & Powell, 2018; McKercher, 2010; Walter, 2011, 2013).

The term ecotourism is defined differently resulting in a plethora of definitions in literature. Ceballos-Lascurain is widely known for crafting the earliest definition of ecotourism (Blamey, 2001). According to Ceballos-Lascurain ecotourism means:

Traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with a specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987, p. 14).

As a pioneer ecotourism definition, the explanation of Ceballos-Lascurain can be criticized for overlooking conservational and economic contributions of ecotourism where subsequent descriptions comprehend. Dowling (2002) also defined ecotourism as a nature-based, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative and locally beneficial that provides tourists with an enriching experience. On the other hand, The International Ecotourism Society, (2018) explained ecotourism as a responsible travel to natural areas with the purpose of conserving the environment, sustaining the well-being of the local people, and educating tourists. However, despite the existence of many descriptions of ecotourism, they all have a common characteristic of incorporating nature, conservation, education and local development.

While definitions of ecotourism remain imprecise (Buckley, 2016), the current study employs Bjork's (2000) interpretation since it synthesises essential components of ecotourism found in various earlier definitions and captures major stakeholders of the ecotourism sector such as the government, residents and the private sector that are relevant in this research. According to Bjork (2000), ecotourism is:

An activity where the authorities, the tourism industry, tourists and local people co-operate to make it possible for tourists to travel to genuine areas in order to admire, study and enjoy nature and culture in a way that does not exploit the resource, but contributes to sustainable development (p. 196–197).

Boosting economic benefits from the tourism sector whilst maintaining ecological sustainability and conserving socio-cultural heritage is a persistent challenge of developing countries such as Ethiopia. A wide range of studies (Garrod, 2003; Gossling, 1999; Honey, 2008; Parker & Khare, 2005; Ross & Wall, 1999; Shoo & Songorwa, 2013; Weaver & Lawton, 2007) proposed ecotourism to secure economic advantages from the tourism sector while conserving environmental resources and protecting socio-cultural heritages. Various factors such as wider acclamation amongst tourism academics (McKercher, 2010; Weaver & Lawton, 2007), dissatisfaction with conventional tourism products (Doan, 2000; Hawkins, 1994) and increasing consumer demand for nature-based products (Hawkins & Khan, 1998; Yeoman et al., 2015) accelerated the acceptance and growth of ecotourism. However, scholars remain deeply divided in their views of ecotourism. On the one hand, ecotourism has

been criticised for failing to fulfil its stated objectives, namely travel to pristine and fragile environments and in practice has merely served as a vanguard to mass tourism (Cater, 2006; Manyara & Jones, 2007; McKercher, 2010; Nyaupane & Thapa, 2004; Sharpley, 2006; Southgate, 2006; Wall, 1997). Scott (2011) and Weaver (2011) noted that over the last fifteen years the success of ecotourism in achieving its widely advocated agendas has been inefficient due to lack of comprehensive understanding and lack of industry commitment. On the other hand, ecotourism has been recurrently promoted as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism that produces sustainable development, community empowerment and environmental conservation (Ambe, Tsi, Chi, Siri, & Tita, 2010; Gale & Hill, 2009; Honey, 2008; Khan, 1997; Masud, Aldakhil, Nassani, & Azam, 2017; Scheyvens, 1999; Snyman, 2014; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). In particular, ecotourism is considered as a sustainable development tool for developing nations which possess rich natural and cultural resources (Mitchell & Ashely, 2010; Butcher, 2011; Snyman, 2014; Cobbinah, Amenuvor, Black, & Peprah, 2017).

In some instances, ecotourism has contributed meaningfully to sustainable development (Hawkins & Khan, 1998; Timothy & White, 1999; Buckley, 2003a; Honey, 2008; Butcher, 2011). However, there are also cases where the impacts of ecotourism are either elusive or destructive (Manyara & Jones, 2007; Rudovsky, 2015; Southgate, 2006; Stone & Stone, 2011). Ecotourism failures may arise for various reasons. Most notable in the literature are claims that it lacks effective stakeholder collaborations and partnerships, and is characterised by inadequate stakeholder competencies (strategic, planning and operational) and poor governance (Backman & Munanura, 2015; Bjork, 2007; Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Diamantis, 2018; Kennedy, Monica, Maria, & Carlos, 2013; Towner, 2018).

The presence of different stakeholders with competing and at times conflicting interests significantly hinders the progress of ecotourism plans and programs (Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Dangi & Gribb, 2018; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2013; Kline & Slocum, 2015; Nault & Stapleton, 2011; Towner, 2018). Stakeholder collaboration is crucial for sustainable tourism development, but is affected by power, trust, financial capabilities, external support, social and cultural backgrounds, awareness level and entrepreneurial skills of actors (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013; Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018; Timothy, 1998; Tosun, 2000; Towner, 2018). Existing literature reveals failed cases of ecotourism projects worldwide because of the prevalence of competition over collaboration and rivalry over cooperation (Kruger, 2005; Mgonja, Sirima, & Mkumbo, 2015; Rudovsky, 2015; Shepherd, 2002; Southgate, 2006; Stone & Stone, 2011).

In light of that, several scholars such as Bjork (2007), Jamal and Stronza (2009), Nault and Stapleton (2011), Kennedy et al. (2013), Kline and Slocum (2015) and Zapata and Hall (2012) have called for further in-depth examination of issues that incorporate multiple ecotourism stakeholder perspectives, interests, interactions, and collaborations to have a comprehensive understanding of the role of stakeholder collaboration in sustainable ecotourism development. The current study takes up this call by investigating issues that surround stakeholder engagement and factors that determine stakeholder interactions, relationships, and collaborations in the context of developing countries. Given developing

countries have ample ecotourism potentials due to their diverse wildlife resources and unique cultural assets (Eshun & Tagoe-Darko, 2015; Mitchell & Ashely, 2010; Sasidharan, Sirakaya, & Kerstetter, 2002), but fail to wisely use the ecotourism sector due to various factors, including poor stakeholder collaboration (Bjork, 2007; Kennedy et al., 2013; McCool, 2014; Southgate, 2006), the problem merits a more closer investigation. Towards that end, the current study addresses the challenge of managing effective stakeholder collaboration for sustainable ecotourism development. Precisely, this study aims to:

- 1) examine ecotourism development in a developing country setting on an example of Southern Ethiopia;
- 2) explore existing ecotourism stakeholders' interactions and relationships;
- 3) identify factors that affect stakeholder collaboration and
- 4) develop a new collaboration framework for effective ecotourism stakeholder cooperation and partnership in developing countries.

## **Literature review**

### **Sustainable ecotourism and stakeholder collaboration**

Inroading into the academic discourse in the 1980s, ecotourism is advocated as a viable form of tourism development especially for developing countries (Butcher, 2011; Cater, 1994; Mitchell & Ashely, 2010; Snyman, 2014). Ecotourism aligns with the “adaptancy” stage of Jafari's (1989) emerging theoretical platforms through tourism evolution, under the broader alternative tourism category, which was itself a response to mass tourism (Honey, 2008; Snyman, 2014; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). The term ecotourism was used increasingly in the tourism literature from the latter 1980s following the release of the influential Brundtland Report and increased global concern about sustainability (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; McKercher, 2010). There have been three distinct phases in the development of academic discourse about ecotourism (McKercher, 2010). The initial ‘New Dawn’ phase was characterised by the prevalence of idealism and hope, while the second stage, ‘Crisis of Legitimacy’ examined whether ecotourism has achieved its objectives and highlighted various failures. The most recent ‘Sustainable Product Niche’ phase is a function of further attempts to explain what ecotourism can and cannot do and how its claims can be examined. The current literature review has revealed that during the 1980s and 90s ecotourism development was largely advocated as an alternative to its mass tourism counterpart (Doan, 2000; Khan, 1997; Lindberg et al., 1996; Wunder, 2000). During the 2000s it was met with modest criticism and its achievements were increasingly scrutinized (Kiss, 2004; Li, 2005; Nyaupane & Thapa, 2004; Sharpley, 2006; Southgate, 2006; West, 2008). This served to supplement McKercher's (2010) discussion. Empirical evidence demonstrates that in developing nations, such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Costa Rica, ecotourism income exceeded the revenue collected from other traditional export items such as coffee and banana (Honey, 2008; Stem, Lassoie, Lee, Deshler, & Schelhas, 2003). However, there are also failed ecotourism projects in developing countries due to factors such as lack of effective collaboration among relevant stakeholders, the absence of well-integrated ecotourism plans,

lack of community participation and weak institutional arrangements (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018; Rudovsky, 2015; Southgate, 2006; Stone & Stone, 2011).

Developing countries face acute challenges of strategic, planning and operational competencies required for successful ecotourism development (McCool, 2014). The complex nature of the ecotourism sector due to the presence of diverse actors along with competing interests is a challenge for the effective development and management (Graci, 2013; Parker, 1999; Zapata & Hall, 2012). Providing solutions to challenges that constrain the impacts of ecotourism calls for embracing collaboration over competition and reconciling competing interests of varied stakeholders (Graci, 2013; Stone, 2015; Timur & Getz, 2008; Yodsuwan & Butcher, 2012).

Collaboration is a process in which actors convene together to discuss issues of shared interest with the intention to arrive at a common ground (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Gray, 1989; Jamal & Stronza, 2009). Factors such as power issues, trust, interdependence, reciprocity, transparency, commitment, genuine participation, and accommodativeness often determine the outcome of stakeholder collaboration (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Graci, 2013; Gray, 1989; Hall, 1999; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Selin & Myers, 1995; Selin, Schuett, & Carr, 2000; Stone, 2015; Stone & Stone, 2011; Waddock, 1989; Waddock & Bannister, 1991; Zapata & Hall, 2012). A successful collaboration improves inter-organizational relationships, ensures wider actor participation, brings viable solutions to problems and facilitates the implementation of joint decisions. Collaboration also helps maximise collective yields of the destination where each stakeholder contributes to the overarching sustainable development of ecotourism (Czernek, 2013; Graci, 2013; Yodsuwan & Butcher, 2012). The current study uses collaboration theory to expand our understanding of the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration models. Stakeholder theory, which is also employed in this study, features the reciprocal relationship between actors to mutually exist and thrive in the long run (Bricker & Donohoe, 2015; Freeman, 1984; Marzuki & Hay, 2016). Currently, comprehensive studies that focus on stakeholder collaboration in ecotourism in developing countries are scarce. Thus, this study uses Southern Ethiopia as a research context for an investigation of multiple stakeholder engagement within the ecotourism sector.

## **Factors determining stakeholder collaborations**

As a joint decision-making process among diverse stakeholders, collaboration is determined by a wide variety of factors. These factors influence the inception, development, progress and results of a collaboration, which can be explained in various forms, circumstances, attributes, events, interests and actors' capabilities (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Czernek, 2013; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Stone, 2015; Waayers, Lee, & Newsome, 2012).

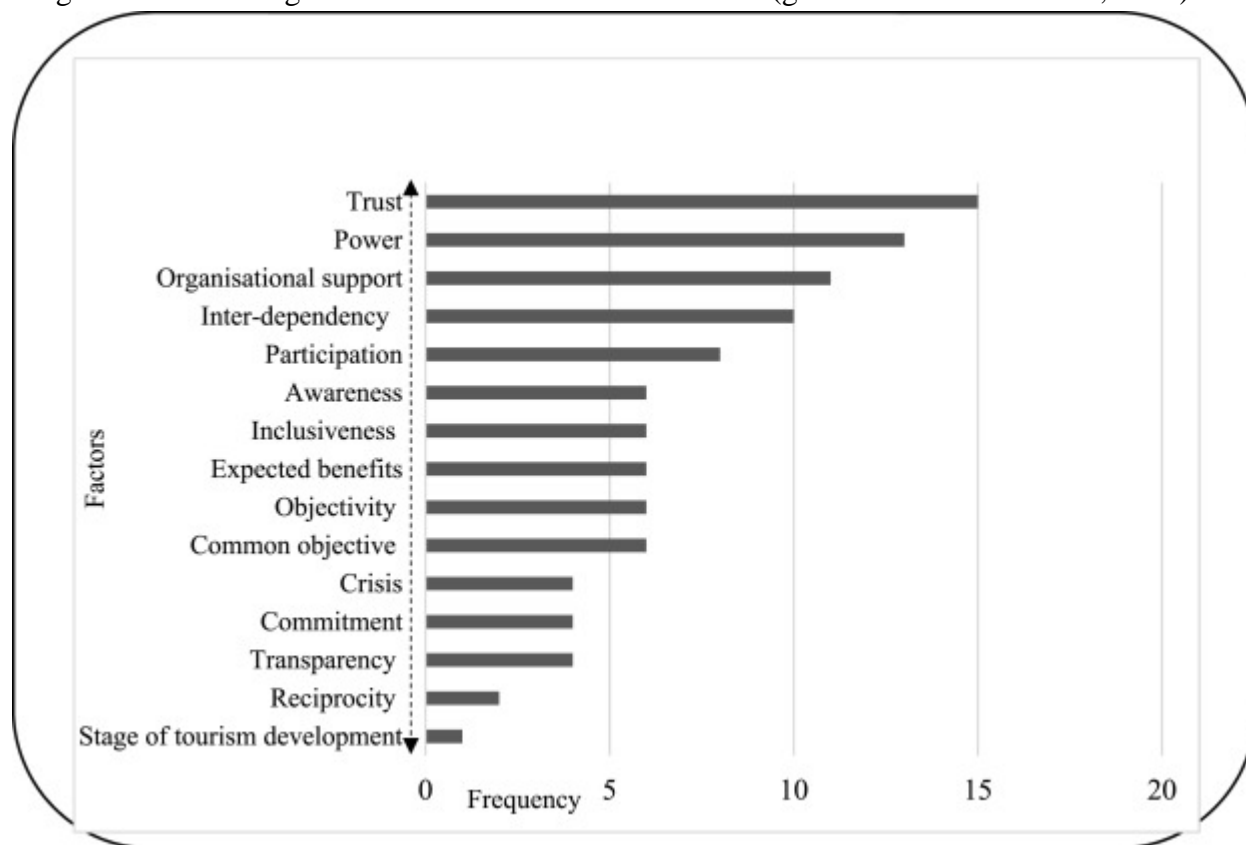
Table 1. Determinant factors of stakeholder collaboration.

