

# **Empowering Communities Through Capacity Development: The Case of Misfat Al Abriyeen Project**

## **O Empoderamento das Comunidades Através do Desenvolvimento das Suas Capacidades: O Caso do Projeto Misfat Al Abriyeen**

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### **Abstract/ Resumo**

Tourism in rural communities has attracted a growing interest from nature and cultural tourists. This has led to the emergence of rural tourism as a socio-economic tool for development. However, some destinations are confronted with problems such as the residents' lack of awareness or limited understanding of tourism and inadequate capacity. Capacity development is fundamental to achieve sustainability, where communities are well-engaged and empowered to create better opportunities. A local, small-scale community project in Misfat Al Abriyeen, Al Hamra, Sultanate of Oman that transformed idle resources into useful, tourism assets, reveals the significance of community empowerment through capacity development, resulting to local people's improved source of income, deeper understanding and cultural interactions with tourists and appreciation of community assets. The project plan was administered between April 2014 and September 2015, with an approved implementation period of five years (2016-2021) under the supervision of Ministry of Tourism (MoT). Furthermore collaborative approach between the public sector and local community plays a significant role in the effective imple-

O turismo nas comunidades rurais é atrativo para os turistas culturais e para quem procura a natureza e a tranquilidade. Pode afirmar-se que o turismo rural surge cada vez mais como uma ferramenta económica e social para o desenvolvimento destes territórios. No entanto, alguns destinos enfrentam problemas devido à falta de consciência dos moradores que têm uma compreensão limitada sobre o potencial do turismo. O desenvolvimento de novas capacidades é fundamental para alcançar a sustentabilidade. Quando as comunidades são motivadas e têm boa capacidade de desenvolvimento estão melhor capacitadas para criar oportunidades. Um projeto comunitário local de pequena escala em Misfat Al Abriyeen, Al Hamra, Sultanato de Omã transformou recursos abandonados em ativos úteis de turismo e demonstrou a importância do empoderamento da comunidade através do desenvolvimento das suas capacidades. Como resultados obtiveram-se melhores fontes de rendimento dos moradores locais, maior compreensão e interação culturais com os turistas e valorização dos ativos da comunidade. O projeto foi desenvolvido entre abril de 2014 e setembro de 2015, com um período de implementação apro-

Mentation of capacity development programmes in rural destinations like Misfat Al Abriyeen.

*Keywords:* capacity development, community empowerment, rural tourism, partnerships

*JEL Codes:* O15, P48, R11, Z32

vado de cinco anos (2016-2021) sob a supervisão do Ministério do Turismo (MoT). Permitiu-nos concluir que uma abordagem colaborativa entre o setor público e a comunidade local desempenha um papel significativo na implementação efetiva de programas de desenvolvimento de capacidades em destinos rurais como Misfat Al Abriyeen.

*Palavras-chave:* capacidades desenvolvimento, empoderamento da comunidade, turismo rural, parcerias

*Código JEL:* O15, P48, R11, Z32

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rural destinations are typically rich in natural, cultural and heritage attractions, yet commonly off the beaten track for most visitors. Having a variety of attractions untouched by modernization and augmented by basic amenities and services, visitors are drawn to its appeal and unique experience. Rural destinations can be a small town or community, close-knit and usually agrarian society based on family farming (Wanda George, Mair & Reid, 2009). Some features include but not limited to the representations of ideal ways of life, perceived environmental qualities, genuine architectural character and authentic food, among others (Bell, 2006; Crouch, 2006; Figueiredo, 2009). Although rural destinations have their varied attractions, many still lack wealth and resources that make it difficult in eliminating poverty or improving people's lives due to a number of issues.

