

The African Dream: A Pan-African E-community Project

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Abstract. The African Dream Project¹ seeks to develop community-based tourism by creating a technology-based solution to global marketing. They have chosen to do this by developing tourism routes across Africa, uniting them under the umbrella concept of Afrikatourism. This paper reports on a study done in the Eastern and Western Cape provinces of South Africa to determine the communication and coordination practices of tourism routes² that form part of a Pan-African e-community under the auspices of the African Dream Project. The study seeks to devise a model for maintaining cohesion of the routes through effective and efficient ICT³ and non-ICT practices. It is part of a 2-year study funded by the IDRC to determine the potential impact of ICT on the development of microenterprise in the tourism industry, entitled the SOMDITTI Phase 2 project.

¹ In December 2002, the African Dream Project comprised 32 routes covering 11623km in five countries, involving 80 towns and 791 establishments that support 5798 direct full-time jobs in season and 2344 part-time. Team Africa, the project driver, had 2331 individual, corporate, institutional, professional and partner members. The web sites registered an average of 679 page impressions per day (1888 hits) for the month of September (Source: Footprints, Open Africa newsletter, December 2001).

² The terms 'route' and 'routes' refer to collections of thematically linked destinations and tourism services in an area. They are not physically linked, as in a trail.

³ Information and Communications Technology

Background

The digital divide is not a single thing, but a complicated patchwork of varying levels of ICT access, basic ICT usage, and ICT applications among countries and peoples.

*Quote from 'Spanning the Digital Divide- understanding and tackling the issue'
A report by bridges.org*

In his report on Tourism, Development and the Internet for the UN ICT Task Force (2002), consultant Roger Harris states that tourism is the world's largest industry and the biggest single e-commerce industry, with over 38% of the US\$64 billion transacted on the Internet in 1999 being related to travel. He continues with 'tourism is also an information-intensive industry and the Internet can satisfy this need for quality information far better than any other technology'.

However as figures from the Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force in table 1 shows there is a growing disparity between the number of users of the Internet in developed and developing countries.

		1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Internet users (in millions)	Developing countries	3	7	13	25	51	83
	Developed countries	30	47	77	124	180	232
% penetration	Developing countries	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.5	1.0	1.6
	Developed countries	4	6	9	15	21	28

Table 1. Growth and penetration of Internet users (DOT Force)

According to the report on 'Spanning the Digital Divide' by Bridges.org, when computers are introduced in a country, they exacerbate inequality, usually benefiting privileged communities first.

It is against this backdrop that the African Dream Project was initiated, to give African microenterprises in the tourism industry access to the Internet on a collective web site. The initiative creates local content via a community tourism development process, and makes it accessible to global markets without taxing the resources of the information providers. This paper explains more of the working of this E-Community.

Southern African development

Inequality

Reducing inequality and poverty, and tackling unemployment and underemployment, are some of the key challenges faced by government. The immediate cause of poverty is huge inequalities in access to productive assets land, basic infrastructure and capital as well as to education and skills.

Quote from the web site of the Department of Trade and Industry of the South African Government (www.dti.gov.za)

Since the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the new government has been trying to redress the negative economic and isolationist effects of the Apartheid era.

Small business and tourism are high and visible on the development agenda. However there are still significant developmental problems to be addressed in the country.

Figures below indicate the socio-economic situations in South Africa and Lesotho. Both countries form part of the study explored in this paper.

	South Africa	Lesotho
Population (millions)	43,1	2,1
Area (1000 km ²)	1,200	30
% of population below the human poverty index	20,2	23,3
Adult illiteracy rate	15,4	17,6
% with lower than Grade 5 education	35	20
GDP per capita (\$)	8488	1626
Gini co-efficient	0,59	0,57

Table 2. Socio-economic indicators for South Africa and Lesotho

Tourism Development

Focus and co-ordination: communities involved in route developments are focused around a vision of common purpose. This has the further benefit of achieving a level of coordination and cooperation that hitherto has been impossible among the multi-faceted participants in tourism.

Quote from African Dream Project web site (www.openafrica.org)

There is a plethora of tourism development agencies in South Africa. At national government level there is the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism. Each of South Africa's 9 provinces has a tourism portfolio within one of its government departments. There are parastatal tourism boards at the national and provincial levels, 10 in all. There are also active tourism development authorities

at the regional, metropolitan and local government levels. For example, in the Cape Town metropole, routes could deal with up to 9 different tourism authorities.

All these organisations are being kept busy and are able to justify their existence in light of the fact that tourism is growing in South Africa and that it is one of the few options open to small business development in disadvantaged areas because of the low barriers to entry. However service standards and information available vary between regions.

