

Community Collaboration with Tourism Stakeholders: Issues and Challenges to Promote Sustainable Community Development in Annapurna Sanctuary Trail, Nepal

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Abstract

Community participation and collaboration among tourism stakeholders are considered key to promote sustainable tourism planning and development in the destinations. This study aims to critically analyse the role and context of community collaboration with tourism stakeholders to promote sustainable community development in the case of Annapurna Sanctuary Trail (AST) in the Annapurna Conservation Area of Nepal. It has adopted multiple tools of data collection such as household's survey, key informants interview, participant observation, informal discussion with local residents and archival research for examining the role and context of community collaboration with tourism stakeholders in settlements around AST. The survey results revealed that the current approach of ecotourism development is tenuous and does not truly satisfy the key objectives of ecotourism i.e. fostering inclusive participation and stakeholder's collaboration. Although tourism has brought significant impacts on the local communities; the extent of these impacts is usually different with difference in the location of households, their level of interaction and exposure with tourists, their capacity and power to involve and influence the participation and collaboration process, and their education, skills, and financial resources. Overall, the existing approach to ecotourism planning is not able to implement the effective and efficient form of collaboration, and hence local community specifically farmers receive minimal benefits from the tourism. It is suggested to empower and enhance the collaborative capacity of local residents to actively participate and influence the planning process for receiving maximum benefits and promoting sustainable community development.

Keywords: Collaboration, Stakeholders, Tourism, Sustainable Development.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The growth of tourism in the late twentieth century was related to the varying issues of economic, socio-cultural, political and environmental factors of globalization (Urry, 1990; Scheyvens, 2002; Telfer & Sharpley, 2008; Mowforth & Munt, 2009). Facilitated by the improvement in transportation, communication, and information technology, globalization has led to time-space compression where people, goods, and information travel greater distances and cross political borders in shorter periods of time (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008, Bhatta, 2014) which has largely influenced the supply-demand aspect of global tourism (Mowforth & Munt, 2009). These changes have encouraged the development of tourism as an industry to satisfy the needs of increasingly prosperous and developed post-industrial societies. In this context, although the policy

makers and governments of developing countries consider tourism development as one of the key aspects of their national policy agenda, the central question is whether they can succeed in achieving the long term development of the destination communities.

Destination communities are one of the key stakeholders of tourism planning, and development process. However, in many cases, tourism planning had often been the top-down approach leaving communities with little input or control over their own destinies (Murphy, 1985). Timothy (1999) and Tosun (2000) noted that lack of communication between local communities, government, and private sectors is the problem that substantially contributes to maintaining a 'knowledge gap', and sometimes isolates communities from tourism development process. In this regard, Chan and Bhatta (2013) argued genuine participation and

collaboration among tourism stakeholders could provide communities an opportunity to empower economically, socially, politically and psychologically. It enhances their sense of unity, power, and thus well-being, which is indispensable to promote sustainability. In this context, considering the case of settlements around Annapurna Sanctuary Trail (AST) in Annapurna Conservation Area in Nepal, this research aims to explore the role and context of community collaboration with tourism stakeholders specifically to promote sustainable Community Development

2.0 THEORETICAL REVIEW

Stakeholders are the actors with an interest in a common problem or issue, and include all individuals, groups and organizations directly influenced by the actions others take to solve a problem (Gray, 1989). Since tourism involves several groups, organizations and communities with varied interest, problems and complications; concept of stakeholder is strongly embedded in the planning and policy making-process of tourism. The key stakeholders of tourism include local communities; tour operators, tour guides, tourism entrepreneurs; governmental and semigovernmental institutions; tourists; NGOs/INGOs; and individuals (Bhatta, 2014).