Tourism plays a vital role in rural destinations' growth and development through generation of income and jobs (United Nations, 2015) and viewed as a community and economic development tool, hence, several rural communities have turned it as a way to diversify their economic and social activities (Razzaq, Mohamad, Abdulkader, Mustafad, Hamzah, & Khalifah, 2013; Roberts & Hall, 2001). Tourism provides socio-economic benefits to rural areas such as infrastructure upgrade (Roberts & Hall, 2001) and fosters civic activity of bringing people together and a means for community deve-

lopment (Shilling, 2006). Its range of activities must be pro-poor, transformative and proactive.

The growing disposable income and leisure time, improved access, better technologies and motivational factors such as 'escapism' - where urban dwellers want to experience life in the rural areas, are some attributes leading to the emerging interest in rural tourism (Wanda George, Mair & Reid, 2009). This creates a new niche market for tourists who are attracted by unique ways of life in the rural areas. Rural tourism serves as a sustainable approach to economic development that creates partnerships and provides opportunities for harmonizing service standards and enhances stakeholders' involvement (Gannon, 1994; WTO, 2004). One of the famous approaches to rural tourism is "attraction-based identity, where 'a community's identity would be purposefully constructed or adapted to provide a cultural tourism experience' (Sidali, Spiller & Schulze, 2011). This form of tourism is not a new concept, as it helps rural regions to pull out from decline (OECD, 2011). Moreover, partnership between the government and community is essential due to issues confronting destinations such as lack of awareness or inadequate capacity in tourism. With recent trends and developments in our global environment, tourism must be inclusive and sustainable to make communities more engaged and empowered. Overall, tourism has a direct bearing on building capacities and has been an important sector contributing to

society's development - economically, socially and environmentally.

Rural destinations apply different capacity development strategies to fit the requirements of their respective localities. Capacity development (CD) is significant in transferring knowledge between individuals and institutions, and there are opportunities to develop the residents and visitors' creative potentials through active participation in learning experiences (Richards & Raymond, 2000). Creativity is an essential element in enhancing local tourism livelihood projects by bringing more potential advantages such as value for tourists, innovative products and sustainable creative resources (Richards & Wilson, 2006; Tan et al., 2013). Knowledge transfer boosts competitiveness (Cooper, 2006; Hjalager, 2010) resulting to innovative ideas that improve the society and local residents' abilities (Velasquez, Yashiro, Yoshimura & Ono, 2005). Innovation provides solutions to our problems, and this is true when idle properties are put into good use to benefit residents and the local community.

Sharing best practices is one way of letting people learn and adapt new methods. Transforming unutilized properties requires several considerations where capacity development plays a major role. The case of Misfat Al Abriyeen, a local community project approved by the Ministry of Tourism - Sultanate of Oman, exhibits how education and trainings improve local people's knowledge and skills in converting idle properties for touristic purpose and as a source of livelihood. This case study is a pilot project in the Sultanate of Oman that presents a practical approach in strengthening capacities of local people. The main aim is to ensure that community is highly integrated in any tourism activity for its long-term viability, empowering them for better understanding and management of properties. A brief literature concerning community empowerment through capacity development, rural tourism, local community roles and partnerships in effectively managing capacity development programmes are presented. Findings and discussions based on observation and interview during the period between April 2014 to September 2015 are also presented; examining its relationship in building capacities and establishing facts relative to the significance of collaborative approach among key stakeholders. Based from these findings, conclusions and implications have been drawn.