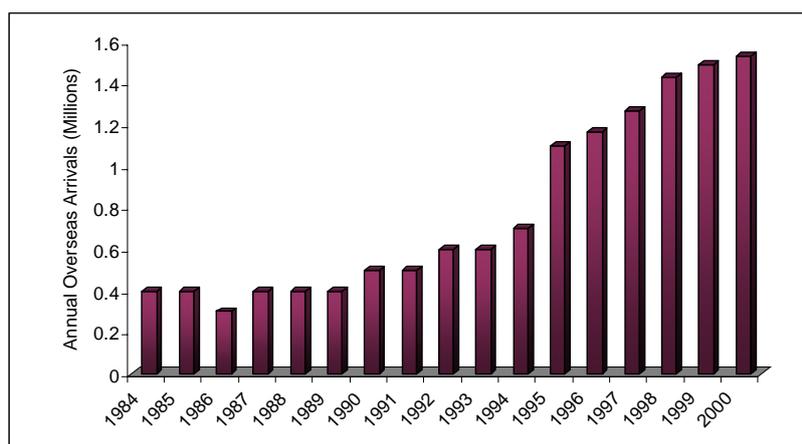


Figure 1. Overseas arrivals – South Africa (Wesgro)

South Africa's 2002 total tourism figure is 6 429 583 of which 4 455 9714 were visitors from Africa. The three biggest markets by continent are Europe (1 252 710), North America (216 275) and Asia (177 415).

It is these 2 issues of inequality and tourism development that the African Dream Project tries to address, within the context of the digital divide by giving all route participants free access to web based marketing.

The African Dream Project

During the study, the research team worked closely with Open Africa, the functionary tasked with realising the African Dream Project. The following information was gathered from this interaction and from the project web site www.africandream.org.

4 According to Wesgro, the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency for the Western Cape, 'The majority of African visitors are cross-border travellers including job-seekers, shoppers and traders from neighbouring countries. African cross border arrivals account for some 70% of all foreign visitors'.

Open Africa is registered as a non-profit organisation. It has a flat organisational structure and operates out of a small office in Cape Town. Noel de Villiers, the founder, provides day-to-day leadership and management and is the organisation's premier spokesperson.

Operational staff include a project leader / Webmaster, a person responsible for the GIS⁵, content design and maintenance and two field officers. Mr de Villiers and the field officers are also involved in fundraising. Additional resources are contracted in as needed.

The motivation of the African Dream Project is to 'turn Africa's natural and cultural heritage into one of the most valuable products on earth, through Afrikatourism - a unique model of tourism specific to Africa'. The vision is to 'link Africa's splendours through a network of Afrikatourism routes from the Cape to Cairo'. - www.africandream.org. The objectives of the project are:

- Tourism development
- Job creation
- Promotion of the routes
- Building community morale and pride
- Benefits to Internet Users
- Conservation

A 90-day route development methodology, backed by the use of information systems such as GIS and database, has resulted in the development of 32 routes in 3 years. Afrikatourism is the unifying brand name and the African footprint is the community's logo. All stakeholders, ranging from sponsors to route participants, form part of Team Africa.

Route participants are representative of all forms of tourism businesses, ranging from micro to big. None of the participants pay for their participation in the project, consequently all are equal. The work is sponsored by a range of corporates, government and tourism authorities and private trusts. However, as stated in the route development workshops, the cost of belonging is high – a commitment to adding value to the route.

The system is run on a Pentium using Windows NT. An Access database is used for search engine and Java is used to query the Arcview GIS. Web server software, an HTML editor and photo editor are also used. Hosting is off-site. There are 2 web sites, www.africandream.org and www.openafrica.org. A GPS is used for positioning and a digital camera for taking photographs. Laptops and data projectors are used for presentations in the field. Figure 2 shows the web site hits for April to August 2002.

