

Towards a framework for identifying and engaging rural tourism route stakeholders in southern Africa



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ABSTRACT

Several southern African governments view rural tourism development as a strategy for employment creation in rural areas where few other opportunities for poverty alleviation exist. Rural tourism routes can attract tourists from developed tourism nodes to rural areas. On both the strategic and operational levels, rural tourism routes can only function effectively if they have the support and co-operation of the wide range of stakeholders in the route. While some stakeholders are readily identified, others are not immediately apparent or may not be recognised as stakeholders in the route. Based on a qualitative study, a framework is developed to identify and link the range of stakeholders in southern African rural tourism routes. Three different groups of stakeholders are identified; each play different roles in the sustainable success of a rural tourism route, namely demand-side stakeholders or visitors, core stakeholders or tourism service providers on the route, and enabling stakeholders, who influence both the route operations and the environment in which the route operates. Finally, recommendations are made for rural tourism route organisations to engage with a range of stakeholders through an inclusive membership structure of the route organisation. Further research is also suggested on the nature and format of route organisation and membership structures to ensure sustainable route development.

Keywords: stakeholders, tourism routes, rural tourism, tourism route organisation, tourism development, rural development

1. INTRODUCTION

In southern Africa, tourism route formation is encouraged as a development strategy for rural areas (South Africa 2012:59; Millennium Challenge Account Namibia 2012). The route organisations represent a means to bring together the typically scattered and unorganised tourism enterprises in the rural areas, to allow them to collectively compete more effectively with more established tourism destinations (Gilbert 1989:41). Rural tourism routes can also link the traditional tourism

structures to poor rural communities who may own the rich culture and unspoilt tribal land that can provide the unique tourism experience that makes a route attractive to visitors (Meyer 2004:11).

Rural tourism routes encourage visitors to travel along the route to visit a number of small towns and rural tourist attractions that may not normally be visited (Rogerson 2007:50). Tourism route organisations employ a marketing mechanism whereby a number of attractions and destinations along the route are packaged into a single branded offering that is then collectively marketed as a unique tourism experience under the route brand name (Rogerson 2007:50). A tourism route thus represents a destination-level collaboration among people from all segments in the communities along the route, to attract tourists to their area (Open Africa 2009). The overall travel experience has become a significant element of tourism route offerings and stakeholders in a tourism route need to understand what each of them has to deliver in order to facilitate a satisfactory visitor experience on the route (King 2002:107).

Rural tourism routes often cross several municipal boundaries, and may pass through urban, agricultural, tribal, heritage and nature conservation areas. As a result, tourism routes have a particularly wide range of stakeholders. While some stakeholders are easily identified, others may not be immediately apparent. This article proposes a framework to guide the identification and engagement of stakeholders along the length of the route, and also at different levels in the immediate route community, as well as in the wider geographical and political region(s) in which the route is situated.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Following Freeman's 1984 seminal work, stakeholders in a rural tourism route organisation may be defined as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the objective of the organisation' (Freeman 1984:46). This definition includes those directly involved in a rural tourism route organisation through formal membership and official or contractual ties, as well as parties not involved, but who nevertheless affect or are affected by the route (Sheehan and Ritchie 2005:713). Those who have interests that may be affected by route operations, such as future generations and non-human entities such as the natural environment, are also considered to be stakeholders in the route (Starik 1995:215).

It is important to bring all the stakeholders together to co-operate rather than to compete against one another (Buhalis 2000:104). This task may be challenging as stakeholders may have conflicting interests and diverging timeframes for deriving benefits from public goods such as the natural environment (Buhalis 2000, 104). Stakeholders may participate in a route initiative for different reasons and with different levels of involvement and enthusiasm (Saxena 2005:284). As their physical distance from the destination increases, the prominence of stakeholders in destination management and marketing organisations (DMOs) tends to decrease, which means that stakeholders on the route itself are likely to play the biggest role in the route organisation (Sheehan and Ritchie 2005:711).