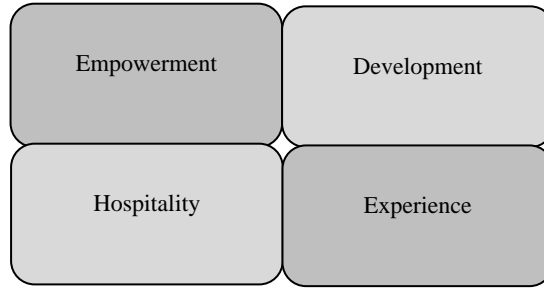
## 2. THE MISFAT AL ABRIYEEN PROJECT

The project, a local community initiative was conceptualized to strengthen the local residents' knowledge and management of idle heritage properties. It was formulated and implemented based on a 'government-community' partnership, a "cooperative" approach to have mutual social, economic and cultural benefits. The project is aimed to empower the local community by applying capacity development strategies in transforming two idle properties in Misfat Al Abriyeen village, Al Hamra, Sultanate of Oman into useful, tourism assets. These properties - a heritage house and a 'trekking' centre have been turned into mixed-use properties; the *heritage house* into a Visitor Centre, souvenir shop, accommodation and traditional restaurant and the *'trekking' centre* as a multi-purpose centre for events, camping, picnic, 'rest & relaxation' and trekking with basic public facilities. The project's specific objectives are: to enhance positive host-guest relationship and heritage tourism activities in the village, provide business opportunities to local people and promote the village as a destination to foreign and local visitors. The transformed properties would lead to proper resource utilization, experience and destination promotions which are beneficial to the residents, visitors and community at large.

The Misfat Al Abriyeen Project focuses on four core elements and these are empowerment, development, hospitality and experience. *Empowerment*, in enabling local people to shape and influence the way things or activities are delivered, and the practical techniques in making local decisions; *development*, in helping employees develop their personal and organizational skills, knowledge and abilities; *hospitality*, in offering friendly and generous reception and entertainment to visitors; and *experience*, in promoting good and positive visitor experience based on perceptions, feelings and reactions.

Misfat Al Abriyeen is a small project granted with a five-year investment by the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) - Sultanate of Oman, for the period 2016-2021. The MoT monitors the project and has the possibility of renewal based on set standards and regulations. The project plan was administered between April 2014 and September 2015 and adopted multiple approaches in collecting information through meetings, site

Figure 1. Misfat Al Abriyeen Project's Core Elements



visit, observation, interview and inventory.

Transforming properties into useful, community assets by the local community is already an achievement towards enhancing people's lives. Although many locals who are part of this project do not have formal education about heritage or tourism management, the group's leader (a graduate of archaeology and tourism), regularly conducts meetings, seminars and trainings in order to educate others. His past experience of managing an old house which was converted into a bed and breakfast accommodation sets a good example that helps locals understand and embrace tourism positively. For the five-year period, the project is expected to: effectively utilize idle or abandoned properties based on a pro-active role and efficient management; boost the local community roles and empowerment through a local tourism initiative; increase awareness about tourism and its positive impacts; promote the Omani heritage and culture through architecture, traditional food, handicrafts and hospitality; generate additional income and serve as a source of livelihood for members and their families; stimulate personal growth and development amongst locals and build their confidence and entrepreneurial abilities; and emulate this practical and sustainable initiative in other Omani tourism sites or destinations.

### 3. PROFILE

Oman, as an emerging tourism destination known for its rich heritage and culture, has one of the most diverse environments in the Middle East. In 2014, Oman attracted 2.1 million tourists and revenue from tourism accounted for approximately 3% of Oman's gross domestic product (GDP) (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2014). One of the known attractions in the Sultanate is Misfat Al Abriyeen in Wilayat<sup>1</sup>

Al Hamra. **Al Hamra** is located in Al Dhakiliyah Governorate, bordered by the Wilayat of Nizwa to the east and the Wilayat of Bahla to the south. Al Hamra, around 220 kilometers from Muscat, is also known as Hamra Al Abriyeen with reference to Al Abri tribe who settled in the place many years ago. Some of the oldest preserved houses in Oman can be found in Al Hamra, a town built on a tilted rock slab (Ministry of Tourism, 2016).

Jebel<sup>2</sup> Shams, the village of Misfat, al Hootah Cave, Hasat bin Salt, Bait<sup>3</sup> al Safa and Bait al Shari'ah are the main tourist attractions in the Wilayat Al Hamra, which lies in the north-western part of the Jebel Akhdar range. It is renowned for its wadis, aflaj, gardens and orchards, while the mountain of Jebel Shams, which rises to 12,000 feet above sea level, is its most significant natural feature (Ministry of Information, 2002). Al Hamra is one of the most important tourism wilayats in the Sultanate because of the large number of visitors it receives all year round. Interestingly, Al Hamra is well-known for its ancient buildings and breathtaking date palm gardens, lime trees and agricultural terraces (Gulf Research Centre, 2013).