Jamal and Stronza (2009) argued that PA destinations often comprise multiple stakeholders who hold diverse views on development, and varying degrees of influence over decision making process such that no individual stakeholder can fully control planning. Inskeep (1991), and Sauter and Leisen (1999) also suggested that all stakeholders interested in or affected by tourism activities within a particular market or community should collectively manage tourism system with integrated input. Referring to Freeman (1984), Sauter and Leisen (1999) have provided three key concepts essential for effective stakeholder management: (i) identification of stakeholders and their respective interest; (ii) a process to manage stakeholders' relationship; and (iii) management of set of transactions and bargains among the stakeholders. To implement stakeholder management, planners also need to appreciate the interests of all persons or groups who have interest in planning process, delivery, and outcomes of tourism service (Sautter and Leisen, 1999). In tourism literature, it is widely agreed that destination communities are the key stakeholders and they should have crucial role in decision making process.

2.1 Tourism and Alternative Development: Tourism as a Tool for Sustainable Development

The model of development based on market liberalization and commercial globalization has been widely criticized for its failure to enhance socio-economic development as well as the quality of life of the poor people in the developing countries. Liburd (2010) rightly pointed that many tourism researchers such as Smith (1977), de Kadt (1979), and Britton

(1982) in their seminal work, underlined that tourism, instead of benefiting peripheral destinations, in many cases led to new forms of dependency and acculturation, therefore its economic value is fundamentally questioned. Some development theorists also argued that peripheral countries essentially fail to establish their own manufacturing basis and market relations as a consequence of exploitative practices, unequal power relations, and practices that accelerate environmental degradation and social inequality (Liburd, 2010).

Development paradigms such as modernization, dependency, and neo-liberalism do not consider the importance of environmental and cultural sustainability, as well as the involvement of local communities in the development process (Telfer, 2002). The growing significance of global environment, and increase in the awareness of several issues such as population increase, environmental degradation, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and discrepancies between rich (developed countries) and poor (developing countries) have eventually led to the development of alternative paradigm that advocate for endogenous development, self-reliance, long term development of local communities, and conservation of cultural and environmental resources (Bhatta, 2014). One of the key arguments of this theory elucidates that development does not start with goods; rather it starts with people and their education, organization, and discipline (Schumacher, 1974 cited in Sharpley, 2000).

The conceptual shift in tourism from advocacy of mass tourism to an alternative approach to tourism was also discussed by Jafari (1989). Departing from preceding western-centric economic growth-based approach, alternative development adopts a resource-based, bottom-up approach that primarily focuses on human and environmental concerns (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Alternative tourism also aims to promote a balanced growth more in tune with local environmental and socio-cultural concerns, and is increasingly regarded as key to sustainable development (Ioannides, 1995). It is also explained in terms of sustainable development which has now become a widely recognized goal for human society. Being a good idea, sustainable development was enthusiastically supported by the governments, NGOs, and academics (Liburd, 2010). The Brundtland Report (Our Common Future) not only concerns on global security, but also human and ecological survival were emphasized through the importance of equitable and fair distribution of resources within and between generations, protection of biodiversity, combating poverty, intersectoral linkages, and empowerment of smallholders, women, indigenous people, rural farmers and local communities (WCED, 1987). It affirms a need for an integrated understanding of the world as a whole, where the wellbeing of man and nature, future development, and environmental issues are inextricably linked (Liburd, 2010). Although

sustainable development has been interpreted in a number of ways articulating different meanings and responses; one of the most influential and widely used definitions was of the Brundtland report, which embraces key concept of “needs” and “limits”, and defines it as “the development that meets the needs of present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p.43).

Sustainable development is considered as a balanced interplay among three key components of development such as economic, environmental, and social sustainability, and its essence is in the harmonious integration of a sound and viable economy, responsible governance, social cohesion, and ecological integrity to ensure that development is a life-enhancing process. Similarly, tourism is also perceived as a model form of economic development that can improve the quality of life of host community, maintain quality of environment at the destinations and satisfy the visitors (Liburd, 2010). Since, sustainable development is also supposed to revive economic growth in less developed countries specifically to alleviate poverty and provide basic needs to the poor people; it therefore adopts both anthropocentric and eco-centric approach to achieve balance between development and environmental protection. In other words, it is a compromise between “neoliberalism” and “deep-green” ideology that may require restructuring of the state policies and market economy. Therefore, it is theoretically conceptualized as a juxtaposition of two schools of thought, first is the development theory; and second is environmental sustainability (Sharpley, 2000). In this regard, tourism scholars put forward the concept of sustainable tourism and/or ecotourism as an alternative or green approach to tourism development, which also logically embraces the concept of sustainable development and sustainability (Bhatta, 2014). In recent years, sustainable tourism or ecotourism is increasingly used as a strategy to promote sustainable development of the destinations communities, whereby inclusive participation of communities and collaboration among stakeholders is prerequisite.