<b>Key Factors</b>	<b>Authors</b>
Inter-dependency	Gray, 1989; Waddock, 1989; Wood & Gray, 1991; Waddock & Bannister, 1991; Selin & Myers, 1995; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Hall, 1999; Yodsuwan & Butcher, 2012; Czernek, 2013; Stone, 2015
Transparency	Gray, 1989; Selin & Myers, 1995; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Zapata & Hall, 2012
Shared objective/responsibility	Gray, 1989; Wood & Gray, 1991; Selin & Myers, 1995; Hall, 1999; Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Beritelli, 2011
Power	Gray, 1989; Waddock, 1989; Waddock & Bannister, 1991; Selin & Myers, 1995; Hall, 1999; Selin et al., 2000; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Stone & Stone, 2011; Zapata & Hall, 2012; Graci, 2013; Stone, 2015
Trust	Waddock, 1989; Waddock & Bannister, 1991; Selin & Myers, 1995; Hall, 1999; Selin et al., 2000; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Johnson, Zorn, Tam, Lamontagne, & Johnson, 2003; Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; d'Angella & Go, 2009; Zapata & Hall, 2012; Yodsuwan & Butcher, 2012; Graci, 2013; Czernek, 2013; Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Kelliher, Reinl, Johnson, & Joppe, 2018; Towner, 2018; Mayaka, Croy, & Cox, 2018
Participation	Wood & Gray, 1991; Selin & Myers, 1995; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; d'Angella & Go, 2009; Graci, 2013; Stone & Stone, 2011; Stone, 2015
Organizational support	Waddock, 1989; Johnson et al., 2003; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Pansiri, 2013; Czernek, 2013; Selin & Myers, 1995; Gray, 1989; Waddock, 1989; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Beritelli, 2011
Objectivity	d'Angella & Go, 2009; Hall, 1999
Commitment	Waddock, 1989; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Johnson et al., 2003; Pansiri, 2013
Perceived benefits	Waddock, 1989; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002; d'Angella & Go, 2009; Stone & Stone, 2011; Yodsuwan & Butcher, 2012
Crisis	Waddock, 1989; Czernek, 2013; Stone & Stone, 2011; Johnson et al., 2003; Jiang & Ritchie, 2017
Reciprocity	Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Waddock, 1989; Beritelli, 2011
Stage of tourism development	Czernek, 2013; Czernek & Czakon, 2016

Inclusiveness	Gray, 1989; Waddock & Bannister, 1991; Selin & Myers, 1995; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Hall, 1999; Graci, 2013
Awareness (information)	Beritelli, 2011; Gray, 1989; Waddock, 1989; d'Angella & Go, 2009; Stone & Stone, 2011; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Graci, 2013

The result of reviewed articles illustrates that trust between stakeholders, power issues and organizational support highly influence the inception, progress and development of stakeholder collaboration. Moreover, interdependency, genuine and inclusive participation, the awareness level of stakeholders as well as expected benefits affect the establishment of collaboration (see Fig. 1). This hints the most essential factors to consider in the formation of candid, functional and long-term stakeholder collaboration and partnership (Hatipoglu, Alvarez, & Ertuna, 2016; Jiang & Ritchie, 2017; Kelliher et al., 2018; Osman, Shaw, & Kenawy, 2018).

Figure 1. Influencing factors of stakeholder collaboration (generated from literature, 2018).



### Advantages of collaboration for sustainable ecotourism development

The inherent complexity and fragmented nature of ecotourism make sustainable ecotourism development a challenge (Graci, 2013; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Parker, 1999; Zapata & Hall, 2012). The development of tourism sustainable in economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects, does require partnership and collaboration amongst various stakeholders



(Timur & Getz, 2008; Yodsuwan & Butcher, 2012). Literature suggests the creation of strong stakeholder collaboration that enhances organizational innovativeness, efficiency and improves relationships (Heugens, Van Den Bosch, & Van Riel, 2002; Manyara & Jones, 2007; Nogueira & Pinho, 2014; Southgate, 2006; Stone & Stone, 2011).

Generally, effective stakeholder collaboration results in the following:

- facilitating the sustainable development of ecotourism through reconciling ecotourism plans with other economic development programs (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Joppe, 1996; Timothy, 1999);
- devising comprehensive solutions (Graci, 2013);
- enhancing plans feasibility (Kennedy et al., 2013; Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2013);
- promoting discussions, communications and negotiations among ecotourism stakeholders (de Araujo & Bramwell, 2002; Graci, 2013) and
- boosting trust and mutual understanding between stakeholders (de Araujo & Bramwell, 2002; Graci, 2013).

Therefore, stakeholder collaboration is fundamental for effective and coordinated destination management and marketing, the safety and security of visitor destinations, communication between stakeholders, improvement of basic infrastructure, positive visitor experience, destination competitiveness and better collective yield (de Araujo & Bramwell, 2002; Dimmock, Hawkins, & Tiyce, 2014; Graci, 2013; Nogueira & Pinho, 2014; Timothy, 1999; Koens et al., 2009; Towner, 2018). Moreover, effective stakeholder collaboration boosts community-based ecotourism practices (Buckley, 2003a; Butcher, 2011; Diamantis, 2018; Timothy & White, 1999). Community-based ecotourism is a type of tourism that emphasises community participation and promotes local control over ecotourism development and management (Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, 2019; Curcija, Breakey, & Driml, 2019; Masud et al., 2017; Mayaka et al., 2018; Murphy, 1985; Stem et al., 2003; Timothy & White, 1999). Community-based ecotourism also places greater importance on communities and helps increase their contribution to the tourism value chain through providing tourist products and services such as village tours, accommodations, gift items and cultural shows (Mondino & Beery, 2018; Moscardo, 2008; Sakata & Prideaux, 2013). Nevertheless, ensuring stakeholder collaboration is a great challenge for ecotourism due to the existence of diverse and competing interests from a wide variety of actors. While the above studies demonstrate the paramount importance of stakeholder collaboration, frameworks that help achieve effective collaboration are still lacking. Therefore, the current study strives to formulate a stakeholder collaboration framework that helps facilitate ecotourism stakeholder collaboration in developing countries. However, it should also be noted that even though stakeholder collaboration brings several benefits, it also can carry problems that constrain sustainable ecotourism development (Chapman, 1998; Waayers et al., 2012).

## **Setbacks of stakeholder collaboration**

One of the fundamental questions stakeholder theory attempts to address is who must be considered as a stakeholder and deserves management attention and which should not (Graci, 2013; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997; Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005). However, a meticulous identification of stakeholders with their true intention and ensuring a successful interaction and collaboration among them is demanding and can be unrealistic (Davies & White, 2012; Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005). To a larger extent challenges stem from the multifaceted nature of destination management and patchy stakeholder features (Aas, Ladkin, & Fletcher, 2005; Bäckstrand, 2006; Diamantis, 2018; Towner, 2018). Mistrust, misunderstanding and lack of transparent communication could lead to the scramble of limited resources and result in environmental destruction (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Hall & Jenkins, 2004; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; McDonald, 2009). Bramwell and Lane (2000) outlined various shortcomings of stakeholder collaboration including:

- Collaboration may block healthy conflicts;
- Collaborative efforts may require more resources;
- Stakeholders with less power may be excluded from the process of collaborative working or may have less influence on the process;
- The need to develop consensus and the need to disclose new ideas in advance might discourage entrepreneurial development;
- Engaging diverse stakeholders in policymaking is problematic in nature to adequately address individual interest;
- The power of some partnerships may be too strong, leading to the creation of cartels;
- In many instances, collaboration and partnerships might be manipulated and suffered the risk of becoming merely an information dissemination panel.

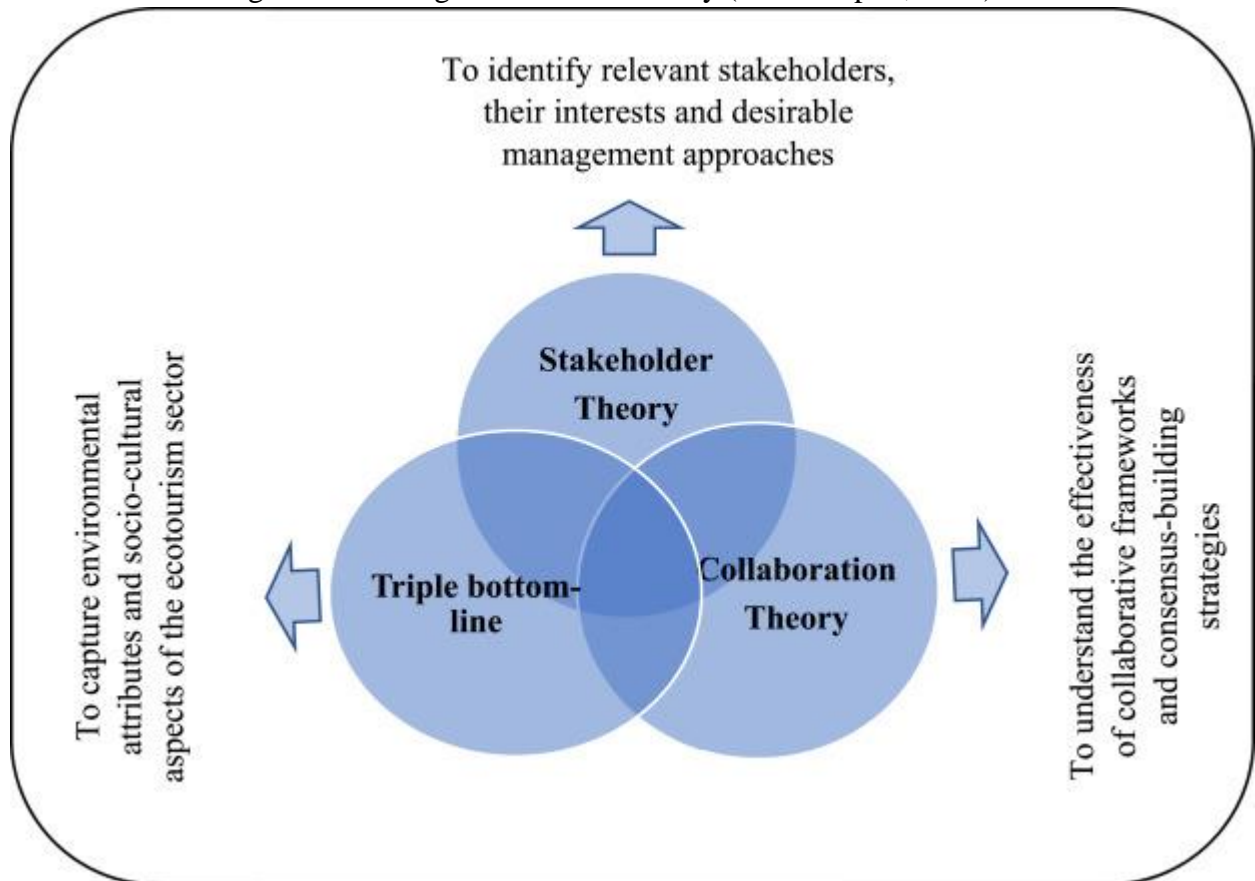
Therefore, understanding the drawbacks of collaboration along with its advantages is instrumental for ecotourism stakeholders to prepare remedies ahead instead of struggling in the middle of a collaboration process. Furthermore, recognising such limitations of collaboration is crucial for stakeholders to be psychologically and mentally ready for the inevitable stalemates since the road to consensus building could be more daunting than expected.