The famous village of Misfat Al Abriyeen is situated over 3,000 feet high. The village has an ancient fortress known as "Rowghan"<sup>4</sup> which is believed to pre-date Islam. The traditional houses were built on large rocks that have unique designs with arched passageways. Misfat's mountain side is planted with terraced plots of date palms, limes, sweet oranges, grapes, figs and mulberries and the village receives its water from a single spring on the wadi bed (Oman Official Guide, 2009). The accessible road has made the village a popular place in the Sultanate. Misfat Al Abriyeen has 1,130 residents in 2017 (Al Hamra Health Centre, 2017). Villagers are devout Muslims, with their social,

<sup>1</sup> Wilayat means an administrative division or province.

<sup>2</sup> 'Jebel' is an Arabic term for mountain or a range of hills.

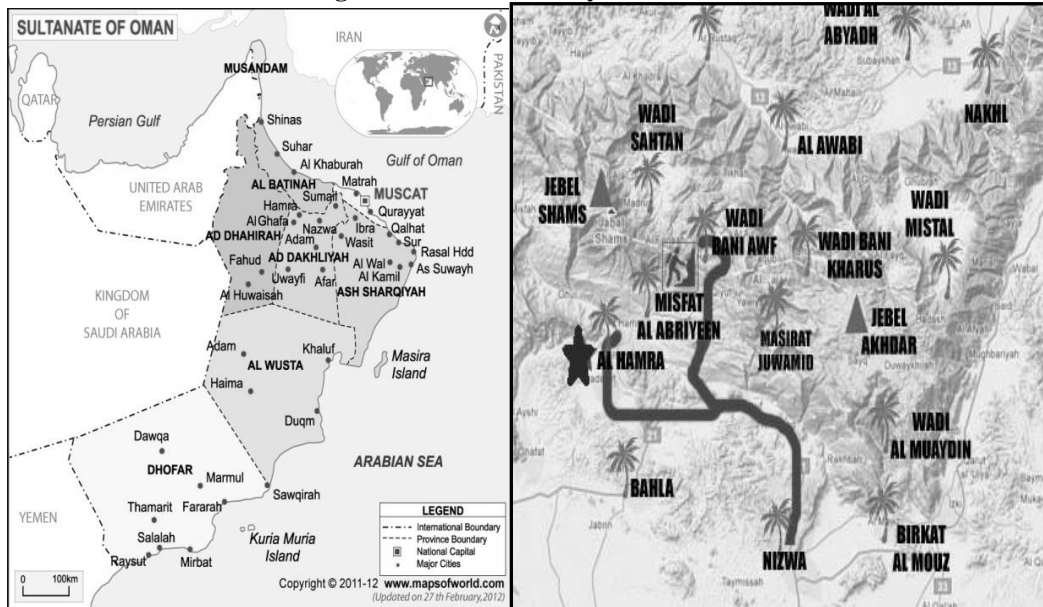
<sup>3</sup> 'Bait' means an edifice, building or home.

<sup>4</sup> 'Rowghan' is an Arabic term for an ancient fortress.

economic and moral conduct substantially inspired by the teachings of Qu’ran<sup>5</sup>. Misfat is a living story of rugged mountains turned into a green oasis that enjoys security, prosperity and development (Oman Observer, 2013). Two idle

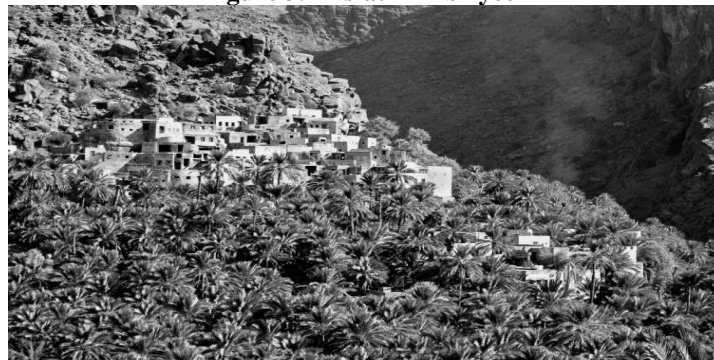
properties namely, *Misfat Old House* and *Ertihal Trekking Centre* are both situated in this village.