Stakeholder collaboration is a process that requires building trust among the participants and, if critical issues are not addressed, they could impede collaboration at a later stage in the process

(Wang 2008:162). Similarly, if all stakeholders are not involved early on, those initially excluded may thwart the collaboration process later on. The proposed framework described below may assist in identifying the broad range of potential rural route stakeholders for engagement in the development and operation of the route.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The findings represented in this article are largely based on a qualitative study on the marketing practices of rural tourism routes. A case study approach was adopted and two long established routes formed the cases for the study. The Battlefields Route and the Midlands Meander were selected for their differences, in order to identify a wide range of possible stakeholders. The routes differed in the size of the geographical area covered, the nature of their membership, their themes and the markets that they attract. With both routes being located in KwaZulu-Natal, they shared a number of stakeholders who were involved in tourism in the province, though not always directly in the routes themselves.

To aid representative sampling, a draft framework was initially developed, based on what could be gleaned from the literature and websites of a number of local and international tourism routes. Early respondents were selected through purposive sampling of route members and, as the study progressed, the sample was supplemented by snowball sampling to include additional stakeholders identified during the interviews. On each route nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism product owners. A further eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders who could directly or indirectly influence the success of the two routes. The draft stakeholder framework was then adapted and refined to reflect the additional stakeholders discovered during the fieldwork. Subsequently, perusal of websites and involvement in routes in countries neighbouring South Africa led to the identification of further categories of stakeholders and the framework was amended to reflect a southern African perspective.

4. A FRAMEWORK REPRESENTING STAKEHOLDERS IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN RURAL TOURISM ROUTES

The framework representing stakeholders in rural tourism routes in Southern Africa recognises three main groups of stakeholders, as can be seen in Figure 1. The first distinction is drawn between demand-side and supply-side stakeholders. Demand-side stakeholders represent visitors to the tourism routes, who form the first main group of stakeholders. Supply-side stakeholders are divided into two groups, namely core stakeholders and enabling stakeholders. The core stakeholders are the suppliers of tourism offerings on the route and they are the most closely associated with the route. The third major group was termed enablers since their influence, decisions and activities may impact directly and/or indirectly on the route's success. The enablers are the most diverse group of stakeholders and the most difficult to identify. Each of the stakeholder categories is considered below.