## **Guiding theories**

To formulate a stakeholder collaboration framework for sustainable ecotourism and achieve its other study objectives, the current study adopts and integrates stakeholder theory, collaboration theory and the concept of triple-bottom-line (see Fig. 2). Stakeholder theory, which is introduced for the first time by the Stanford Research Institute in 1963 (Marzuki & Hay, 2016) and further elaborated by Freeman (1984) is employed in the current study to identify relevant stakeholders and their appropriate management strategies (Mitchell et al., 1997; Savage et al., 2010; Yodsuwan & Butcher, 2012). Stakeholder theory is a concept

related to the proper management of organizational matters by addressing possible moral and ethical issues that potentially arise regarding the organization's activities (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & De Colle, 2010). Stakeholders are actors without whose support the organization would cease to exist (Marzuki & Hay, 2016). According to Freeman (1984), a stakeholder is “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives” (p. 46). Consequently, stakeholder theory strongly underlines the significance of collaboration and partnership between actors for the accomplishment of common goals (Bricker & Donohoe, 2015). Mutually interdependent attributes such as power, legitimacy, and urgency are determinant dimensions of stakeholder theory (Mitchell et al., 1997). The adoption of stakeholder theory into the current study enables identification of relevant ecotourism stakeholders, their characteristics, nature, expectations, and roles in the ecotourism sector. Understanding the nature, characteristics, interests, and roles, in turn, would improve stakeholder management and ease the formation of viable collaboration among stakeholders.

Figure 2. Guiding theories of the study (Authors' plot, 2018).



Collaboration theory underscores that decisions have a high probability of implementation and success when key stakeholders participate in problem identification, direction setting, structuring and enactment (Gray, 1989). A collaborative effort is considered to be effective (1) when a fair and lasting agreement is reached and the agreed-upon issues are implemented (Gray, 1989), (2) when collaboration entails a joint decision-making among participant stakeholders (Jamal & Getz, 1995) and (3) if a collaboration effort is inclusive enough and

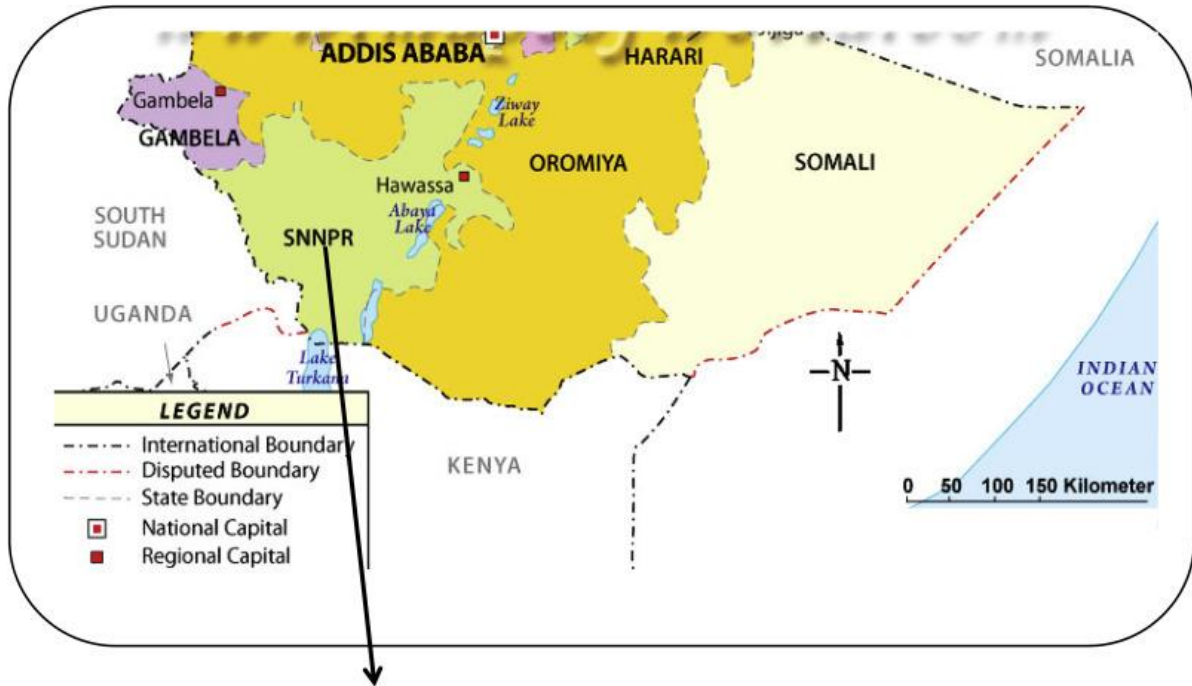
enhances collective learning that leads to consensus building (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999). Hence, collaboration theory helps to understand the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration efforts (Gray, 1989; Jamal & Getz, 1995).

The concept of triple-bottom-line (TBL) is employed to capture ecological sustainability and social justice, which are overlooked by the above theories due to their focus on economic pillar primarily. Triple bottom-line (TBL) is a concept that duly considers environmental, social and economic aspects in decision-making (Dwyer, 2015; Hede, 2007; Stoddard, Pollard, & Evans, 2012). The tourism sector provides a unique opportunity to examine the efficiency of TBL since it is comprised of multiple stakeholders with different values and interests (Buckley, 2003b). According to Faux and Dwyer (2009), Dwyer (2015) and Stoddard et al. (2012), tourism sector gains tremendous advantages such as improved efficiency and cost savings, improved market positioning, better stakeholder relationships, improved strategic decision-making, and wider destination benefits and competitiveness through adopting principles of triple-bottom-line. Therefore, integrating these three theories enables the current study to better understand proper mechanisms of stakeholder analysis and consensus-building strategies taking the concept of sustainability into account.

## **Research context**

Ethiopia is a vast country with diverse cultural, historical, anthropological and natural attractions (Frost & Shanka, 2002; Feseha, 2012; Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2009). The country possesses a long and uninterrupted history (Feseha, 2012) and retains its unique cultural identities and history by defending itself from colonisation (Frost & Shanka, 2002; Kebete & Wondirad, 2019; Wondirad, Tolkach, & King, 2019). There are five major tourist routes in the country that link widely scattered attractions of the country (Ethiopian Tourism Organization, 2017) see Fig. 5. The present study focuses on the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS), which is one of the nine autonomous federal regions located in the Southern and Southwestern Ethiopia (see Fig. 3). Bordered with two neighbouring countries, the region provides one of the major tourist routes with immense potential for ecotourism development. Southern Ethiopia is a mosaic of nations and nationalities with more than 56 ethnic tribes maintaining their distinctive language, culture, and social identities (SNNPRS Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2018). Southern Ethiopia's blend of contemporary systems of public administration and governance and traditional chiefly-based administration are common characteristics in many post-colonial developing countries. The diversity of the societal, economic and cultural attributes of the region offers a research setting that encompasses many common features of developing countries. Bird watching spots and indigenous ethnic tribes such as Mursi, Hamar, Karo, Surma, and Tsamai are among the tourism assets of the region. Four UNESCO World Heritage sites of the country (Tiya Stalae, Lower Valley of the Omo, Konso Cultural Landscape and Fiche Chambalala) are also found in the SNNPRS (SNNPRS Culture and Tourism Office, 2012). Moreover, seven national parks of the country with diverse flora and fauna are found in this region (Ethiopian Tourism Organization, 2017).

Figure 3. Map of SNNPRS (Maps of World, 2019).



Even though travel flows into the region are incommensurate with its diverse natural and cultural attractions, data from the Regional Tourism Bureau (see Fig. 4) shows a consistent steady growth of both international and domestic tourist arrivals over the previous two decades.

Figure 4. Domestic and international tourist arrivals in SNNPR (1995–2016).

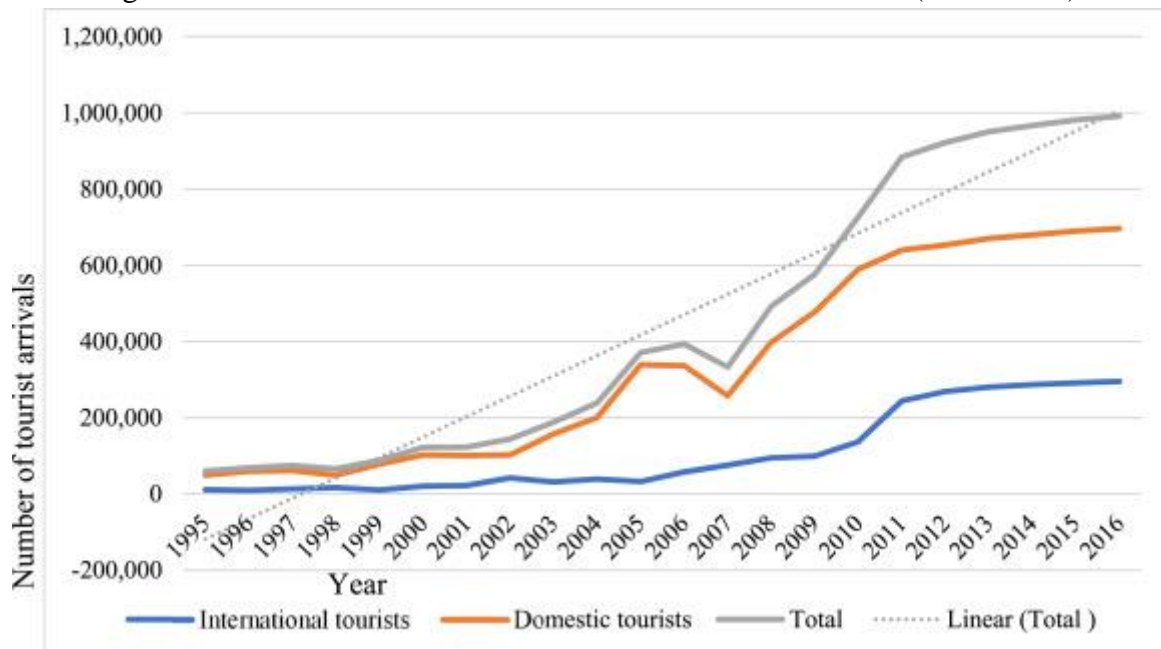
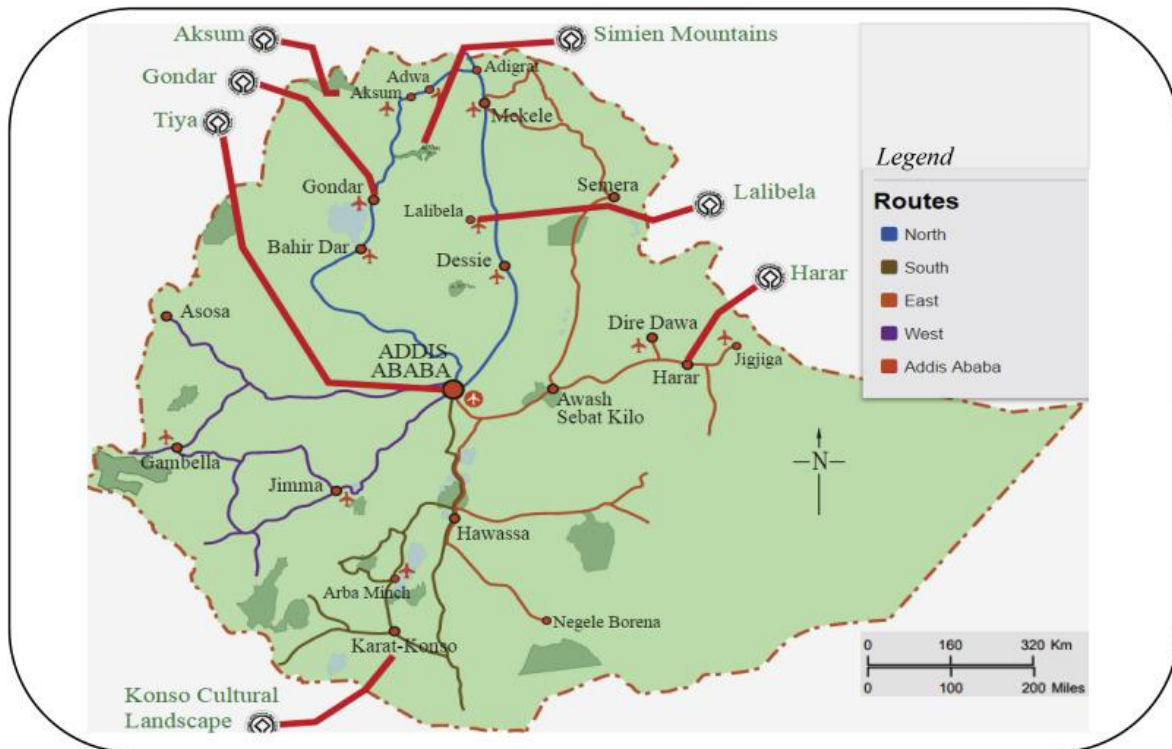


Figure 5. Major tourist routes in Ethiopia (ETO, 2017).