Figure 2. Misfat Al Abriyeen Location



Lonely Planet, 2015; Maps of World, 2011-12

Figure 3. Misfat Al Abriyeen



Misfat Old House, 2015

The Misfat Old House was constructed in 2012, with an approximate size of 350 square meters. It has three floors comprising three rooms, one kitchen, two toilets and one big room. The property is owned by the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) and converted into Misfat Heritage House that comprises a Visitor Information Centre, accommodation, a souvenir shop and a restaurant that caters authentic Omani food. The traditional restaurant serves

lunches and snacks for visitors. Foods are prepared and supplied by the local residents combined with traditional Omani hospitality and service. The Ertihal ‘Trekking’ Centre was constructed around twenty-two years ago. This property located around 300 meters away from the Misfat Heritage House, is also owned by the MoT and has long been idle. The compound has idle shops, recreational areas and picnic ground. Ertihal Trekking Centre was converted as a

<sup>5</sup> ‘Qu’ran’ is the Holy book of Islamic religion.

multi-purpose centre for events, camping, picnic, 'rest and relaxation' and serves as a trekking point for campers and visitors who would like to embark on a journey to Misfah village and nearby surroundings. The site is exclusively

managed by Omanis and caters traditional Omani food including snacks and refreshments. It now plays a role in promoting traditional events, adventure and recreation activities in the area.

**Figure 4. Misfah Heritage House**



(a) Inside the Compound



(b) The Back View

**Figure 5. Ertihal Trekking Centre**



(a) Rest Area



(b) Room / Office

(Flores, 2015)

#### 4. THE PROJECT PLAN PROCESS

The project was conceptualized and undertaken due to idle properties' feasibility of becoming useful resources for the community. The project plan was developed from the period April 2014 until September 2015 and implemented, as a five-year small-scale investment, from 2016 until 2021, under the supervision of MoT. Several steps were followed in preparing the project plan considering the management, technical, financial and socio-economic aspects.

*First, preliminary meetings with local community were arranged.* These were taken into consideration to draft the proposal and get relevant information and facts from members of the

local community. Discussions covered various issues such as purpose and awareness about the benefits of the proposed project. Meetings and seminars were conducted during April and May 2014 to ensure members' commitment for the project. Critical information was given about how the two properties will operate, including recommended actions for planned activities related to planning and management. The meetings are also significant to build trust and confidence amongst the group. They also act as a representative for stakeholders' meeting called upon by the government. *Secondly, site visit, field observation and inventory were conducted in order to get the actual information.* These methods were also done to familiarize with the place and get firsthand experience on the status

of idle properties. An inventory was made to record all the available resources in the two properties. These activities were administered for four months, from April to July, 2014. *Then, discussion with locals and interview with the association leader were performed.* Project benefits, effective administration, government's roles and improving interactions with visitors, for a period of two months (August and September 2014) were the key issues discussed. Some locals would be meeting foreign visitors for the first time and orientations are important to avoid misunderstandings or conflicts.