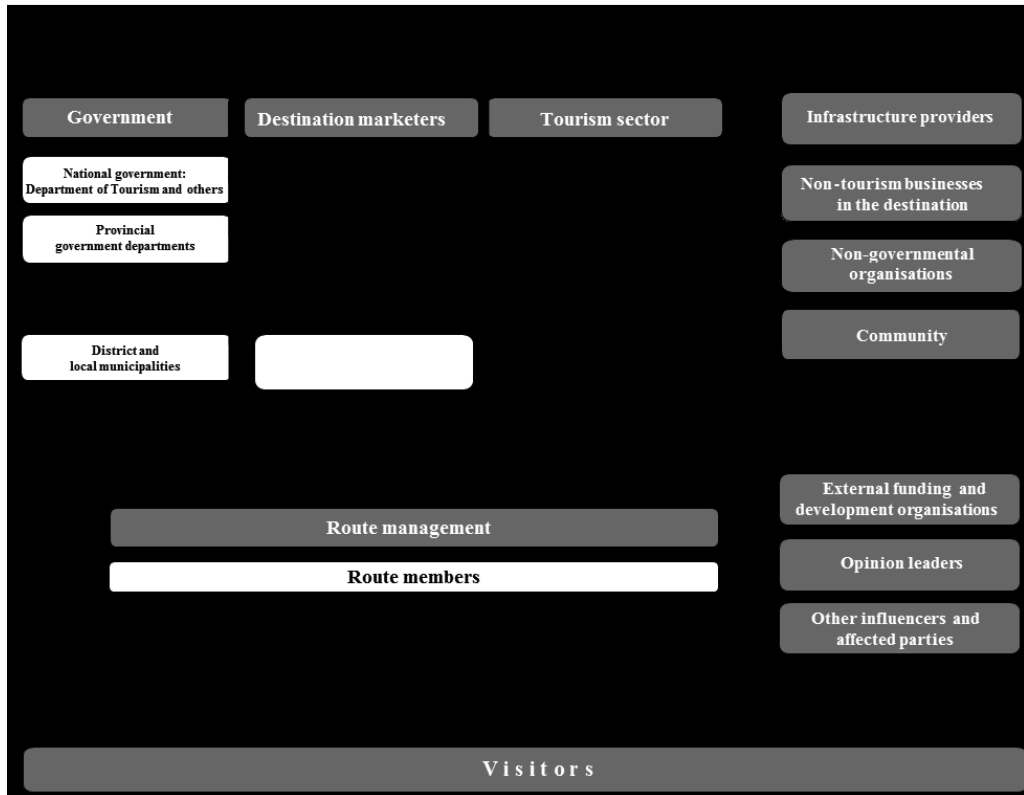


Figure 1: A Framework of Rural Tourism Route Stakeholders

Source: Developed by the authors for this article.

5. DEMAND-SIDE STAKEHOLDERS

Visitors represent the demand-side stakeholders (Buhalis 2000:104). Different market segments may be identified among visitors who may be consumers of the route product as a whole, or of individual tourism offerings on the route. This stakeholder group may include tourists who stay overnight, excursionists who visit for a day only and those who visit the route on their way to another destination.

Visitors are interested in the route as a tourism experience and have direct contact with tourism service suppliers who provide the tourism services they buy. Their interaction with these suppliers will therefore directly influence their route experience. Enabling stakeholders may have an equally important impact on visitors as they influence the route environment in which the visitor experience takes place.

6. SUPPLY-SIDE STAKEHOLDERS

Supply-side stakeholders include all who may influence the route's success in terms of what is on offer to the visitors. This definition includes both the core stakeholders and the enabling stakeholders.

6.1. Core route stakeholders

Core stakeholders provide tourism services to visitors such as accommodation, attractions to visit and activities to participate in, art and craft producers and sellers, restaurants, pubs and other suppliers of food and drink, tourist guides, and tour operators on the route. These businesses stand to benefit directly from the increased number of visitors that the route can attract and are therefore likely to join the route association so as to gain access to the opportunities that are provided through the route's marketing initiatives. Core stakeholders interviewed confirmed that they benefit from route membership in terms of benefits to the business in general, and marketing-related benefits in particular, through the 'collective marketing effort [that] can stimulate tourism demand for the area'¹ (Route member) and the fact that 'product owners market each other's products as aggressively as they market their own' (Enabler). In addition, these stakeholders also value route membership for the moral support, networks and friendships that their affiliation brings. This was something that was evidenced on the Midlands Meander in particular, with comments such as 'we are all friends' (Route member) and 'it's like a big sort of family and people help each other out' (Route member).

6.2. Enabling stakeholders

Enablers include a wide range of stakeholders whose initiatives, goodwill and support, or the lack thereof, impact both directly and/or indirectly on the visitor experience on a rural tourism route and hence on the success of the route, the businesses of tourism suppliers along the route, and the greater community in the route area. The success of the route may not be the primary focus of many enabling stakeholders and their interest may more likely be other benefits derived from increased tourism activity brought about by the route, such as local economic development, job creation, poverty alleviation, preservation of natural, cultural and built heritage, increased property values and political advantage (Briedenhann and Wickens 2004a: 197–199). Enabling stakeholders may also be concerned about the negative social and environmental impacts of increased tourism on the local community and the rural milieu (Aronssen 2000:137).

Different groups of enabling stakeholders are identified in Figure 1 and discussed in more detail below.