The current study data collection sites of Hawassa, Arbaminch, and Konso are the major tourist destinations in the Southern Ethiopia tourism route (see Fig. 5). Hawassa is the capital City of Southern Nations and Nationalities People's Regional State located in the Great Rift Valley system of East Africa (Tamene & Wondirad, 2019) and Arbaminch is one of the largest towns in SNNPRS (SNNPRS Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2018; Lonely Planet, 2016). Both Hawassa and Arbaminch have a wide range of natural and cultural attractions within a close range. Konso, on the other hand, possesses a well-known cultural landscape of 55 km<sup>2</sup> arid territory with stone-walled terraces and fortified community settlements (UNESCO, 2016). Konso tribes are known for terracing practices and efficient land use planning and management, which boost agricultural productivity and water conservation in a hostile environment (The Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritages & Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2009). As a result, UNESCO registered Konso cultural landscape in 2011 as a World Heritage site.

## Research method

In order to achieve objectives set out in the introduction, the current study adopts an exploratory qualitative research approach largely due to lack of adequate previous research on the topic (Creswell, 2013; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 2002; Stake, 2010). A constructivist paradigm informs the current study since epistemologically it allows flexibility in the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013; Schwandt, 2000). Ontologically constructivist paradigm underlines the existence of multiple constructed realities that are unique to a given context

(Guba, 1990; Ritchie et al., 2013) and methodologically it permits for an in-depth extraction of realities using multiple data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews, focus group interviews and field observations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ritchie et al., 2013; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). As Guba (1990) and Creswell (2003) noted, constructive epistemology permits a close interaction between the researchers and the researched subjects and enables to capture respondents' unique worldviews. Given, the current study is guided by a qualitative research approach, adopting such a paradigm is relevant to properly address research objectives. Researchers took maximum care towards the trustworthiness of research findings to boost the quality of research outputs (Decrop, 1999; Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). Consequently, pilot study, method triangulation, member checks, and confirmability audit were performed to make sure that findings are reliable. Furthermore, to maintain consistency, all data collection, transcription and translation are executed by the researchers. Both focus group and in-depth interview questions were guided by adapted theories.

## **Study participants**

Federal, regional and local government organizations (Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Ministry of Forest and Environment), local communities, private ecotourism institutions (tour operators and ecolodges) and non-governmental organizations are participants of the current study. Table 2 and Table 3 provide background information of in-depth interview participants and focus group discussants respectively. Purposive and snowball participant selection techniques were used based on predetermined criteria. Since the study requires respondents who have extensive experience within the ecotourism sector in the region and familiarity with the research problems stated, purposive and snowball sampling techniques are found to be appropriate. Hence, in case of governmental organizations and the private sector, 5+ years of experience, NGOs: 2+ years of experience in ecotourism projects and as far as local communities are concerned, those who have links and familiarity with the ecotourism sector were chosen as participants both for an in-depth interview and focus group interviews. Interviews were carried out until theoretical saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2014; Mason, 2010). Researchers understood that the collection and extraction of additional data appear counter-productive adding not necessarily new information to the overall story, model or theory framework and research problem indicating the cutting point of data collection (Mason, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All interviews were conducted face to face by the researchers. Each interview (about 70 min on average) was audio-recorded with consent for subsequent transcription and analysis. In order to protect the interest and privacy of research participants and strictly obey research integrity, the current study thoroughly considers ethical issues and provided every research participant with written informed consent. Researchers extracted a thick chunk of data out of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to build a theoretical framework (see Fig. 13). Each interview and focus group discussion question was followed by in-depth probing to further clarify ideas and uncover relevant information. Given the main purpose of a qualitative study is to advance an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon instead of drawing generalisation (Crouch & McKenzie,

2006) and since theoretical saturation was adequately reached, researchers believe that the number of participants sufficed to the study mission.

Table 2. Background information of in-depth interviews participants.

<b>Respondent No.</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Respondents' base</b>
1	Local community	F	20–30	Hawassa
2	Local community	M	41–50	Arbaminch
3	Local community	M	41–50	Konso
4	Local community	M	20–30	Hawassa
5	Local community	M	31–40	Arbaminch
6	Local community	M	50+	Konso
7	Local Community	M	41–50	Hawassa
8	Government organization	M	31–40	Addis Ababa
9	Government organization	M	41–50	Addis Ababa
10	Government organization	M	41–50	Addis Ababa
11	Government organization	M	41–50	Addis Ababa
12	Government organization	M	41–50	Arbaminch
13	Government organization	M	50+	Hawassa
14	Government organization	M	31–40	Konso
15	Government organization	M	31–40	Hawassa
16	Private ecotourism enterprise	M	31–40	Hawassa
17	Private ecotourism enterprise	M	41–50	Hawassa
18	Private ecotourism enterprise	M	41–50	Hawassa
19	Private ecotourism enterprise	F	31–40	Addis Ababa
20	Private ecotourism enterprise	M	31–40	Arbaminch
21	Private ecotourism enterprise	M	31–40	Konso
22	Private ecotourism enterprise	M	31–40	Konso



23	Non-governmental organization	M	41–50	Arbaminch
24	Non-governmental organization	M	31–40	Konso
25	Non-governmental organization	M	50+	HQ Addis Ababa & operates in SNNPRS
Government Organizations belong to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism; Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority and Ministry of Forest and Environment.				
Note: English was used as an interview language for respondents 1, 7, 10, 17 and 25. Amharic was employed for the rest of the respondents.				

Table 3. Background information of focus group discussions participants.

Respondent No.	Organization	Sex	Age
1. Hawassa (Conducted on Saturday, April 9, 2016)			
1	Local community	M	50+
2	Ec lodge manager	M	31–40
3	Tourism expert (government)	M	31–40
4	Non-governmental organization (coordinator)	M	41–50
5	Tour operator representative	M	31–40
2. Arbaminch (Conducted on Saturday, May 7, 2016)			
6	Local community	M	50+
7	Ec lodge manager	M	31–40
8	Tourism expert (government)	M	31–40
9	Non-governmental organization (consultant)	M	41–50
10	Tour operator representative	M	31–40
3. Konso (Conducted on Saturday, June 11, 2016)			
11	Local community Chief	M	50+
12	Ec lodge manager	M	31–40
13	Tourism expert from local government	M	41–50
14	Domestic Non-governmental organization (head)	M	41–50
15	Tour operator representative	M	31–40

Data collection took place in the capital Addis Ababa and three locations (Hawassa, Arbaminch, and Konso) in Southern Ethiopia (see Fig. 5) from 2016 to 2018. These sites were selected based on specific criteria relevant to the study such as:

- The ecotourism resource base of the site

- Accessibility to the site and infrastructural development issues within sites, and
- The present state of visitor flows and ecotourism development in the destinations.

## Data analysis

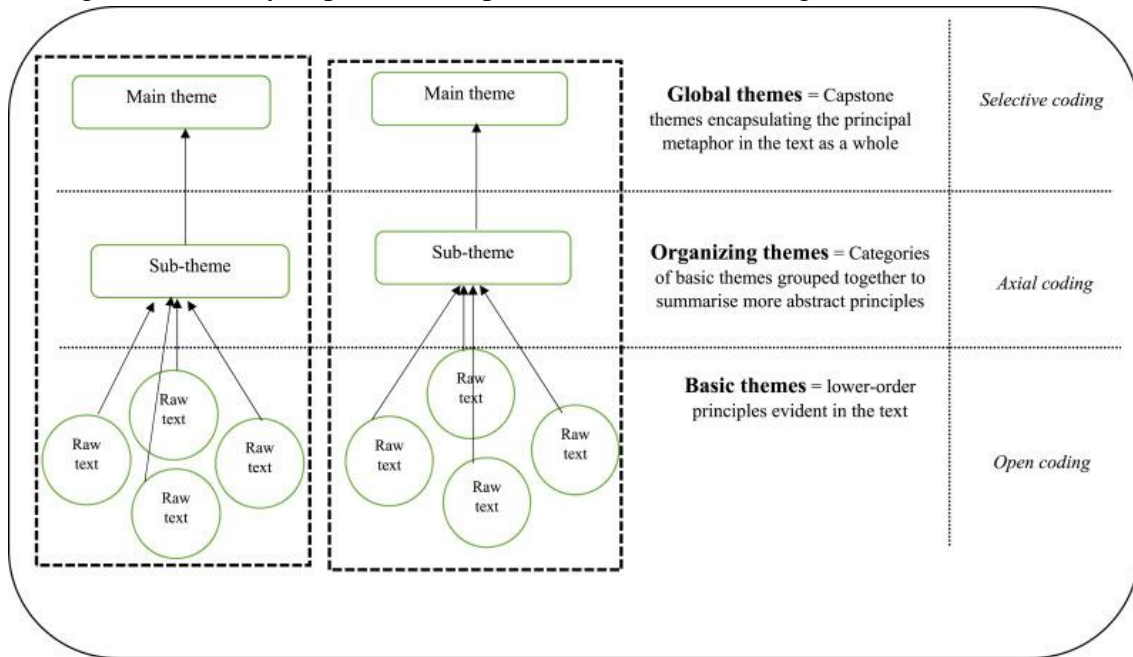
All face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Amharic (Ethiopian national language), audio-recorded, transcribed, translated into English and purified for coding. Then, data analysis was conducted using content analysis assisted with QDA Miner version 4.1.33 Qualitative Data Analysis Software (see Fig. 6). Content analysis is a systematic collection, classification, description, investigation, and synthesis of patterns or themes of data (mostly non-numeric) to deepen understanding of a phenomenon (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Mohammed, Guillet, & Law, 2015). By boosting external validity, content analysis enhances the practical applicability of studies (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). Three types of coding (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) were applied in the data analysis process (see Fig. 7).

Figure 6. Data coding and organizing process (Authors' survey, 2018).

The screenshot displays the QDA Miner software interface with several key components:

- Cases:** A list of cases including PRSE2, PRSE3, PRSTO1, PRSTO2, PRSTO3, PRSTO4, and RGOV1. PRSTO2 is highlighted.
- Major themes:** A list of themes such as Environmental Sustainability and Cultural Conservation, Community participation and Livelihood Improvement, Factors That Affect Stakeholders' Collaboration, Lack of trust and mutual understanding, Poor culture of collaboration, Power/Friction, Egocentricity, Lack of Awareness, Development Stage of Ecotourism, Resource Limitations, Lack of good governance, Lack of sufficient discussion and communication, Existence of Diverse Interests and Unhealthy Competition, Suggested Solutions to Challenges, Creating Awareness, Cultivating Trust and Mutual Understanding, Decentralizing Power, Restructure the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Formulating a Harmonized Plan, Improving Commitment, Designing Strict Ethical Standards, Designing a System where Stakeholders Regularly Meet, Creating Experience Sharing Mechanizems, Allocating Sufficient Resources, Fighting Poverty, Formulating Comprehensive and Well-articulated Agendas, Establishing a Strong Responsible Organ, Empowering and Building Local Communities' Capacity, Integrating Ecotourism with Local Economic Activities, Cultural Revolution, Installing Good Governance, Designing Proper Follow-up and Evaluation Scheme, Compromise and Narrowdown Differences, and Giving fair and Lasting Solutions for Park Ownership and Ill.
- Open codes from a case:** A list of codes including A Contemporary and Preferred Type, Conserves and Promotes the Sust, EmConserves and Promotes the Sust, Empowers, participates and Benef, A Contemporary and Preferred Type, Major and Networking, Deficient, Weak, Inconsistent and De, Lack of Effective Governance, Deficient, Weak, Inconsistent and t, Deficient, Weak, Inconsistent and De, Resource Destruction due to Lack, Deficient, Weak, Inconsistent and t, Development Stage of Ecotourism, Resource Limitations, Lack of Awareness, Existence of Diverse Interests and t, Lack of trust and mutual understa, Lack of good governance, Lack of good governance, and Unidentified network.
- Text Document:** A document titled "Private sector Tour operator 2" containing three questions and their answers. Annotations include "A purified and organized case on display" and "Major and Networking".
- Sub-themes:** A list of sub-themes including Environmental Sustainability and Cultural Conservation, Community participation and Livelihood Improvement, Factors That Affect Stakeholders' Collaboration, Lack of trust and mutual understanding, Poor culture of collaboration, Power/Friction, Egocentricity, Lack of Awareness, Development Stage of Ecotourism, Resource Limitations, Lack of good governance, Lack of sufficient discussion and communication, Existence of Diverse Interests and Unhealthy Competition, Suggested Solutions to Challenges, Creating Awareness, Cultivating Trust and Mutual Understanding, Decentralizing Power, Restructure the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Formulating a Harmonized Plan, Improving Commitment, Designing Strict Ethical Standards, Designing a System where Stakeholders Regularly Meet, Creating Experience Sharing Mechanizems, Allocating Sufficient Resources, Fighting Poverty, Formulating Comprehensive and Well-articulated Agendas, Establishing a Strong Responsible Organ, Empowering and Building Local Communities' Capacity, Integrating Ecotourism with Local Economic Activities, Cultural Revolution, Installing Good Governance, Designing Proper Follow-up and Evaluation Scheme, Compromise and Narrowdown Differences, and Giving fair and Lasting Solutions for Park Ownership and Ill.