⁵ Geographical Information Systems

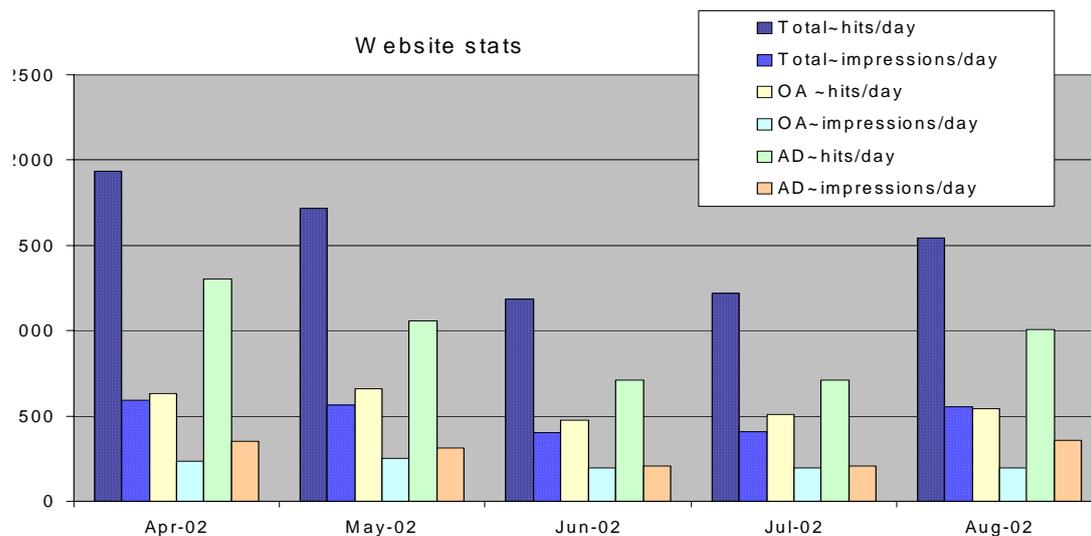


Figure 2. Web site statistics (Open Africa)

Route Development Process – the establishment of the E-Community

Open Africa does not canvass for routes but rather invites communities or routes to approach them to become part of the African Dream Project. No group is turned away as the assumption is that there is tourism potential in every area or situation. There are routes in such diverse situations as disadvantaged communities in large cities and mountain villages in remote rural areas.

Funding from an outside source is then sought, either by Open Africa or by the group. Currently the cost of developing a route in South Africa is approximately \$10 000. Costs rise the further the route is from the organisation's base in Cape Town.

Three workshops are held at 6-week intervals. All participants for that route are invited to all of the workshops, which are held in the area of the proposed route. Participants are encouraged to identify others to join so numbers usually grow with each workshop. The entire process from the time the Open Africa field officer meets with the group for the first time, to the launch of the web site, takes 90 days.

During the first workshop, a 60-minute presentation is shown to the audience, which explains the African Dream Project and associated concepts. A route forum is elected by the group to drive the process in between workshops and one person is identified to liaise with Open Africa. The attractions on the tourism route are identified.

Between the first and second workshops, participants fill in forms with all the data required for the web site. Information about the area is also gathered, such as seasonal activities, condition of the roads, useful tips; etc. A road map of the route is requested which will be digitised and uploaded onto the site for viewers to print.

During the field officer's second visit to the area, GPS positioning of all destinations and attractions on the route is recorded. If participants are not able to provide photographs, these are taken by the field officer. At the workshop, all outstanding information is collected and decisions are made about the name and contact person.

The launch takes place at the third workshop. It is usually a gala community event with guest speakers ranging from community leaders to politicians to sponsors. During the workshop, the route participants are advised on how to promote their route and their businesses further.

At any time after the launch, the data for participants can be changed and new participants added. If a route is to be extended significantly, a new 90-day process is initiated.

After a route is established, Open Africa's associates on Team Africa promote the routes. Promotions include articles in Africa Magazine, a full-page map and article in a quarterly publication on tourism by Open Africa's major sponsor, Engen⁶.

The Study

Liaison persons of five routes were visited for face-to-face interviews by 3 members of the study group. The interviews were structured, with the interviewers filling in questionnaires. Meetings were lengthy and informal and much time was spent in discussion. Anecdotal evidence was collected in the form of comments.

The routes are spread out over the Eastern and Western Cape provinces of South Africa and across the border into Lesotho, a land-locked country. The routes are all situated in rural areas, ranging from an impoverished township near a small town to the mountainous areas around Lesotho. All but one are spread over vast distances. Details of the routes' backgrounds are tabled in Table 3 below.

⁶ Formerly Mobil

<i>Route name:</i>	<i>Blue Crane Caledon</i>	<i>Southernmost Blue Crane</i>	<i>Kwa Mandlenkosi</i>	<i>Maloti</i>	Thunga-Thunga
<i>Date established</i>	1 March 2001	3 July 2002	27 October 2001	Originally in 1998, launched on Open Africa site 10 Dec 2002	12 May 1999
<i>Catalyst for establishment</i>	Conservation of the Blue Crane	Caledon Blue Crane extension	Community project	Poverty relief initiative in Lesotho.	Create benefits for local communities
<i>Route setting:</i>	Western Cape Rural – mostly farmers	Western Cape Rural – mostly farmers	Western Cape Karoo desert Rural – township	Cross border – Eastern Cape; eastern Free State; Lesotho - Rural	Eastern Cape Rural
<i>Theme:</i>	Conservation and awareness of Blue Cranes	Conservation and awareness of the Blue Cranes	Townships and township life in the platteland	Maloti Mountains of Lesotho	To follow the footsteps of Mandela
<i>No. of participants</i>	16	15	15	89	68

Table 3. Route backgrounds

The study seeks to determine the issues pertaining to common vision; cohesion; coordination; communications; collaboration; the measurement of impact; the use of ICTs and the challenges faced by the route.