2.2 Collaboration in Ecotourism Planning

The effectiveness of ecotourism planning, in addition to inclusive participation, also depends largely on the level of collaboration exists within and among its stakeholders (Bhatta, 2014). Strong mechanism of collaboration at community level is vital to enhance community benefits and promotion of ecotourism development activities (Getz & Jamal, 1994; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Hall, 2000). Referring to the Gray’s (1985, 1989) theory of collaboration, several scholars have discussed on the significance of collaboration in tourism planning, where collaboration is defined as “a process of joint decision-making among key stakeholders of a ‘problem domain’ about the future of that domain”. According to Jamal

and Getz (1995, p.188), a problem domain is a situation where the problems are complex, and requires an inter- or multi-organizational response, as they are beyond the capability of any single individual or group to solve single handedly. They further asserted that collaboration in community-based (eco) tourism is indispensable to resolve planning problems of the domain and/or to manage issues related to the planning and development of that domain.

Considering the need of empowerment of stakeholders, Himmelman (1996) defined collaboration as “exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing the capacity of another for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose”. It indicates that meaning of collaboration is not only limited to networking, cooperation and coordination; it also stresses on the enhancement of capacity of other stakeholders to receive mutual benefits through collaborative efforts (Bhatta, 2014). As such empowerment of indigenous communities in the destinations is necessary to receive maximum socio-economic benefits from tourism. Gray (1989) defined effective collaborative process possess five key characteristics such as : (i) the stakeholders are inter-dependent; (ii) solutions emerge by dealing constructively with differences; (iii) joint ownership of decisions is involved; (iv) the stakeholders assume collective responsibility for the ongoing direction of the domain; and (v) collaboration is an emergent process, where collaborative initiatives can be understood as ‘emergent organizational arrangements through which organizations collectively cope with the growing complexity of their environments. It is crucial that representatives from various stakeholder groups including local communities should be decided at an early stage of the planning process (Murphy 1983; Gunn, 1988; Haywood 1988; Inskeep, 1991). It maximizes mutual benefits, and also avoids costs of resolving conflicts in long-term (Gray, 1989; Healey, 1998).

In practice, performing efficient and effective collaborative efforts is not easy, as tourism development involves multiple stakeholders with variety of interests. In most of the cases, there remains a lack of communication between communities and government bodies that substantially contribute to maintaining a ‘knowledge gap’ and isolating local community from the tourism development process (Timothy, 1999; Tosun, 2000, Bhatta, 2014). In this context, an appropriate convener needs to be involved from early stage of planning to the implementation stage. Local authority or local government or like-organizations could act as a convener (Jamal and Getz ,1995). Emphasizing on the capacity of local communities to involve in collaboration process, Mowforth and Munt (1998) strongly highlighted that local communities should be able to make use of, and benefit from the assistance of the national government

resources particularly to help establish and co-ordinate their ideas and schemes. Community mobilization may not be possible in the absence of prior governmental investment in community development, i.e. without creating new networks, strengthening the existing ones, invigorating community institutions, and motivating and training community members to become effective leaders and participants (Beeker *et al.*, 1998, cited in Wisansing, 2008). On the whole, the approach of planning must recognize that the private and public sectors, the host community, advocacy groups, and business representatives are all interdependent stakeholders in a complex and dynamic tourism domain, where no single individual or group can resolve strategic tourism issues by acting single handedly (Timothy & Tosun, 2003; Bhatta, 2014). Therefore, in addition to empowerment and participation of local communities, equal emphasis must also be given towards collaborative efforts in the planning and management of ecotourism.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