6.2.1. Government

Government, on the national, regional and local levels, provides the enabling environment in which a rural route functions through tourism planning and funding, development of the physical infrastructure, marketing and distribution for the areas that the route traverses (Buhalis 2000, 104). On the national level, there may be a dedicated tourism ministry as is the case in South

Africa since 2011 and in Mozambique. Tourism may also be part of the responsibilities of the ministry, as is the case in Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and South Africa before 2011. Tourism is often grouped with development, environmental affairs, wildlife and even culture. In some countries the ministry takes responsibility for tourism on regional and local level as well. This is, for example, the case in Botswana, where the Ministry has District Tourism Offices in seven different locations (Botswana Ministry of Environment, Wildlife and Tourism not dated).

In South Africa, tourism is governed by a complex hierarchy of executive, co-ordinating and marketing structures. On all levels of government, several other departments may influence tourism matters. For example on provincial level in KwaZulu-Natal, tourism falls under the Department of Economic Development and Tourism (KwaZulu-Natal 2009). Several other provincial departments also impact on rural routes, such as the Department of Transport, which is responsible for roads and road signage, the Department of Sport and Recreation, which is responsible for facilities and large events, and the Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs, that regulates agricultural land use, that may affect rural tourism development along a route (KwaZulu-Natal 2009).

In addition, there are provincial statutory bodies tasked with conservation that may impose restrictions or assist a route through their actions. For example, in terms of the KZN Heritage Act of 2008, Heritage KwaZulu-Natal (Amafa), is the custodian of historically important cultural heritage attractions such as monuments, memorials, battlefields, military cemeteries and other important graves, as well as rock art sites (Amafa 2010), and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife is responsible for tourist attractions such as nature reserves in terms of the KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Management Act 1997 (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife 2010). These organisations influence the visitor experience through the fees, opening times, interpretation, and the level of maintenance of the attractions under their management.

Rural local government in South Africa has a two-tier structure with district municipalities having legislative and executive authority over more than one local municipality with which it shares such authority (South Africa 1998:14). District councils are specifically tasked in terms of Section G5 of the White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in KwaZulu-Natal, to 'budget for the effective implementation and growth of tourism in line with the provincial objectives', and with creating and co-ordinating 'tourism experience routes across its district and beyond municipal boundaries' (KwaZulu-Natal 2008:54). The extent to which a district council encourages and supports tourism routes has a noticeable effect, as is demonstrated by the municipality-driven Battlefields Route, which straddles a number of district municipalities, receiving ample financial support in some districts and virtually none in others. Private sector driven routes, such as the Midlands Meander, are less reliant on government financial support, but both district and local governments remain important stakeholders in terms of promotion of tourism to the area, and the many aspects of governance of the local municipalities.

6.2.2. *Destination marketers*

Most of the southern African countries have destination marketing authorities that promote their countries as tourist destinations. Some of these entities have offices in different parts of their

countries to serve tourists with information. For example, Botswana Tourism runs branch offices in eleven different locations in Botswana. Where local representation exists, such offices naturally form important stakeholders in the rural routes. Some countries may have largely centralised operations, for example Namibia and Zimbabwe, and there the national tourism authority needs to be engaged as a stakeholder in rural routes.

South Africa's more complex government structure is mirrored by its destination marketing structure in that there are destination marketing authorities on provincial and local government level as well, each tasked with the marketing of its own area as a tourist destination (Briedenhann and Wickens 2004a:195–196). For example, while South African Tourism markets the country, Tourism KwaZulu-Natal is tasked by Section 2(3) of the KwaZulu-Natal Tourism Act of 1996 as amended, to 'work with the Minister, Provincial Tourism Committee, department, municipalities and tourism stakeholders in the Province in order to implement and advance national and provincial tourism policies' and for which purpose it receives funding from the provincial legislature (KwaZulu-Natal 2002:6).