*Afterwards, the preparation of document was initiated.* Document was prepared based on site visit, field observation and inventory that took three months (from October to December 2014). Four parts of the report were prepared: management, technical, financial and socio-economical aspects. The management aspect presented details about its 'cooperative' business nature and type operation, products and services, organizational profile, training plan, Omanisation policy, operations, suppliers, promotions and risk management. Technical aspect includes facility lay-out and designs, space utilization, safety, inventory and graphical image presentations. Financial aspect highlights the estimated budget, operational costs and income statement while socio-economic aspect focuses on the contributions of the project to local people, society and the environment. *Submission of the final project plan was the fifth step.* After thorough preparation and compliance to the local and national authorities' requirements, the project plan was submitted to the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) for evaluation and approval in early 2015. *After that, evaluation and approval commenced.* Upon submission to MoT, the evaluation process took place for at least three months (March to May 2015). The association having complied with the appropriate requirements was given an approval to take over the management and operations of the two idle heritage properties for five years (2016-2021), renewable, given that future compliance to the MoT requirements are met.

*Then, project was registered and implemented.* After receiving approval from the authority, the group conducted discussions in order to lay out the commencement of project

operations. With the MoT's approval, the project was then registered as an entity under the name Misfah LLC.<sup>6</sup> with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Acquisition of additional materials/equipment was also initiated together with the recruitment of staff. Tourism and hospitality seminars and trainings (tour guiding, customer service, reservations, housekeeping and property administration) were also conducted among the members and staff in order to ensure the effective management, operations and treatment of visitors. Each programme was delivered for a period of three to four days. These activities took place between June and September 2015. The properties opened to the public in the early 2016.

*Finally, project monitoring and evaluation mechanisms were set-up.* Management and operations are self-assessed by Misfah LLC. Under the leadership of Mr. Ahmed Al Abri (Managing Director) representing the group, the project is currently operating successfully. Misfah LLC was registered as a business entity and has the authority and decision-making power in terms of management and operations for five years, while MoT has the full ownership and authority in all physical assets of both properties e.g. buildings, built-in furniture, fixtures and equipment.

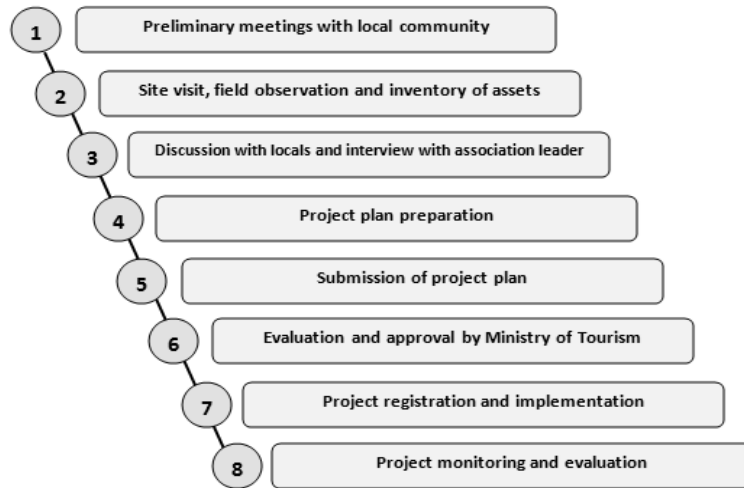
## 5. CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL DESTINATIONS

The success of any destination in attracting visitors depends on the capabilities and skills of human resource. No development can occur if locals are unskilled or lack the proper training. People, having the capacity will work and define activities that make the 'differentiation.' Destinations, as highlighted by Ritchie and Crouch (2003), must remain competitive in order to attract visitors, increase tourism income and provide memorable experiences while enhancing the well-being of people and communities. This indicates that human capital is the most important development factor that drives long-term effects at individual, national and global levels (Macbeth, Carson & Northcote, 2004; Maria Lut & Vlad, 2012). Strengthening the capacities of people and institutions is essential to ensure CD's role in advancing tourism

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<sup>6</sup> The project is a small-scale business managed and operated by 40-member team headed by the with the Managing Director & Leader.