Further data is to be collected. Using the current questionnaire, telephonic interviews will be conducted with African Dream Project routes far from Cape Town. Face to face interviews will be conducted with Open Africa routes close to Cape Town and with route coordinators of older and bigger routes that are not part of the African Dream Project, e.g. Wine Routes in the Western Cape and the 1000 Hills Experience and Midlands Meander in KwaZulu Natal. Model and recommendations will be drawn up and these will possibly be included in a revised plan for the African Dream Project.

Common vision

As stated the vision for the African Dream Project is to ‘*link Africa's splendours through a network of Afrikatourism routes from the Cape to Cairo*’. It is a Pan-

African vision for tourism development, which is presented at the first workshop of every route.

Two respondents stated conservation as the major focus of the route, others stated that poverty relief, job creation and community development were the major driving forces. Only one route stated tourism as the primary focus. The route fora adhere to their own vision and not necessarily to the Pan-African vision of the African Dream Project.

Tourism development, which is one of the African Dream Project objectives is in line with the objectives of local government and tourism development authorities. Those routes championed by tourism authorities stated that the routes gave them vehicles to introduce emerging businesses and tourism products in their areas.

Route participants are largely interested only in the marketing of their own businesses. They recognise the value of the collective marketing opportunities that the African Dream Project affords but are not exclusively members of that route. There was no evidence of buying into the African Dream or the routes' visions.

Cohesion

The study found that the cohesion of the routes was largely due to the efforts of one person or champion in each route. None of the routes employ any permanent staff members. However of the 5 routes studied, 3 of the champions were employed by tourism authorities in the area and one was sponsored by a corporate to create awareness of conservation of Blue Cranes in the area. The champion of the remaining route had been employed by a sponsor, specifically for the route but is now is self-employed as a participant on the route.

Only one route has a legal persona. The Thunga Thunga route has been registered as a private company with a limit of 50 participants as shareholders. In addition, all 68 members are members of a voluntary association. Two routes charge membership fees.

Communication

All staff at Open Africa have e-mail addresses and cellphones. One staff member is permanently stationed at the office. When the manager and field officers travel they keep in touch with each other and the office via cell phone as e-mail access is not always available in remote areas. At other times the team keeps in touch with each other by e-mail and project meetings.

All route forum liaison persons have e-mail addresses, cell phones, telephones and faxes. Communication between Open Africa and the route for a and Team Africa is by printed and electronic newsletter, telephone and e-mail.

All participants have telephones. Most have cell phones although the cell phone network does not extend into some of the areas covered by the routes.

In all but one route, participants and forum members live far from each other. The fora meet more regularly than the participants (*ad hoc; ad hoc; monthly; bimonthly; annually*). Teleconferencing was used by one of the route fora and proved to be successful.

Open Africa is planning a conference to which two representatives from each of the 32 routes plus other stakeholders will be invited. Agenda items will include successes; synergies; stumbling blocks and sustainability.

Open Africa uses the partnerships within Team Africa that have promotions and public relations expertise to promote the routes to the tourism market. Promotional material, such as stickers with the web site address printed on them, have also been developed.

Most of the promotional material developed by the routes is printed, in the form of collective brochures. Other external communications include stickers; postcards; newspaper editorials; slots on television programs; trade shows and talks, e.g. targeting birding groups. There was not much use made of ICT to promote the routes.

Collaboration and support

Two of Open Africa's major sponsors, Engen (oil company) and Hertz (car hire), collaborated to develop a guide book of all the African Dream Project routes. This enabled Hertz to win a major account with a German travel agency.

Despite the fact that four of the routes have not been constituted as a legal entity, all are attracting significant support from sponsors, who were not involved in the initial set up of the route. Direct support includes brochures; bookings; sponsorship to trade shows; funding awareness workshops and skills development; infrastructural development; and in one case a route extension. Indirect support includes small business training in the area; the establishment of a tourism hotline; employment of a conservation worker. There is no evidence of collaboration between routes

All respondents noted that participants on the routes have collaborated with respect to festivals; craft markets; joint marketing and tour packaging.