On local government level, district and local municipalities may have their own tourism marketing offices that market their areas of jurisdiction. In terms of Section A1d xii of the White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in KwaZulu-Natal (KwaZulu-Natal 2008:20) local government also has the responsibility to promote and financially support community tourism associations (CTAs), which market their local areas as tourist destinations. CTAs are autonomous entities based on voluntary membership, and which replaced the former publicity associations. Where district and local municipalities embrace tourism development, funding to promote tourism per se, to market the destinations, and to support a route, is readily made available, as for example in the Zululand district. However, where CTAs are not supported, they are generally underfunded. The CTAs often run the local tourism information centres, which serve as one-stop information hubs. Since many visitors seek more detailed information once they arrive on the route (Olsen 2003:337), these centres can support the route by distributing brochures and maps, providing visitors with information on local conditions and availability of capacity, assisting with reservations, and sorting out problems to smooth the visiting process (Middleton, Fyall, Morgan and Ranchhod 2009:357). Effective collective marketing by destination marketing entities at the different levels of government can enhance a rural route association's own marketing efforts, to the benefit of the whole area.

6.2.3. *Tourism sector*

The tourism sector comprises several subgroups. Members of the tourism route have already been dealt with as the core stakeholder group and therefore do not form part of this discussion.

Stakeholders are not necessarily confined to the route area and tourism businesses outside the route area may represent an important group of stakeholders in a route. These businesses may benefit from increased visitor flow to the route and they include tourism service providers such as airlines, vehicle rental companies, tourism distribution channel members (including travel agents and tour operators) and even hospitality establishments en route to the rural area.

The rural route experience is largely an intimate one, and road conditions generally do not suit large tour busses: '[Y]ou will never get a bus coming along these dirt roads, they're too scared they're going to fly off' (Route member). An important stakeholder group is therefore tour operators bringing tour groups in numbers that can be accommodated by smaller establishments, such as farm or home stays and rural guest houses, and use vehicles that can negotiate the dirt roads. Although reservations are increasingly made through the internet, travel agents remain important links to some market segments, especially international visitors.

Tourism industry bodies play influential roles in representing the tourism sector to government, setting standards, and providing services for their members. Furthermore, these organisations can provide the stamp of approval through the route's association with them. For example, the Midlands Meander Association uses the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa to grade all the accommodation members on the route. As visitors become better informed and more discerning, accreditation by organisations such as Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa can improve the perception of the route among visitors, especially international ones who are concerned about the environmental and social effects of tourism and their own contribution to negative impacts.

Not all tourism businesses are willing to join a route organisation and some may not be desirable as members. Regardless, these businesses may still affect the route, either positively or negatively. The uninvolved tourism suppliers may at best attract visitors to the area as a result of their own reputation, or they may spread damaging communication about the route, as was indeed demonstrated by a disgruntled former member of the Midlands Meander Association. Social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, blogs and e-mail make negative communication very easy and it is thus advisable that the route organisation maintain good or, at least, neutral relationships with non-members of the route.

6.2.4. Infrastructure and service providers

Transport infrastructure providers are important stakeholders because they facilitate access, an aspect that takes on a special significance for rural tourism routes, as these routes tend to be away from the normal tourism nodes and corridors. A route, such as the Battlefields Route, is located about four hours' drive from Durban and even further from Gauteng, which makes it inaccessible for many international visitors spending limited time in the country, since there is 'no airfield where you can land a plane properly; it's got potholes in it' (Route member).

Drive tourists form a significant market segment in route tourism, since exploring the countryside by oneself is part of the attraction of rural tourism routes. Country roads are often dirt roads, and while the 'ruggedness of the roads is part of the experience' (Enabler), visitors may not be used to driving on them. The regional and local roads departments thus are important stakeholders, enabling safe travel to remote destinations through good maintenance of both dirt and tarred roads, as well as signage. With infrastructure provision increasingly becoming a private sector undertaking, toll road concession holders and privately owned airports and landing strips should also be included among the stakeholders in a route.