Fig. 7. Data analysis process (adapted from Attride-Stirling, 2001; Strauss, 1987).



Open coding was used initially to identify key concepts or topics (Merriam, 2009). Axial coding then was employed to relate similar or related concepts into categories and to explore relationships between subcategories (Merriam, 2009; Pandit, 1996). Finally, selective coding was applied as a final step to integrate and refine categories to build a theoretical framework (Merriam, 2009; Pandit, 1996; Strauss, 1987). In-depth interviews led to the emergence of 184 distinct codes which are organized into 42 sub-themes that lead to 17 major themes. 45 codes in 15 sub-themes and 5 major themes were extracted from the focus groups interviews. As a result, the study is inductive in nature and employs content analysis as a data analysis technique. Themes are clustered in line with research objectives (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Fraser, 2004; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Accordingly, relevant themes related to the current state of ecotourism are grouped together, while themes that explain present stakeholder interactions and collaboration are categorised into another cluster. Finally, factors pertinent to the formulation of effective stakeholder collaboration and partnership come under the same category for further analysis. Fig. 6 is a snapshot of the QDA Miner interface virtually depicting how the coding was performed.

## Findings and discussions

### Ecotourism development and stakeholder engagements in Southern Ethiopia

The findings of this study reveal that despite the vast potential for ecotourism development, currently, the ecotourism development in Southern Ethiopia is not only in its infancy, but also is growing inappropriately by overlooking the principles of triple-bottom-line. The development approach that the government advocates is growth-oriented which neglects the

fundamental pillars of the triple-bottom-line concept. Developing nations usually measure success in terms of economic returns and visitor arrivals instead of the net effects of tourism on the environment, local economy and community (Bien, 2010; Ruhanen, 2013). In developing countries, economic returns of tourism draw more attention at the cost of destinations' environmental and socio-cultural heritages (Parker, 1999; Ruhanen, 2013; Scheyvens, 1999). As a result, governments of developing countries would welcome any type of ecotourism development in favour of economic benefits despite environmental and socio-cultural repercussions (de Haas, 2002). Participant 11 reflects on this as follows:

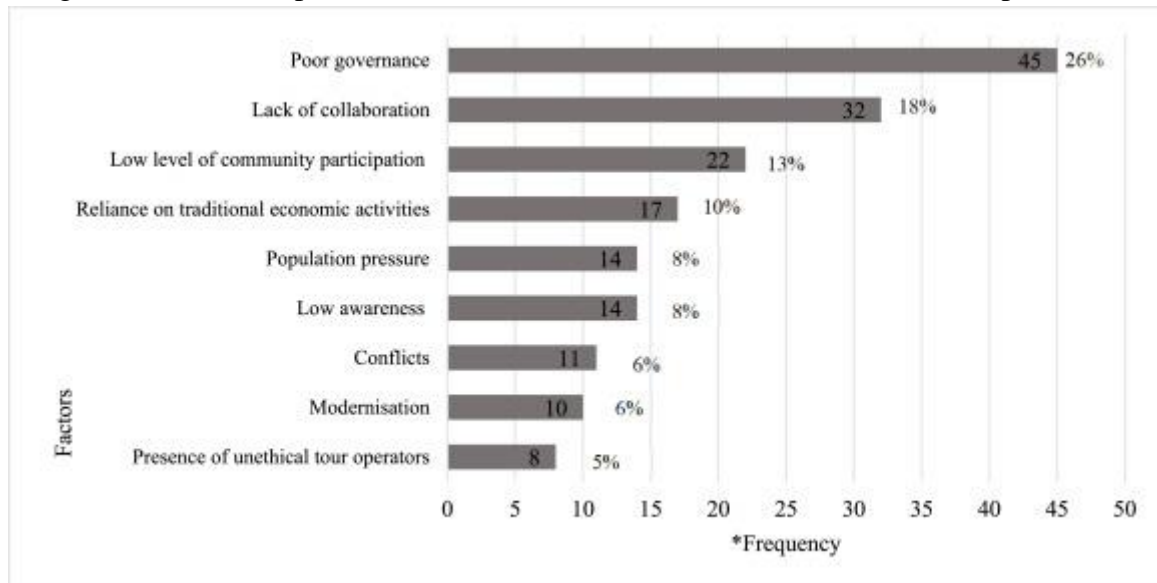
*Even there are conflicting perspectives between professionals and officials as far as the ecotourism development approach is concerned. Professionals argue for the development of adequate and standardised infrastructure and facilities, ecosystem and environment rehabilitation followed by marketing to visitors, while officials espouse the idea of developing and promoting ecotourism concurrently due to the urgently needed ecotourism revenue (Participant 11, Addis Ababa).*

As frequently stated by research participants, in Southern Ethiopia presently both the natural and cultural resources of the region are deteriorating at alarming rate defying the claim that ecotourism contributes to the protection and conservation of ecological and cultural heritages (Parker & Khare, 2005; Honey, 2008; Lindsey, Alexander, Mills, Romanach, & Woodroffe, 2007; TIES, 2018). Numerous factors contribute to the rapid resource damage as Fig. 6 shows. As a result, in Southern Ethiopia, currently, both the natural and cultural resource base, upon which the ecotourism sector itself relies on, are in jeopardy. The following excerpt from a private ecotourism respondent asserts this as follows:

*I have been working in the tourism sector for the last 25 years. As one of the most popular tourism corridors in the country, especially for nature-based and cultural tourists, we organize countless trips to Southern Ethiopia throughout the year. In my entire experiences, I could closely observe that our natural resources have been deteriorating and cultural heritages been fading away gradually. If things continue in the way they currently are, I strongly warn that there will be no reasons for visitors to go to Southern Ethiopia in ten years or so (Participant 17, Addis Ababa).*

Respondents mentioned poor governance, lack of awareness, poor community participation in ecotourism, dependence on traditional economic activities, increasing population pressure and poor stakeholder collaboration as top factors responsible for the destruction of ecotourism resources (see Fig. 8).

Figure 8. Factors responsible for ecotourism resource destruction (Authors' plot, 2018)



Frequency represents the number of mentions of each factor by respondents.

Poor governance was mentioned 45 times accounting for 26% of the factors of ecotourism resource destruction, while lack of stakeholder collaboration and poor community participation constitute 18% and 13% of the factors respectively (see Fig. 8). The incompetent tourism policy formulated in 2009 that disregards environmental issues and the development of sustainable and equitable tourism is one indicator of inadequate government attention to the ecotourism sector. In this respect, the previous prime minister of the country emphasised that political leaders should feel remorseful and take historical accountability for the extinction of wildlife and environmental degradation (Ethiopian Reporter, 2016). A continuous public discontent and protest in Konso due to marginalisation from economic benefits of ecotourism and the government's violation of negotiation reached between provides strong evidence of poor governance as a grave challenge in Southern Ethiopia. The negotiation which was drafted by the UNWTO and come into effect since 2007 states that 80% of the tourism revenue should be distributed within the local community and the remaining 20% needs to be allocated for administrative purposes of the district. Moreover, endemic corruption across the region appeared to have a deleterious impact on sustainable ecotourism development (Avraham & Ketter, 2016; Backman & Munanura, 2015). Traditional substance economic practices cause forest clearing and soil erosion contributing to ecosystem destruction. Mounting population pressure and lack of awareness about the practical aspects of sustainability also led to the current environmental degradation.

Presently, the ecotourism sector is heavily controlled by the private sector mainly residing in the capital and abroad, the federal and regional government and few elites within the community as participants constantly describe, compromising the concept of equity and fairness in the distribution of ecotourism benefits. Representatives from the local community expressed that in many circumstances they are deliberately excluded from the benefits of ecotourism development and management. Their view is supported by a participant representing a tour operator as follows:

*Linkages between communities and tour operators are almost non-existent. As tour operators are owned privately, their prime objective is to maximise profit in any way at the expense of communities and the ecotourism resource. To make things even worse, tour operators warn their guides to abstain from creating any interactions between ecotourists and communities. They believe that if locals understand the economic values of ecotourism, they will compromise their business in the long-run (Participant 5, Hawassa).*

Due to that, except for very few attempts (e.g. in Dorze, Arbaminch, in Yirgalem, and Zeway), currently, there are no systematically organized community-based ecotourism establishments in Southern Ethiopia. Community-based ecotourism is advocated to ensure community engagement for effective sustainable resource management and environmental conservation practices (Curcija et al., 2019; Masud et al., 2017). Ensuring local community participation in ecotourism is widely advocated in developing countries (Ballantyne & Packer, 2013; Bello, Carr & Lovelock, 2016; Bello, Lovelock & Carr, 2016; Butcher, 2007; Mayaka et al., 2018; Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018; Sakata & Prideaux, 2013; Scheyvens, 1999, 2000). Nevertheless, the findings of the current research demonstrate poor participation of communities in the ecotourism development and management confirming existing literature (Bello et al., 2016a; Bello, Lovelock & Carr, 2016b; Li, 2005; Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018; Pasape, Anderson, & Lindi, 2013; Pasape, Anderson, & Lindi, 2015a; Pasape, Anderson, & Lindi, 2015b; Pyke, Law, Jiang, & de Lacy, 2018; Tosun, 2000).

Numerous critical factors specific to developing economies deter local communities' participation, among them: absence of continuous government support, corrupted government structure, lack of monitoring and evaluation, lack of awareness, the dearth of entrepreneurial skills and a shortage of financial resources (Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Mgonja et al., 2015; Towner, 2018). Moreover, lack of empowerment and limited capacity, lack of marketing and promotion skills, low community organization initiatives, poor networking, poor communication skills and lack of effective collaboration with other ecotourism stakeholders significantly hamper community engagement (Wang, Cater, & Low, 2016; de los Angeles & Gunnarsdotter, 2012; Cobbinah et al., 2017). The small volume of economic benefits that accrue from the prevailing ecotourism sector, which relates to the stage of ecotourism development and communities' weak internal organization also affect communities' active participation (Lepp, 2008a; Chuang, 2010; Lee, 2013; Pyke et al., 2018; Lee & Jan 2019). Most factors emanate from the external environment, while some factors such as poor self-organization (Towner, 2018) stem internally from the communities themselves.

NGO participants noted that NGOs play essential roles in addressing some of the constraints of community participation by promoting the establishment of effective stakeholder collaboration (Butcher, 2007; Zhuang, Lassoie, & Wolf, 2011). However, despite the substantial supports that NGOs provide, the Ethiopian government perceives them as foreign agents and political opponents which negatively influence NGOs' performance (Clark, 2000). The federal government strictly monitors the practices of NGOs by introducing prohibitive civil society decrees (Bekele, Hopkins, & Noble, 2009; Clark, 2000; Dupuy, Ron, & Prakash, 2015). Nevertheless, it could be also argued that these NGOs performed well because of the

presence of strict monitoring and evaluation schemes pressing them to deliver some sort of discernible outcomes.