This study considers case study as an approach to investigate the context of community collaboration with tourism stakeholders. It has adopted a qualitative approach with descriptive and explanatory methods. The Settlements around Annapurna Sanctuary Trail (AST) such as Dhampus, Landruk, Ghandruk and Birethanti are selected for detailed examination. Multiple methods of data collection such as questionnaire survey with households (n=199), semi-structured interview with key informants (n=8), participant observation, informal discussion and documentation analysis have been used. The set of questionnaires were designed with open and close ended questions that provided respondents an opportunity to express their opinions and suggestions. Documentation consisted of collection of written documents from the official records, relevant publications, reports, photographs and videos. Extensive discussion and field notes were carried out through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and informal discussion. During the selection of survey unit, stratification criteria such as location of households, type of enterprise, use of the building and the household activities were used. Considering the spatial context, households were selected from the Major Trail (MT) i.e. major streets in the settlements as well as from off-the trail (OT) i.e. secondary or branch streets in the settlements. These were selected as survey units through systematic and stratified random sampling. The approximate distance of a peripheral household from main trail is supposed to be 500 meters (maximum). Households representing both the locations were selected specially to understand the perceptions and attitudes of households towards role and context of collaborative efforts in ecotourism development and its planning. In addition to spatial location, the type of use of the building and the engagement of households in

specific activities were the additional criteria for selecting the households as a survey unit. Attempt was made to seek maximum responses from different people engaged in different types of activities. Based on the community perceptions, the role and context of community collaboration with tourism stakeholders has been examined with regard to collaborative efforts among (i) local community and government institutions; (ii) local community and tour operators (private sector); and (iii) local community, NGOs and tourists. It also examines the community capacity to collaborate with tourism stakeholders and future tourism development in their community.

Study Area:

Established in 1986, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) covers a land area of 7,629 Km², the largest conservation area in Nepal. The Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) is a land of spectacular beauty and diversity, stretching from the subtropical zone in the south to the alpine and dry alpine steppes in the north with altitudinal variation from 100m to the 8091m (Bhatta, 2019). It is unique and crucial for its outstanding landscape, diverse flora and fauna, and the most geographically and culturally diverse area in the world (Nepal, 2000). The majority of the residents live at subsistence level or below with a high level of dependence on natural resources. Annapurna Sanctuary Trail (AST) is one of the oldest and popular tourism trails in the region starting from Dhampus and Birethanti leading to the base camp of Mount Annapurna (4070m) and Mount Machhapuchre (Fishtail) (3703m) (Bhatta, 2019). It passes through several ethnic villages in the southern Annapurna region, of which Dhampus, Landruk, Ghandruk and Birethanti have specific importance attracting thousands of tourists every year. These villages are the major stop-points for trekkers going to or returning back from the base camps and thus have been influenced by the tourism activities (Bhatta, 2019). Ghandruk, predominantly a *Gurung* ethnic village, is the region where the pilot project of ACAP was first implemented in 1986 to mitigate the environmental problems of the region. The unique geographical, biological and cultural diversity has made the area the most popular trekking destination in Nepal (Nyaupane & Thapa, 2004). The AST exhibits the diverse ethnic culture of the *Gurungs*, *Magars*, *Bahun*, *Chhetri* and *Kami*. The livelihood of these communities has been largely influenced by the tourism development in the region. Since the inception of ACAP, the plans and policies advocate the concept of community participation and stakeholders collaboration as a tool to promote sustainable tourism, conservation and socio-economic development of the communities.