Measurement of impact

The system developed by Open Africa has the capability to create and update statistics. These are gathered during the initial 90 day process. However the integrity of the data is dependant on timeous feedback from the routes to keep it updated. Of the five routes studied, four were out of date because information was not forwarded to Open Africa. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the routes are growing in terms of numbers of participants, skills development; infrastructure; emerging businesses; and outside support.

Tourism bureaus record statistics on source markets, seasonality and growth. However this is not route specific. Feedback from the participants is oral and informal and would be available on request in some cases. Three routes kept statistics on how clients heard about the routes. They all stated that 80% or more of their clients heard about the routes through word of mouth.

Participants do not keep statistics of their business other than those required for financial accounting. No formal records, other than guest books, were kept on the origin of visitors. Participants interviewed noted that knowing how their customers heard about them and where they came from would help them to decide how to spend their marketing budgets.

Use of ICT

The African Dream Project is based on and committed to the use of the ICT and the Internet. However the hardware and systems need to be upgraded. This is dependant on funding.

All of the forum representatives interviewed had e-mail access, cell phones, faxes and telephones and used them regularly. There are problems with cell phone access in three of the areas studied and Maloti stated that there were problems getting technical ICT support.

All participants have telephones and most have cell phones. E-mail usage is higher on some routes than others. The reasons for this range from financial in the case of the Kwa Mandlenkosi route to lack of awareness in the Southernmost Blue Crane. Forum liaison persons complain of a reluctance by participants to learn and use ICTs.

<i>What % of the participants have</i>	<i>Blue Crane Caledon</i>	<i>Southernmost Blue Crane</i>	<i>Kwa Mandlenkosi</i>	<i>Maloti</i>	<i>Thunga-Thunga</i>
<i>Telephones?</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
<i>E-mail access?</i>	75%	40%	13%	62.9%	58%
<i>Internet access?</i>	68%	40%	6%	58.4%	52%
<i>Their own web sites?</i>	18%	0%	0%	24.7%	25%
<i>Booking facility?</i>	18%	6%	0%	12.35%	14%

Table 4. Participants' use of ICT

5. Challenges faced by the routes

All respondents stated that their routes were seasonal. Summer is the busiest season for all, then autumn (Easter) and winter. Snow is an attraction and a constraint on the Maloti route. Roads in some areas of the Thunga Thunga Route pose difficulty for travelers and make it more difficult for participants to meet. Some of the border posts between Lesotho and South Africa are not tourist friendly. The long distances of the routes made it difficult for four of the five routes to convene meetings of both the forum and the participants.

None of the routes employs a full-time worker. They are reliant on volunteers or staff of the local tourism authorities to drive the development of the route. Outside of the local tourism authorities, there is a lack of expertise in tourism and business management. Only one route has a visible central venue or presence, with a display area at the local tourism office.

The respondents stated that participants in rural areas prefer to communicate face to face. In some areas, participants speak different languages making communication a problem. ICT has not been utilised to make communication more efficient and effective.

Open Africa has attempted to put systems in place that result in data being kept updated. However there isn't an appreciation amongst the routes of the value of this information. Statistics on overall tourism activity in the areas is collated by local tourism authorities but the impact of the routes cannot be isolated and assessed accurately from these figures.

It is not evident that the participants would know what information would be useful. By and large participants keep information, which is pertinent to finances and taxes only.

There is less of a sense of urgency in rural areas, which means the time savings are of no real value. In the rural areas, people prefer to meet face to face so electronic communication does not have a strong appeal.

There is a lack of awareness of the benefits of ICT amongst participants. The perceived cost of investment in ICT is high and the participants are too dispersed to be able to share facilities. As tourism activity is the major activity in many of the small businesses, there are no other business reasons to purchase a personal computer, which then becomes an expensive device to purchase purely for communications.

Observations

The African Dream Project's concept of routes is modeled on the Wine Routes in the Western Cape, which are almost 30 years old. It is remarkable how much has been achieved by the routes studied in a short space of time, despite the lack of

permanent coordination structures. Much of this can be attributed to the energy of the Champions.

There appear to be different visions within the African Dream Project, which the various stakeholders need to be aware of. Expectations need to be managed accordingly.

There is scope to strengthen relationships at all levels, especially peer-to-peer networking, e.g. forum to forum. The benefits of this need to be articulated and the mechanisms put in place to make it practical.

Information flow needs to be improved at all levels. An analysis of useful information should be done and all stakeholders need to be made aware of the value of the information.

Participants need to be made aware of the benefits of using ICT in a global market and how they can access it at an affordable cost.

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