## **Stakeholder relationships and what influences them**

The concept of stakeholder relationship is instrumental for the planning and management of tourist destinations (Beritelli, 2011; Pulido-Fernández & Merinero-Rodríguez, 2018). Stakeholder relationship is understood as a set of non-uniform interactions between actors of the tourism sector in a specific destination (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016; Pulido-Fernández & Merinero-Rodríguez, 2018). Depending on various circumstances, stakeholders may establish different types of relationships and interactions (Baggio, 2011; Beritelli, 2011; Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Munanura & Backman, 2012; van der Zee & Vanneste, 2015; Wang & Krakover, 2008). Hence, under different circumstances, stakeholders might choose to compete, cooperate or coopete (compete and cooperate simultaneously) with their counterparts (Denicolai, Cioccarelli, & Zucchella, 2010; van der Zee & Vanneste, 2015). It is also common to see stakeholders interacting vertically, horizontally and/or adopt a hybrid approach (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Baggio, 2011; van der Zee & Vanneste, 2015). Given tourist destinations are the venues of an amalgam of different stakeholders, the establishment of relationships between these stakeholders is crucial (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016). A successful tourism network comprises of tourism stakeholders who work together consistently and interdependently maintaining a proper balance of co-mpetition, driven by trust and reciprocity (Beritelli, 2011). Nonetheless, research participants indicated that in Sothern Ethiopia currently there is a shortage of ecotourism stakeholder interactions or relationships. The existing relationships and interactions between and amongst ecotourism stakeholders are more informal and sporadic or seasonal in nature.

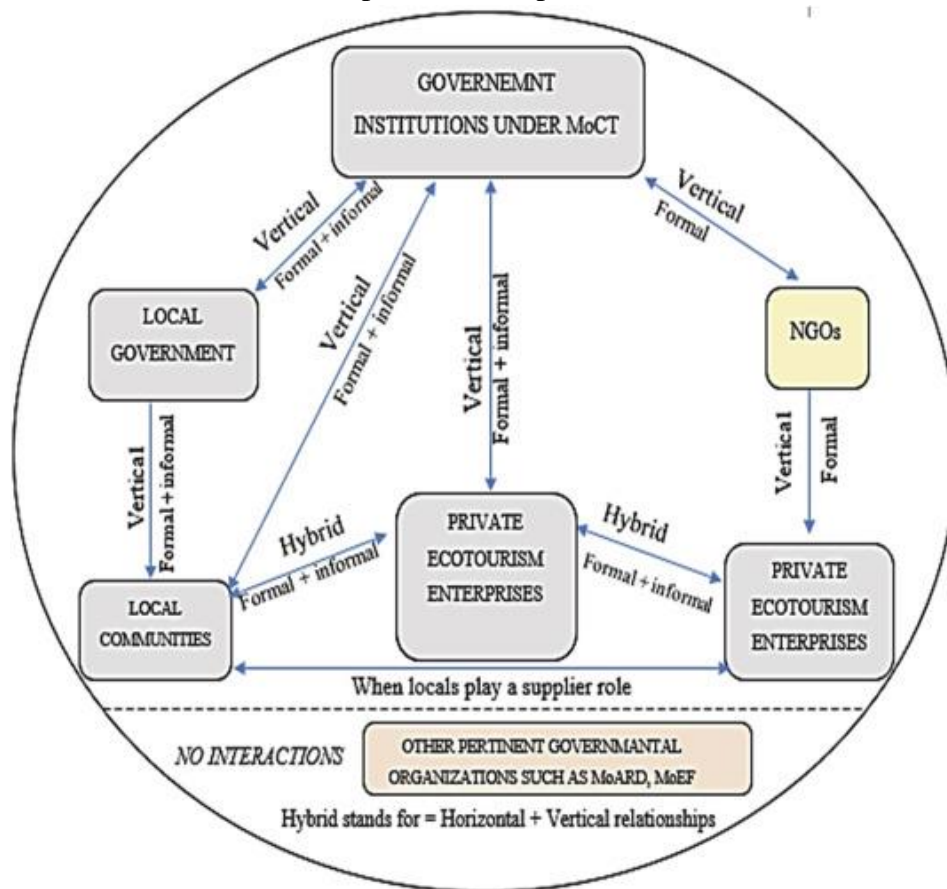
The following excerpt from a local community representative epitomises the majority's view: *Well, in the first place, relationships and interactions amongst ecotourism stakeholders in Southern Ethiopia are currently scarce. Furthermore, most of the existing ecotourism stakeholder relationships and interactions are rather informal and seasonal lacking consistency and formal structure (Participant 2, Arbaminch).*

Most of the existing stakeholder interactions and relationships lack transparency and trust. As Fig. 9 depicts, the government maintains formal and informal vertical (top-down) interactions with the rest of the ecotourism stakeholders. Informal relationships are created and utilised to tackle issues in the absence of formal procedures. Stakeholders also employ informal means of interactions to eliminate undesirable bureaucracy, expedite ecotourism tasks and deal with urgent matters. Informal networks could be established based on common interests to produce positive outcomes (Beritelli, 2011; Zach & Racherla, 2011). Meanwhile, private ecotourism enterprises have vertical relationships with communities in terms of employment and connecting locals with visitors and vertical interactions with NGOs for training, capacity

building, and technical supports. In this regard, a participant from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MoCT) has expressed his views as follows:

*Currently, you can see hybrid relationships within ecotourism stakeholders generally in the country which also works for Southern Ethiopia. The public sector utilises both formal and informal ways to interact with private sector ecotourism stakeholders and local communities. We use informal means of interactions when we face issues that cannot be effectively tackled within our existing policies and rules and sometimes to facilitate and speed up urgent works (Participant 10, Addis Ababa).*

Fig. 9. Current types of ecotourism stakeholders' interactions and relationships in Southern Ethiopia (Authors' plot, 2018)



Relationships and interactions between and amongst ecotourism stakeholders in Southern Ethiopia, except for a few cases, are also driven by hostility and mistrust, as indicated by 18 participants. A participant from the federal government stated that:

*Most of the existing interrelationships and interactions amongst ecotourism stakeholders in the country and Southern Ethiopia are inimical. Particularly, relations between tour operators and local communities, interactions within tour operators themselves, and relations between private ecotourism institutions and governmental organizations are less friendly and suspicious. In such a situation, it is very difficult to think about a successful stakeholder collaboration and this is what we are experiencing (Participant 11, Addis Ababa).*



Unhealthy competition among stakeholders results in hostility, while limited information among stakeholders, termed as prisoner's dilemma (Beritelli, 2011) and the absence of structures that promote collective action lead to mistrust (Beritelli, 2011; Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Kelliher et al., 2018; Towner, 2018). While stakeholders may adopt vertical or horizontal, formal or informal relationships, establishing transparent, consistent and friendly relationships between them is crucial and it could serve as a cornerstone for further collaboration and partnerships (Beritelli, 2011; Kelliher et al., 2018).

## **Factors affecting ecotourism stakeholder collaboration**

Even though stakeholder collaboration is advocated as an important tool to facilitate the development of sustainable ecotourism, establishing an effective stakeholder collaboration is troublesome due to the existence of numerous factors surrounding the subject of collaboration (Beritelli, 2011; Beritelli, 2011; Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Diamantis, 2018; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Kelliher et al., 2018; Keppel, Morrison, Watling, Tuiwawa, & Rounds, 2012; McDonald, 2009; Pyke et al., 2018; Towner, 2018).

Table 4 displays major factors that hamper effective ecotourism stakeholder collaboration in Southern Ethiopia and suggested remedies. Despite many of the factors match with exiting literature (see Table 1), some of the factors (e.g. conflict among ethnic tribes, a poor culture of collaboration) are unique to the current study. Tribal or ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia have been increasing both in volume and intensity since the introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991 (Belair, 2016; Schemm, 2017). The ethnic federal structure, which creates boundaries between nations based on language, aggravates ethnic conflict in various parts of the country (Aalen, 2011; Abbink, 2006, 2011). State media have been also frequently criticised by research participants for cultivating and over pronouncing differences among ethnic groups instead of addressing similarities and binding communities (Hagmann & Abbink, 2011). The repercussions become fatal to communities who have been coexisted peacefully for ages by creating suspicion and fear (Kefale, 2014) significantly affecting their tendency to collaborate in developmental activities including ecotourism (Tache & Oba, 2009; Wondirad, 2017). The enduring dispute between Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State and Oromia National Regional State on the use and ownership of resources found along their border exemplify recurrent ethnic conflicts in the country. On the other hand, a poor culture of collaboration primarily stems from a sense of insecurity and closeness due to a lack of frequent open discussions among stakeholders (Beritelli, 2011). The Amharic proverb descended through generations “ሀበሻ አብሮ ሙብላት እንጅ አብሮ ሙስራት አይወድም።” is an evidence for the deep-rooted poor culture of collaboration within the Ethiopian society. Roughly translated, the proverb reads, “Habesha people better know how to feast together, but not how to work”. Furthermore, although literature mentions poor governance (Honey, 2008; Petrou, Pantziou, Dimara, & Skuras, 2007; Ruhanen, 2013; Towner, 2018; Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015) as one of the factors affecting stakeholder collaboration, it is quite uncommon to find it as a primary factor. Rather, the government is supposed to be

a facilitator and enabler of other stakeholders for the creation of effective stakeholder collaboration (Liu, 2003; Weaver, 2006; Eagles et al., 2013). As Butler (2017) stressed, the triple-bottom-line concept could only work if the political sphere supports it to function. In Southern Ethiopia, as the government consistently fails to deliver its promises (e.g. community participation and benefit-sharing, capacity building and the provision of incentives), other stakeholders develop mistrust (Backman & Munanura, 2015). Scholars critiqued that in Africa, governance is the source of many problems. Lumumba (2015) argued that in various African countries, individuals who claimed to be leaders, are mis-leaders. Overall, lack of effective stakeholder collaboration is attributed to numerous antecedents such as lack of regular discussions, absence of consistent external support, lack of empowerment, resource shortage and poor self-initiatives and commitment from relevant stakeholders (Beritelli, 2011; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Czernek, 2013; Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Kelliher et al., 2018; Keppel et al., 2012; Pansiri, 2013; Zapata & Hall, 2012). Keppel et al. (2012) highlighted that in tropical Pacific Island countries, poor capacity and poor information exchange amongst ecotourism stakeholders led to poor stakeholder collaboration thereby environmental degradation. Insufficient economic alternatives and lack of sustainable livelihood options to replace destructive activities and lack of finance for conservation projects are also major challenges to sustainable ecotourism development in developing nations (Keppel et al., 2012; Sarrasin, 2013).

Table 4. Factors affecting ecotourism stakeholder collaboration (authors' compilation).

No.	Factors that hinder ecotourism stakeholder collaboration	Recommended solutions	Category of participants					
			Gov't	LC	PEE	NGOs	Total	%
1	Poor tourism governance	Transforming tourism governance at all levels, employing well-trained professionals and ensuring accountability, empowering local government entities	8	7	7	3	25	100
2	Lack of awareness amongst stakeholders about the relevance of collaboration	Creating adequate awareness about the relevance of working in collaboration and about the current global tourism/ecotourism development	7	7	5	3	22	88

		paradigm to all ecotourism stakeholders						
3	Poor culture (tradition) of collaboration in the society	Attitudinal change and coordinated campaign are needed to eliminate poor culture of collaboration	7	6	6	3	22	88
4	Resource constraints	Allocating adequate resources (finance and human power) and reinvesting part of the ecotourism revenues collected in the region	5	5	6	2	18	72
5	Lack of trust and mutual understanding amongst ecotourism stakeholders	Cultivating trust and mutual understanding amongst ecotourism stakeholders through time by conducting several discussions and negotiations, creating adequate opportunities for ecotourism stakeholders to get to know each other and find common goals	6	3	7	2	18	72
6	Lack of sufficient and sustained discussion and communication amongst ecotourism stakeholders	Designing a system in which ecotourism stakeholders regularly meet and discuss issues regarding working in collaboration, resource conservation and sustainable ecotourism development	5	4	5	3	17	68
7	The limited size of the ecotourism	Improving facilities and infrastructures that are basic for	3	3	4	2	12	48

	sector in the country and in the region receives little attention within local communities and private ecotourism enterprises due to its smallness in scale	ecotourism development and currently deter its development, properly integrating ecotourism with the traditional local economic activities and practically demonstrating to stakeholders that ecotourism can bring a complementary alternative income						
8	Existence of diverse interests and unhealthy competition amongst ecotourism stakeholders	Finding a balance in which each stakeholder equitably shares the costs and benefits. The government should discourage unhealthy competition by adopting different educative measures. Creating familiarization about the TBL concept in contemporary business development and associated responsibilities of stakeholders	2	3	5	1	11	44
9	Power friction within governmental organizations and amongst government, local communities and private ecotourism enterprises	Power decentralization, especially empowering local communities and building their capacities and establishing a positive and supportive relationship amongst	2	3	4	1	10	40

		government, local communities and private ecotourism enterprises to ensure that power will be a tool to facilitate stakeholder collaboration than a source of problems						
10	Conflicts amongst ethnic tribes	Initiating constant discussions amongst ethnic chiefs and resolving conflicts that hamper collaboration	3	3	2	2	10	40
Note: Gov't = government (federal, regional and local), LC = local communities, PEE = Private ecotourism enterprises, NGOs = Non-governmental institutions.								