Ecotourism has become one of the major alternatives for supporting livelihoods of local people in the AST. It is attracting different types of tourists including luxurious, pleasure seeking, adventurous,

holiday making and economical budget backpackers (Bhatta, 2019). It is visited by the large number of international tourists every year which usually accounts more than 60 percent of the country's total trekkers (NTNC, 2009). Since the opening of the first lodge in Ghandruk village in 1976, there has been a significant growth in the construction of lodges, and tourism services in the region (Bhatta, 2019). By the end of the year 1999, there were 518 lodges in the ACA, which increased rapidly and now reached over 1,000 lodges, and tea-shops along with hundreds of other subsidiary services especially to cater the trekkers and pilgrims (Bhatta, 2019). In the study area only, there are more than 300 lodges and tea-shops operated and registered under the Annapurna Sanctuary Tourism Entrepreneurs Committee. Tourism has become one of the prime economic activities in the region, providing employment to the local people.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is widely accepted that planning of ecotourism must recognize the complexity, and interdependency of its key stakeholders such as host community, tourists, government, tour operators, and advocacy groups, and enhance mutually beneficial relationship among them by developing mutual trust, responsibility, and collaborative efforts (Bhatta, 2014). It is widespread that no any actors can resolve complex tourism issues by acting single-handedly, thus a joint planning process where local heritage, culture, and social and environmental concerns of residents are valued is crucial to promote ecotourism development and long term community benefits (Simmons, 1994; Scheyvens, 1999; Tosun, 2000; Timothy & Tosun, 2003; Chan & Bhatta, 2013, Bhatta, 2014). In the ACA, community participation and stakeholders collaboration are considered as key objectives of planning and development process specifically to promote sustainable development. Survey findings also suggest that there exist a form of collaborative efforts between and within the grass-roots organizations, and park authority. However, community collaboration with private sector such as tour operators, and tourism-related institutions at the central level seems tenuous (Bhatta, 2014). The issues, challenges and significance of collaborative efforts in ecotourism development have been discussed below with regard to the community perceptions in the AST.

4.1 Tourism stakeholders and collaborative efforts: The community perspective

Survey results demonstrate that local communities need strong support and cooperation from tourism stakeholders for enhancing local capacity, developing tourism-related enterprises and community development activities. All the respondents perceived that collaboration is crucial to operate tourism and receive its benefits. They are agreed that each tourism stakeholder should have equal responsibility to contribute achieving mutually beneficial relationship

among them. About 92.5% respondents surveyed in AST believed that local community, Park authority, tour operators, NGOs, and tourists are the key tourism stakeholders. It is crucial to note that local residents strongly acknowledged the significance of stakeholder's collaboration in ecotourism development. The development activities including ecotourism are supported by the ACAP through its Conservation Area Management Committees (CAMCs) and other grass-root organizations; effective collaboration mechanism between local communities and these institutions seems imperative for fostering efficient service delivery. Of the total respondents, majority (91.5%) replied that there exists a certain degree of collaboration among tourism stakeholders. The effectiveness of collaboration is however mostly perceived as average or below. For example, only 7.69% respondents perceived it positively, whereas rests believed that it is 'average' (52.19%), 'weak' (29.67%) and 'very weak' (10.43%).

Theoretical review suggested that effectiveness of collaboration often depends upon how each actor perceives others and develops trust, respect and mutual responsibility between them (Bhatta, 2014). Local residents in the AST although perceived that each actor should have equal responsibility and role in planning process; the park authority and community organizations largely play dominant role in decision making and control on the development activities. As Bhatta (2014) argued that each stakeholder seeks to play influential role in the development of tourism, and thus use their power, resources, and knowledge to influence the decisions. It is true that stakeholders are motivated by the specific interests, aspirations, and goals, such as the private sector, specifically the outside tour operators and entrepreneurs in the AST, is largely motivated by economic benefits of tourism, while the park authority has specific attention towards biodiversity conservation and community development through mobilization of local resources (Bhatta, 2014). Survey results shows that local community also expects their dominant role in the local development activities to ensure socio-economic benefits. The different issues and challenges of stakeholder's efforts to promote collaborative activities at community level in AST are discussed below specifically with regard to framework of sustainable development.