**Figure 6. Steps in the Misfat Al Abriyeen Project Plan**



Flores, 2015

resources and organizations (Butler, 2016), towards ‘community empowerment’ in creating new ideas and methods that would improve the surrounding and abilities of the residents (Velasquez, Yashiro, Yoshimura & Ono, 2005). Destinations must adapt and develop new strategies to become marketable and competitive (Carvalho & Costa, 2011; Santos & Ramos, 2008). Through the years, the main key success factor to the implementation of sustainable tourism in any community is through the support of various stakeholders (Aas, et al., 2005; Gunn, 1988; Joppe, 1996). The sustainable development (SD) concept is all about meeting the needs and aspirations of the locals at present and the future without compromising the environment (World Tourism Organization, 2004), embedding social inclusion, economic growth and environmental stewardship. This must be carefully delivered, both for immediate and long-term benefits to people, environment and the economy (World Bank, 2006). Capacity is an integral part of sustainable development that gives emphasis on tourism products and resources. It provides a range of potential interventions between public, private and community sector organizations that widen engagement in building outputs not just technical but also methodological, policy-driven and institutional (DFID, 2006).

Misfat Al Abriyeen, as a rural destination must explore its potentials to attract visitors, create jobs and provide memorable experiences while enhancing the well-being of its people and the community – economically, socio-culturally and environmentally (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The case of Misfat, like in many commu-

nities, where residents either have lack of awareness or limited understanding about tourism industry (World Bank, 2006) or lack of adequate capacity in tourism shows a limiting factor in development programmes (Eicher, 2004). In this project, residents are pleased with the capacity education and trainings that led them to transform two idle properties into community assets. The opinions about the impacts of tourism for their community are highly positive. Residents believe *self-employment, job creation, cultural exchange experience, heritage awareness and sense of pride, growth and development of the area and valuation of real estate properties*, are some of the benefits they will get. On the contrary, they are slightly cautious once visitors flock to their place, as tourism activity might result to *commercialization of their culture, threat to family structure and inflation*. Overall, they believe tourism brings more benefits and capacity development activities lead to empowerment. When people are empowered, development occurs that drives economic growth, addresses social challenges and creates innovative solutions and opportunities, such as engagement in entrepreneurial activities (OECD, 2012).

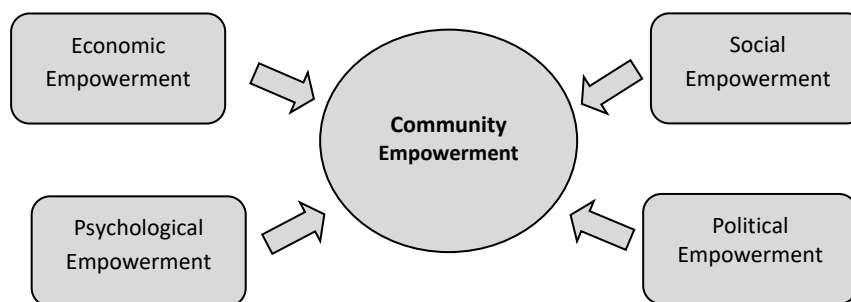
Another example stressing local community empowerment is the Kenyan case presented by Akama, Christopher & Burnett in 1996, concerning the development on the types of tourism facilities and forms of conservation programmes where benefits and costs are to be shared among stakeholders. Scheyvens (2003) supports this principle about real control over tourism by communities. This augments the need for communities to consider important aspects



such as checking the desirable type of tourism; local people as main beneficiary; ensuring tourism occurs in a controlled manner and does not undermine the culture, society and livelihood activities. The ability to solve problems and translate into action is essential for community's capacity to take charge and make decisions for the people. The community may then address problems or issues through formal or informal means, spontaneously or through planned actions (Chaskin, 2001). In such cases, empowerment can be done in multiple ways (Scheyvens, 2003). These could be through *economic empowerment*, by securing access to productive resources in the area and diversification in terms of livelihood options for many communities;

*social empowerment*, a situation where a community's sense of cohesion and integrity is strengthened through involvement in tourism; *psychological empowerment*, to shape community's confidence in its ability to participate equitably and effectively in tourism planning and development in order to play an active role in decision-making or power-sharing processes; or *political empowerment*, where community members' voices and concerns are guiding the development of any tourism initiative from the beginning up to its implementation. The framework (see Figure 7) demonstrates the multiple ways in empowering communities to say the least, in having management control over tourism and maximizing benefits in the long-term.