## Effective stakeholder collaborations for sustainable ecotourism

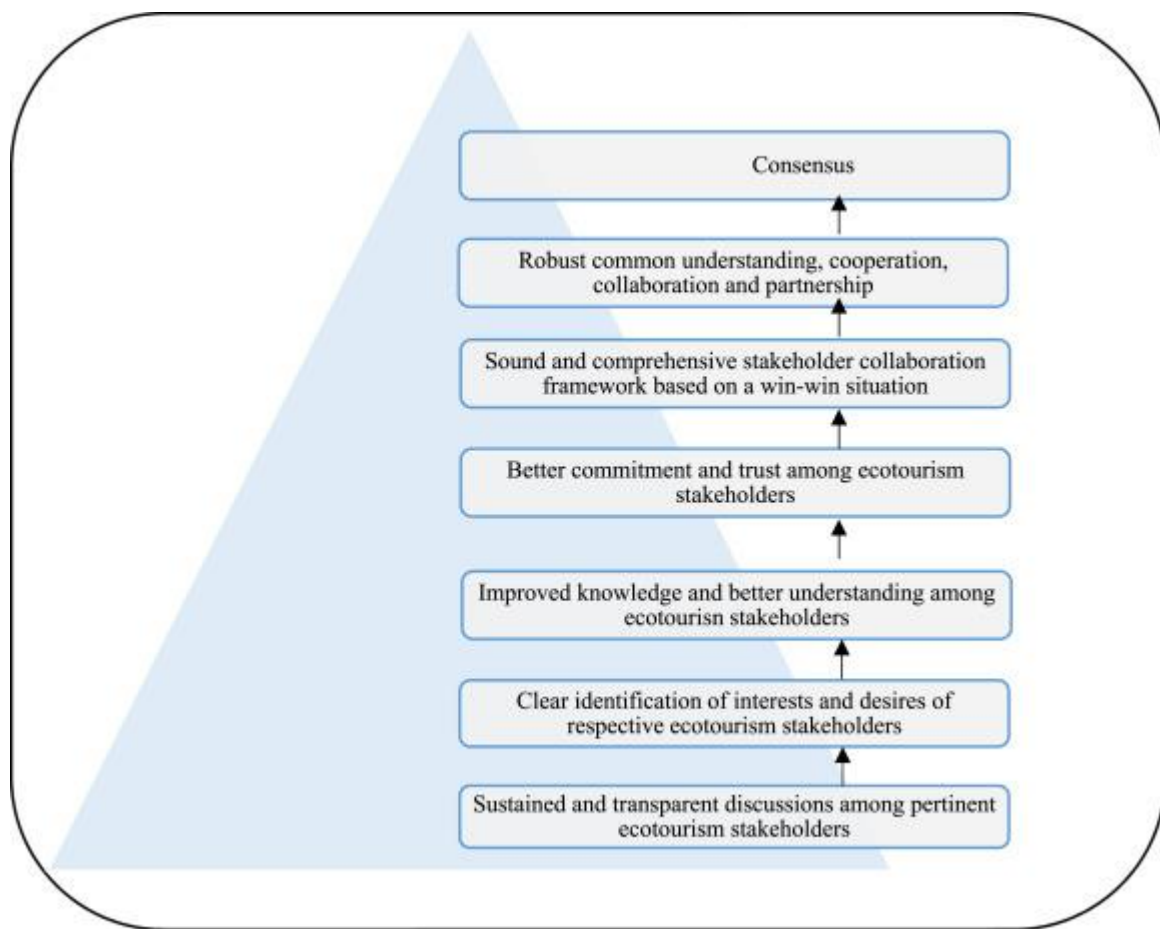
Stakeholder theory underlines the importance of understanding and accordingly responding to the interests of pertinent stakeholders (Adiyia, Stoffelen, Jennes, Vanneste, & Ahebwa, 2015; Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Parmar et al., 2010; Loi, 2016; Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018). Unlike traditional stakeholder management approaches, which predominantly focus on profit maximization (Garvare & Johansson, 2010; Jones, Wickes, & Freeman, 2001) stakeholder theory emphasises the significance of holistic consideration of other critical interests within the wider business ecosystem (Freeman, 1984). Properly reconciling and accommodating the interests of ecotourism stakeholders is currently a pressing challenge in Southern Ethiopia. Successive discussions between ecotourism stakeholders would help to meticulously pinpoint the interests and desires of each stakeholder thereby act appropriately to reach consensus and formulate a collaborative framework that intends to benefit all stakeholders. In this regard a regional government participant remarks the following:

*By bringing all the key ecotourism stakeholders to the discussion platforms and discussing issues with scrutiny, the interests of each stakeholder can be clearly detected and a consensus about the importance of working in collaboration can then be reached despite competing interests. Therefore, through transparent, participative and comprehensive discussions and formulation of win-win situations, competing/conflicting interests can be harmonised, and effective stakeholder collaboration can be established (Participant 13, Hawassa).*

Moreover, abolishing the traditional ways of doing business (Table 4, number 3) and cultivating the culture of compromising and mutual understanding amongst stakeholders through incessant and transparent discussions (see Fig. 10), could lead to the creation of

effective stakeholder collaboration. There is also an acute need to create stakeholder awareness on issues that matter to all stakeholders irrespective of interest such as sustainability, the importance of collaboration and partnerships and the nature of ecotourism. Awareness can bring an attitudinal change towards the values of collaboration and sustainable ecotourism development and can be created by establishing a comprehensive regional stakeholder steering committee that sets agendas, dictates discussion and screens potential ecotourism stakeholders in each destination. The committee shall decide discussion topics and take all the inputs from the discussion to develop a comprehensive plan that addresses the interests of each stakeholder in a win-win situation.

Figure. 10. Suggested procedures to reach a consensus amongst ecotourism stakeholders for the creation of effective collaboration (Authors' plot, 2018).

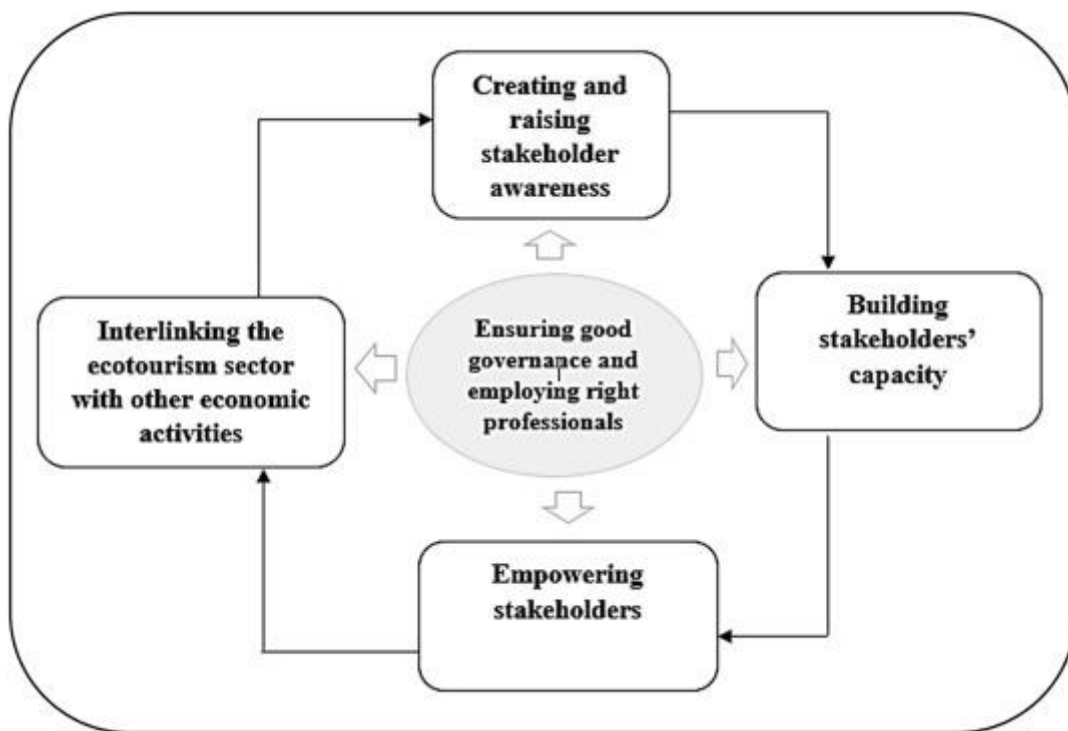


In the meantime, employing the right professionals in public and private organizations, cultivating the will and commitment of stakeholders towards collaboration and eliminating the perpetuated red tape and lip service from the government side are also suggested as the vital impetus of formulating effective stakeholder collaboration that reconciles competing interests of ecotourism actors.

In general, the findings of the current research recommend a step by step approach to ensure the establishment of effective ecotourism stakeholder collaboration thereby advance the development of sustainable ecotourism in Southern Ethiopia. Research findings suggest (1)

creating and raising stakeholders' awareness about ecotourism and collaboration, (2) empowering and building stakeholders' capacity (3) creating and strengthening inter-sectoral linkages between ecotourism and other local economic activities (4) conducting recurrent monitoring and evaluation to ensure things are going in the right track and (5) ensuring good governance from the federal to the local level are pivotal to formulate effective ecotourism stakeholder collaboration and (see Fig. 11).

Figure 11. Recommended steps of ensuring feasible ecotourism stakeholder collaboration for sustainable ecotourism development (Authors' plot, 2017).



Lack of awareness not only affects collaboration and sustainable ecotourism development, but also contributes to many other challenges of sustainable ecotourism development such as stakeholder participation, leadership, coordination and empowerment (Cole, 2006; Honey, 2008; Moscardo, 2008; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008; Timothy, 1999; Tosun & Timothy, 2003). This can be resolved through a sustained awareness-raising program using different media and strategies (Cole, 2006; Walker, 2008). Contents of an awareness-raising program should include defining ecotourism and ecotourists, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of working in collaboration and depicting the short-term and long-term consequences of resource destruction. Limited capacity is found to be one of the recurrent challenges that hamper the establishment of effective stakeholder collaboration (Moscardo, 2008; Graci, 2013; Cole, 2006; Pirnar & Günlü, 2012; Nunkoo, Smith, & Ramkissoon, 2013; Western, 2013, TIES, 2018). Therefore, building stakeholders' capacity is vital to enable stakeholders to gain the required competencies, knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to set and achieve goals of sustainable ecotourism development.

Similarly, poor stakeholder empowerment emerges as one of the stern restraints of effective stakeholder collaboration. Therefore, all relevant ecotourism stakeholders should be adequately empowered so that they can determine their affair and gain control over factors that influence their well-being, cultivate mutual trust and foster the establishment of effective stakeholder collaboration (Scheyvens, 2000; Cole, 2006; Lai & Nepal, 2006; Stone & Stone, 2011; de los Angeles & Gunnarsdotter, 2012; Kruger, 2005).

Finally, the present study discovers that in Southern Ethiopia, the ecotourism sector is currently operating in isolation from the local economic activities. Such absence of linkages is detrimental to the region (Cater, 1994; Salafsky & Wollenberg, 2000). Therefore, to increase the multiplier effects of ecotourism (Cater, 2003; Mitchell & Ashley, 2006; Spenceley & Manning, 2013; Trejos & Chiang, 2009; UNECA, 2011; UNEP & UNWTO, 2005), forming and strengthening inter-sectoral linkages between ecotourism and other local economic activities such as agriculture and trade is instrumental (Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Murphy, 1985; Stem et al., 2003; Timothy & White, 1999).

In the context of Southern Ethiopia, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and Ministry of Forest and Environment should be systematically interlinked from the federal to the local level as indicated in Fig. 12. This would help avoid work overlaps, minimize resource wastage and facilitate horizontal and vertical integration. The inter-linkage should also demonstrate how ecotourism can be integrated to function harmoniously with other economic sectors. Ecotourism should be considered and incorporated into plans and programs of the aforementioned government agencies.



Figure 12. Proposed horizontal and vertical integrations amongst MoCT, MoFE, and MoARD (Authors' plot, 2017).