4.1.1 Collaboration among local community and government institutions

With regard to tourism planning, the key governmental institutions such as Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), and the quasi-governmental organization Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) usually play principal role in the promotion and preparation of national tourism plans, policies and strategies. They have however minimal role at local community and village level such as in the AST. Actually, they do not have significant control at the local level. In ACA, local level institutions are found

actively involved in tourism planning and development activities. The protected area (PA) authority, specifically the ACAP, UCOs (Unit Conservation Office), CAMCs and grass-root institutions such as sub-committees and groups could play strong role to cooperate and coordinate with local communities in development of sustainable tourism (Bhatta, 2014). So, specific collaborative mechanism is necessary where each stakeholder could have opportunity to raise their genuine voices and issues, and effectively negotiate with the legitimate stakeholders through dialogue, sharing of ideas and developing mutual trust and respect among them (ibid). Currently, there is a lack of broader collaborative approach is lacking in the AST, as interaction is mainly limited to ACAP and local communities.

The survey results demonstrated that significant number of respondents (58.3%) perceived local community as the most powerful and dominant actor in the decision-making process of tourism development, whereas, 39.7% perceived PA authority is the most powerful, and rest (2%) believed both are dominant actors. Almost similar number of households in MT (58.3%) and OT (58.2%) believed that local community is the most dominant stakeholder in the AST followed by the park authority (38.9% in MT and 40.7% in OT). It suggests that both the local community and PA authority play crucial role in ecotourism planning and development. However, with regard to financial and technical assistance, local communities yet fully rely on PA authority, and decisions are therefore largely in the hand of ACAP and CAMCs. Moreover, power difference exists between the residents of MT and OT, not all communities equally influence the decisions (Chan and Bhatta, 2013; Bhatta, 2014). Majority of respondents (67.3%) also rated the governments (PA authority) willingness towards collaboration as 'average'. Rest perceived above the average level (13.6%) and below (19.1%). Since the effects of collaborative efforts nurture empowerment of local communities (Sofield, 2003); the PA authority in the AST need to be proactively involved in collaborative exercise with the indigenous people including farmers and lower caste communities (Bhatta, 2014). It is crucial to bring communities together in an inclusive way so as to encourage the process of collective action and bring positive changes in local communities. The cooperation of PA authority with communities would indeed enhance capacity of local residents and enable them to exert greater influence over tourism development process (Murphy & Murphy, 2004).

4.1.2 Collaboration among local community and tour operators (private sector)

The private sector, specifically the tour operators, is one of the key stakeholders bringing tourists to the local communities, and supporting local economy and their livelihoods. Survey results however

showed that local residents do not think tour operators have contributed much to the local economy. Local residents, specifically the non-entrepreneurs, perceived that tour operators are mostly profit-oriented, often bargain with local tourism entrepreneurs and residents about the price of accommodation, food and tourism services, and intend to pay the lower price (Bhatta, 2014). One of the key informants at AST argued that:

“Tour operators are benefit-oriented groups. They usually establish their offices in the cities like Pokhara and Kathmandu, and deal with tourists for a packaged scheme. When their deal with tourists is confirmed, they then negotiate with the hotels and lodges in the AST for tourist services paying them the lowest price”.

Bhatta (2014) also argued that there exists a type of networked communication between tour operators and local entrepreneurs that does not benefit local communities in a broader way, and the local entrepreneurs who have good relationship with tour operators will only receive more economic benefits. Community perceptions towards outside tourism entrepreneurs revealed that less than one fourth of respondents (22.6%) perceived tour operators positively. However they realized that presence of tour operators is crucial for tourism development. Majority of respondents (67.3%) showed neutral response indicating that most of the local people neither received benefits from tour operators, nor they could deny their presence in the in the AST. Households living along the MT (i.e. mostly the entrepreneurs) are found positive towards tour operators that that of living along OT (mostly the farmers and lower caste people).