Because rural routes are located in remote and often sparsely populated areas, providers of communication infrastructure and services, especially cellphone, GPS and internet connectivity

are very important from a safety perspective, and slow connections or even no connectivity at all can significantly affect the visitor experience.

6.2.5. *Non-tourism businesses*

Non-tourism businesses in the vicinity of the route benefit from the increased number of tourists attracted by the route and the economic activity stimulated in the area as a result. Businesses such as banks, personal care providers, medical facilities, supermarkets and shops, garages, and many other amenities that may meet the needs of visitors, are also stakeholders of the route. Not only do these businesses benefit from the route, they also influence the tourist experience through their interaction with visitors. Filling stations in particular, play an important role as it is often to them that the self-drive tourist refers for directions.

6.2.6. *Non-governmental organisations and interest groups*

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often fill gaps that other entities neglect, or cannot fill. They can play a meaningful role in rural tourism routes to assist in spreading the benefits of tourism to less advantaged communities and to bring these communities into the tourism sector. One example is Open Africa, an NGO that establishes what they refer to as ‘off-the-beaten track, self-drive routes’ through community-based tourism in African countries (Open Africa 2010). Another example is the N3 Gateway Tourism Association, an N3 Toll Concession social investment project, which aims to promote tourism in the areas to which the N3 forms a major access road (N3Toll Concession 2010). Route organisations also need to identify and engage with NGOs that are not directly involved with tourism promotion, for example, rural development agencies.

Interest groups and societies may not be organised into NGOs and may therefore not be as readily recognised as stakeholders of a route, but they can make a significant contribution to the tourism experience. Knowledgeable individuals and members of societies may act as volunteer guides or pressure groups for the preservation of natural, cultural and historical heritage in the vicinity of the route. On the Battlefields Route, for example, military history societies and individuals passionate about history have supplied invaluable research and have campaigned for the preservation of battle sites (Enabler). Such stakeholders may even be located outside the country: British military regiments have contributed towards the upkeep of war monuments and graves on the Battlefields Route in KwaZulu-Natal, and the French government has built a school near the Prince Imperial Memorial. Collectors, enthusiasts and hobby groups all have the potential to add attractions or activities to a route, such as birding, butterfly and hiking clubs, historians, geologists and more.

6.2.7. *Local communities*

Communities in southern Africa are by no means homogeneous and the different groupings within the community need to be recognised as route stakeholders. In South Africa rural communities

typically consist of an advantaged group and a disadvantaged group, each with different capacity to contribute or benefit from a tourism route.

- Poor township and rural tribal communities

Rural tourism routes may go through deep rural areas with very poor indigenous communities. Rural disadvantaged communities should therefore be considered as a separate stakeholder group, lest their stakeholder interest in the route be overlooked (Binns and Nel 2002:240). Unless these communities understand the role of tourism and they perceive a benefit for their community from tourism, they may deliberately or inadvertently take actions that detract from the tourist experience along the route. They can also contribute to the increased risk of travel in rural areas, through the removal of signage and fencing to use as building material, and cattle and goats that wander onto the road (Route member). Communities that do not benefit from tourism may fail to realise the value of their tourism resources such as ruins and graves vandalised in a mistaken search for treasure, (Route member) or building on historical sites and destroying the archaeological evidence in the process (Enabler).

Poor black communities in rural southern Africa often own cultural or natural assets with tourism potential, but lacking the resources and skills to develop these assets into tourism products, they do not benefit from tourism (Briedenhann and Wickens 2004b:76). To gain the support of traditional leaders, as well as that of the community, liaison with local chiefs and conservancy management committees is an essential precursor to tourism development and to open up tribal land and conservancies to tourism that may otherwise be regarded as 'no go areas ... because they perceive their area as an area that should not be gone into' (Enabler). A community can also be reached through its children and here schools form an important stakeholder group in the route through their support of school programmes that provide children with an understanding of the roles of tourism and conservation in their own community.