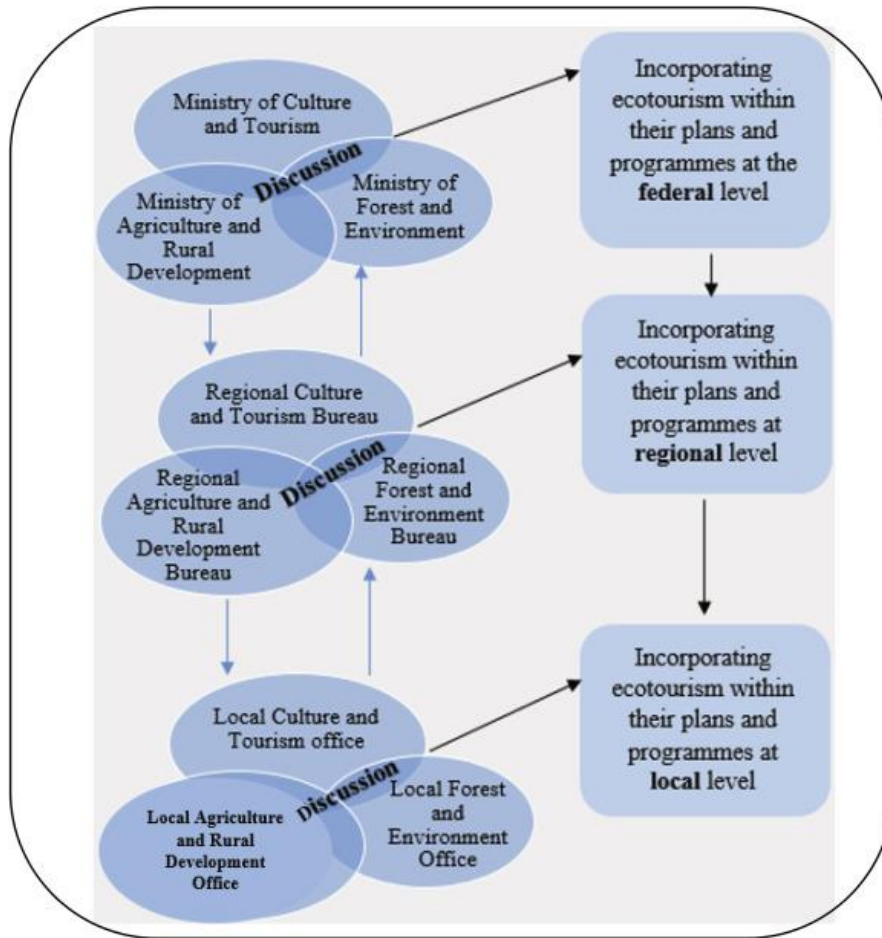
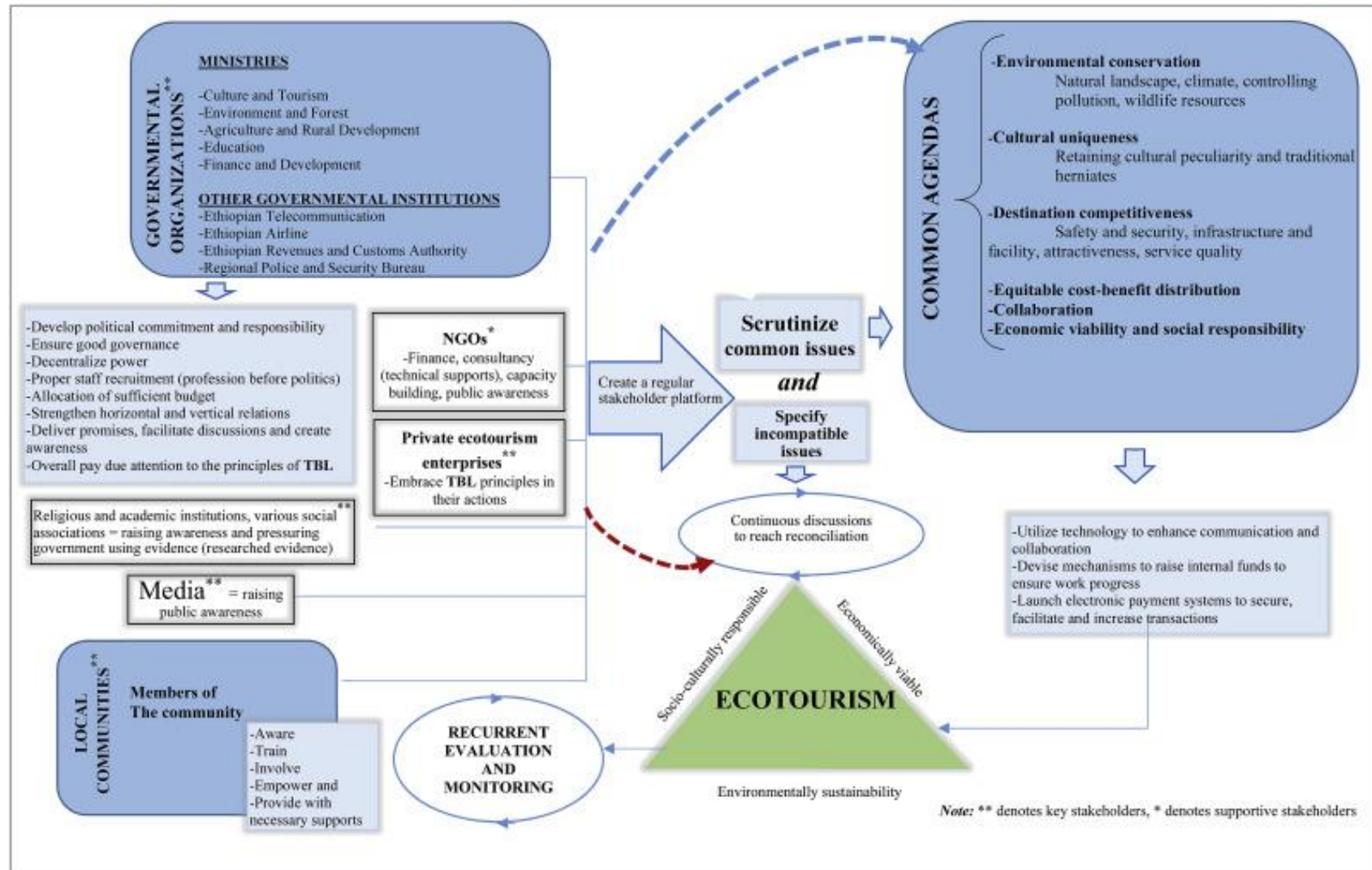


Figure 13. Stakeholder collaboration framework that boosts collaboration and facilitates sustainable ecotourism development (Authors' construction, 2017).



## **Proposed stakeholder collaboration framework**

Based on the study findings, a collaboration framework for ecotourism stakeholders is proposed (see Fig. 13). This framework, the first of its kind, integrates stakeholder and collaboration theories with the principles of triple-bottom-line and brings together relevant ecotourism stakeholders in a common platform to enable them to discuss and act on issues that matter to them and to the ecotourism sector. In doing so, the current framework strives to address multiple issues that surround the ecotourism sector. It informs stakeholders about their expected roles in achieving sustainable ecotourism development. Furthermore, this collaboration framework outlines concerns such as environmental conservation, cultural uniqueness, destination competitiveness, fairness, collaboration, and economic viability and social responsibility, upon which, stakeholders should have a common ground regardless of their individual interests. The framework advocates regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure the implementation of joint decisions. The application of this framework should warrant the development of an economically viable, environmentally sustainable and socially responsible ecotourism.

The subject of stakeholder collaboration is widely examined by numerous scholars. However, many of the existing tourism collaboration studies predominantly investigate stakeholder collaboration in the planning and policy-making stages of tourism development (e.g. Getz & Jamal, 1994; Parker, 1999; Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002). As such, stakeholder collaboration has never been examined from a broader perspective by integrating relevant theories. Aas et al. (2005) studied stakeholder collaboration for successful heritage management while Graci (2013) examined stakeholder collaboration for sustainable tourism development and Baggio (2011) empirically investigated collaboration as a networking tool for destination development. However, none of the above studies attempted to develop a collaboration framework that captures the entire range of relevant stakeholders with their respective roles by integrating the three theories employed in the current study. In this respect, the collaboration framework developed in the current study is comprehensive and unique.

## **Conclusion and implications**

The current study has examined the status of ecotourism development in Southern Ethiopia, has explored ecotourism stakeholder interactions and relationships, investigated factors affecting stakeholder collaborations and provided recommendations to stakeholders about establishing effective ecotourism collaborations to facilitate the development of sustainable ecotourism. The study has integrated stakeholder and collaboration theories with the triple-bottom-line concept to address the research objectives and to formulate comprehensive ecotourism stakeholder collaborations. Ecotourism strives to ensure tourism development that is environmentally

sustainable, economically viable and socio-culturally responsible (Honey, 2008; Eshun & Tagoe-Darko, 2015; TIES, 2018). However, attaining such instrumental objectives is challenging. The process requires steadfast collaboration and partnerships amongst various ecotourism.

Research findings have illuminated who benefits most and have shown the recent course of ecotourism development. Currently, in Southern Ethiopia, ecotourism is not only in its infancy but is also growing inappropriately, as is indicated by the incidence of community exclusion, natural resource destruction and conflict of interest between stakeholders. The triple-bottom-line concepts have been overlooked, and the sector is highly controlled and exploited by the government, the private sector, and few elite community members. There is limited community participation in ecotourism developments. This affects the sustainable development of ecotourism on one hand by ignoring traditional community knowledge, whilst on the other fostering community resentment towards development efforts. Interactions and relationships amongst ecotourism stakeholders are not only inadequate but also are informal, sporadic, hostile and lacking in transparency and trust. Poor governance, lack of awareness about the relevance of collaboration and a poor culture (tradition) of collaboration have led to ecotourism resource destruction and have prevented the establishment of effective stakeholder collaboration. Creating and raising stakeholder awareness, building stakeholder capacity, adequately empowering stakeholders, properly integrating ecotourism into other local economic sectors, ensuring good governance, properly structuring the tourism governance system and conducting regular monitoring and evaluation are suggested remedies to revert the current scenario.

The current study offers some important theoretical contributions. First, by conducting an extensive literature review, the investigation has contributed to ongoing discussions about the achievements and shortcomings of the ecotourism sector in developing countries. Towards this end, the research findings challenge the view that ecotourism consistently contributes to environmental conservation, cultural revitalization and local community livelihoods in developing countries. Yet, in settings such as Southern Ethiopia, where diverse and heterogeneous communities reside, the fate of ecotourism appears to be bleak unless host communities participate actively in ecotourism developments and the ecotourism sector is well-integrated into local economic systems. The current study suggests that adopting the principles of triple-bottom-line can help to improve relationships amongst ecotourism stakeholders, enhance financial performance, broaden market opportunity, formulate inclusive decision-making and increase destination competitiveness thereby boost destination benefits (Dwyer, 2015).

Previous studies (e.g. Li, 2005 and Su & Wall, 2015) have claimed that local community participation in ecotourism planning and decision-making is not necessary, provided economic benefits accrue to local communities. The current study, however, contends that in developing country settings, community participation in planning and decision-making is necessary since: (1) their survival is directly linked to ecotourism resources with little or no other options and (2)

communities are the first to bear the associated development costs (Liu et al., 2014; Mbaiwa, 2015) and community participation creates a sense of belongingness and ownership (Chuang, 2010; Lee, 2013; Scheyvens, 1999).

Finally, the study proposes a new and holistic collaboration framework that integrates stakeholder and collaboration theories with triple-bottom-line principles to develop sustainable ecotourism in developing countries. The framework can serve as a blueprint for ecotourism stakeholders to consider environmental, social and economic elements as common agendas in their decision-making, irrespective of individual interests.

From a practitioner perspective, the current study provides ecotourism stakeholders with valuable inputs - policymakers, planners, destination management organizations, non-governmental organizations, private ecotourism institutions, and local communities. The inputs extend to (1) establishing effective collaborations to facilitate ecotourism development, (2) exploring the factors affecting stakeholder collaborations and (3) devising appropriate intervention mechanisms to overcome barriers in developing sustainable ecotourism.

## **Limitations and opportunities for future research**

The study has employed a qualitative research approach due to the dearth of previous research in the study area and the nature of the study objectives. The use of a single approach might constrain data variability, and thereby compromising the trustworthiness of research findings. Moreover, in order to reach a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder collaborations in ecotourism from the supply perspective, the current study considered four stakeholder groups as a unit of observation. Therefore, since influential factors affecting stakeholder collaborations are identified in the current study, future researchers might undertake empirical verification of these factors using either quantitative or mixed methods research approach. Furthermore, future researchers may consider one or two relevant stakeholders and examine and gain a more in-depth understanding of the links between stakeholder collaborations and sustainable ecotourism development.

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