Survey results suggested that as economic benefits are mostly received by local entrepreneurs and tour operators, they tend to cooperate with each other to promote their business and tourism marketing. There seems low degree of collaboration with non-entrepreneurs specifically the local farmers and low caste people living off- the major trail (OT). While asking about the effectiveness of private sector's effort in collaboration with local communities, majority considered their efforts as 'average' (72.4%). Only 8.5% of respondents perceived it positively and rest (19.1%) perceived negatively. Since the perceptions are generally shaped by the level of resident's interaction and exposure with tour operators as well as the potential benefits to local residents; it is arguably concluded that communities living off-the major trail (OT) had limited collaboration with tour operators receiving the minimal benefits from tourism industry. It is suggested to initiate mutual dialogue, discussion and coalitions among residents and tour operators from early stage of tourism planning to its implementation.

4.1.3 Collaboration among local community, NGOs and tourists

There has been a significant contribution of local NGOs and tourists in the tourism development activities. Tourists visiting the AST are considered an instigator of tourism development; their activities, actions and behavior largely contribute towards sustainability of the destinations. Local NGOs and Community –based organizations often play significant role in promoting community awareness, empowerment, and tourism development. Survey findings revealed that NGOs have been closely working with local communities specifically to support conservation and development activities. The local level youth clubs, cooperatives and community development organizations have become instrumental to promote ecotourism, community development and environmental protection in the AST. Along with NGOs, the role of tourists is also perceived as an agent to enhance community livelihoods. The cooperation and financial support from the tourists for the community infrastructure development is notable in the AST. For example, many tourists had volunteered in the construction of community infrastructure such as school building, health post, drinking water supply, and hydroelectricity, and in the promotion of educational and environmental awareness activities. Most of the residents perceived tourists more responsible, aware, and caring towards environmental protection and community development. The financial and moral support of tourists has indeed contributed to enhance community livelihoods in the region (Bhatta, 2014).

4.1.4 Community capacity to collaborate with tourism stakeholders

It is widely acknowledged that capacity of local community should be enhanced specifically to make them able playing influential role in the decision-making process for tourism development. Interview with ACA staff revealed that local communities in the AST are capable of effectively participating in the collaborative efforts such that they could influence the joint decision-making process (collaborative efforts) and could receive direct economic benefits from tourism industry.

They further asserted that ACAP has been supporting local communities in multiple sectors empowering them through educational awareness, skill development trainings, and financial assistance. The findings from the household's survey, however, showed opposing result. Majority of them perceived that local resident's capacity to influence tourism related decision-making is weak. About 64.8% admitted that they cannot effectively participate in the collaborative activities. Comparatively, higher number of respondents (75.8%) living off-the major trail (OT) agreed that local people cannot effectively participate in collaborative efforts than that of MT (55.6%). It is obvious that farmers living in the peripheral region (OT) are not able

to raise their voices in the collaborative plan making process (Bhatta, 2014). The key reasons responsible for weak performance of local community in collaborative efforts are reported as lack of education, knowledge, confidence, and leadership skills. Hence, collaborative capacity and leadership skills of local residents, specifically the farmers and lower caste people, need to be strengthened through different skill development trainings, educational awareness activities, and support from relevant stakeholders so that they could effectively participate in the collaborative planning. It will support them receiving tourism benefits and foster mutually beneficial relationship among the stakeholders.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Based on in-depth discussion on the diverse issues community collaboration in tourism development in the AST, it is arguably concluded that the current approach of ecotourism development is tenuous and does not truly satisfy the key objectives of ecotourism i.e. fostering inclusive participation and stakeholder's collaboration. Although tourism has brought significant impacts on the local communities; the extent of these impacts is usually different with difference in the location of households, their level of interaction and exposure with tourists, their capacity or power to involve and influence the participation and collaboration process, and their education, skills, and financial resources. Significant differences in the perceptions of residents in MT and OT have been identified with regard to the role and context of participation and collaboration. It seems that higher the level of community participation and collaboration among stakeholders, higher will be the benefits accrued to local communities and stakeholders. As such, community capacity building is necessary to foster community's role in influencing the planning process for receiving maximum benefits at local level and promoting sustainable community development. Moreover, mutual trust, harmony and sense of responsibility among these stakeholders are vital for enhancing sustainability.

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