- Developed rural communities

Rural tourism routes pass through small towns, as well as established commercial farmland. These developed rural communities tend to have the necessary resources and the skills to take advantage of the tourism opportunities presented by a successful route in their vicinity (Briedenhann and Wickens 2004b:72). Tourism product owners who operate their tourism businesses in the more developed rural areas need the understanding and co-operation of the neighbouring farmers as well as the rural 'lifestyle' community who live on farms, but do not necessarily farm the land. Rural routes share the rural environment with agriculture, which means that they compete for scarce resources to ply their respective trades. However, the situation can easily polarise the two interest groups, as happened on the Midlands Meander where water became an issue during a drought. Just as tourism can impact negatively on farming activities, for example by visitors not respecting farm boundaries, farmers can detract from the tourist experience on the route with noisy and dusty activities, but, when the two groups work together, they can achieve mutual benefit, for example getting roads repaired.

6.2.8. *Opinion leaders*

Opinion leaders are influential individuals in a community and who, through their interpersonal relationships, form a channel for information and are able to exert social pressure as well as social support (Katz 1957:77). Opinion leaders can be anyone within the route community and not necessarily someone in a leadership position or even in the business of tourism; in one instance, a farmer's wife proved to be the champion for tourism development in the area.

The media represent a significant source of influence and are therefore stakeholders that can affect the route through what they publish or what they communicate in the social media. A route needs to engage not only with the local newspaper and radio station, but also with media in their target areas and national travel magazines, and newspaper travel columns and supplements. Electronic communication is playing an increasingly influential role in travel choices and the route organisation needs to engage with Web-based stakeholders, including electronic intermediaries such as Expedia, Booking.com and Hostelworld.com, review sites such as TripAdvisor, and influential travel bloggers and tweeters.

6.2.9. *Funding and development agencies*

The dire need for poverty alleviation in southern African countries has led to the involvement of external funding and development agencies in tourism development. Where this is the case, these agencies become important stakeholders in rural routes. For example in Namibia, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, an independent U.S. foreign aid agency, is involved with the improvement of the management of the Etosha National Park, supports tourism development in the conservancies, developed an interactive website for the country, and is assisting in marketing Namibia as a tourist destination (Millennium Challenge Corporation 2012). In Malawi, the Moffat Centre at Glasgow Caledonian University has developed the Malawi Institute of Tourism, an academic training centre for the tourism industry (Glasgow Caledonian University 2012). In South Africa the Industrial Development Corporation finances tourism development projects in rural areas (Industrial Development Corporation 2011).

6.2.10. *Other affected parties*

Various other individuals and organisations may be affected by a rural tourism route. They may own potential tourist attractions, but may not necessarily be members of the route organisation. So, for example, on the Midlands Meander, Sappi owns large tracts of plantations. They have teamed up with the Howick Mountain Bike Club to make day permits for biking trails available to visitors to the area at a local cycle shop, or after hours, at the local hospital in Howick (Midlands Meander Association 2010:30). The Meander brochure publishes information on some non-members of the Meander, such as places of worship, conservancies and conservation groups, and sporting facilities, such as golf courses, and fishing and birding sites (Midlands Meander Association 2010:28).

Land owners in the vicinity of a successful route may benefit from increased land values, although this may also make residential and business premises less affordable to the local

community (Briedenhann and Wickens 2004a:197–199). Increased popularity of a destination may also attract developers to the area as is demonstrated on the Midlands Meander, where retirement estates with up to 800 units have been developed near Howick (Amber Valley not dated). While development may be good for the economy, if it is not carefully managed, it may destroy the unspoilt country ambience that attracts visitors to rural routes. In this regard, government stakeholders are particularly important in preserving the integrity of the country experience along the route.

7. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND ROUTE MEMBERSHIP

The question arises about which stakeholders should be engaged and invited to become members of the rural tourism route organisation? While there is broad agreement that ‘mainstream’ tourism businesses should be members of the route organisation, three points of view emerged during the study, namely that the route be open to all stakeholders, that membership should be selective to maintain standards, and that it should be recognised that some product owners cannot afford to join the route. While municipalities expressed the wish for ‘everyone in the area to be part of the route’ (Enabler), route members resisted the idea of any form of ‘forced registration’, whereby every tourism business is required to join the route organisation. They preferred a free market situation where ‘if you show your membership that it is benefiting from the effort you are putting in, they’ll want to be members’ (Route member), as is indeed the case on the successful Midlands Meander where ‘people phone in and say we want to join’ (Route member). It also appears as if a route that is primarily driven by tourism product owners who have a direct interest in the route’s success, as in the case of the Midlands Meander, it is more likely to succeed than a route that is primarily institutionally driven by local municipalities or their tourism offices, as in the case of the Battlefields Route that ‘has an on-going struggle to get the municipalities to pay their membership fees’ (Route members).

There was a plea for routes to extend their membership to stakeholders other than the core stakeholder group and to ‘open up their membership to anybody who is committed to making a success of the route’ and who may ‘add to the process of developing a successful tourism environment’ (Enabler). In this regard, it is interesting to turn to some successful international routes. Websites of six international route associations were examined as part of the study, namely, the Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association in Ontario, Canada, the Viking Trail Tourism Association and the Heritage Run Tourism Association in Newfoundland, Canada, Savannah Way Ltd that stretches over Western Australia, Northern Territory, and Queensland, Australia, Pennsylvania Route 6 Tourist Association and various Historic Route 66 associations in the USA. A common feature of the first four routes is their broad membership bases that extend beyond tourism businesses to other businesses interested in furthering tourism, to development, community, funding and marketing agencies, as well as to government at municipal, state and even federal level. The planning perspectives of these routes appear not only to have included the totality of the routes, but also to have gained the support of regional tourism entities, as is evident from funding obtained from provincial and even federal sources (Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association 2006; Viking Trail Tourism Association, not dated; The Heritage Run Tourism Association 2007; Savannah Way Limited 2009).

A further interesting characteristic of the international routes is their tiered membership structure. For example, Savannah Way has five membership categories, ranging from the free Friends of the Savannah Way category, who receive the newsletter and merchandise, through to bronze, silver and gold memberships at fees ranging from US\$77 to \$990 and that offer progressively better website coverage, greater advertising and web listing discounts, and branding rights and benefits, to platinum members at \$5 500 who have specific service agreements (Savannah Way Limited 2009). Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association offers a free basic partner membership with website listing, associate membership for non-tourism organisations with no advertising and a 'Trailblazer partner' or advertising partner category with enhanced web-listing and co-operative marketing opportunities (Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association 2009). Carefully constructed membership categories can make it possible for a rural tourism route association to include a wide range of enabling supply-side stakeholders as members of the route association, without forfeiting the drive provided by the core members who supply the tourism offerings along the route. Rural tourism route development can benefit from further investigation of the factors that inform the route organisation and membership structure.

8. CONCLUSION

The stakeholder framework proposed in this article does not profess to be exhaustive of stakeholders in rural tourism routes. It does draw attention to the wide range of stakeholders who may influence the success of a rural tourism route, especially enabling stakeholders who may not be immediately apparent and even difficult to identify. Each route will have its own unique set of stakeholders and the framework can serve as a basis from which to commence the identification and engagement of the stakeholders in a route. The framework also serves as a reminder that each stakeholder, to a greater or lesser extent, contributes towards the success or failure of a route and that the chance of success is likely to be greater when stakeholders co-operate rather than work against one another. A concerted effort should be made on an ongoing basis to identify and engage all stakeholders who are impacted by or who could impact on the sustainable success of a route. Furthermore, a multi-tiered membership structure should be considered to accommodate the wider spectrum of stakeholders in an equitable manner in the route tourism organisation. In this regard further research is proposed, focussing on international and local best practices as well as stakeholder perceptions and expectations regarding tourism route organisation and membership.

NOTES

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