**Figure 7. Local Involvement in Managing Tourism**



Scheyvens cited in Singh, Timothy and Dowling, 2003

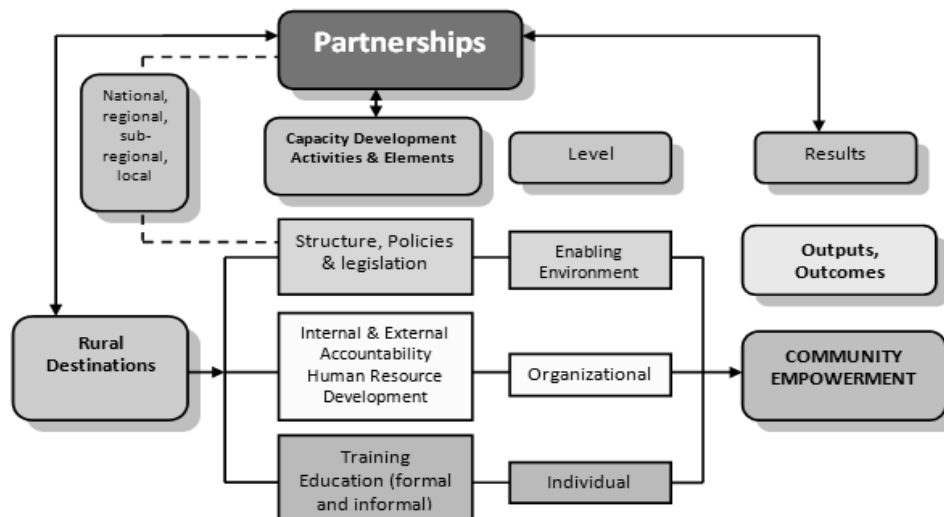
Relatively, capacity development (CD) as a holistic enterprise, strengthens the processes, systems and rules that influence collective and individual behavior and performance for developing communities and organizations (Abaza, Bankobeza, Bendahou and Al, 2002; Butler, 2016). These are proven with the tourism and hospitality trainings and seminars provided to locals in the beginning and during the implementation phases of the project. The group leader states: “Our personal and social conditions will improve if capacity development (tourism) programmes (e.g. trainings, workshops, seminars) are regularly provided by government, non-government or private institutions. The best outcome of this project is the development of opportunities for the locals and improving their lifestyles. The idle properties will remain idle if not utilized in the best manner.” This is true where institutions or partners are vital in delivering programmes to educate

people, while decision-making is made by the local community in the form of self-directed development (Koutra & Edwards, 2012). When communities own, manage and control their local tourism initiatives, these create community harmony and cohesion as results (Giampiccoli, Jugmohan & Mtapuri, 2014). This project supports the idea based on these statements: “We will be able to create new jobs for almost everyone. This will develop the community as well as the living standards of the locals. This project will also be a bench mark and standards for others to follow and raise their living. The idle property will be properly utilized, and the focus of tourism will be increased many folds.” This project empowers me to become a better person and citizen. Now, I have a broader vision of empowering locals by empowering myself.” Building capacity is an important element to improve and influence economic development through proper governance (Levy & Kpundeh, 2004).

However, government institutions still play a pivotal role in making sure that entrepreneurial opportunities are encouraged and prioritized for the local people. The leader comments: “*Government should hold workshops and seminars in different regions. Government must also share the success stories of people who are making tourism as their ‘bread and butter.’ Government should encourage all such activities and support financially.*” This attests no matter what type of management approach, government institutions are a core element of any development activity. Even at times where government or public institutions lack support or power to do things due to limited resources, an initiative from a local community or private sector is a critical step in empowering individuals and communities. Creative ideas also play an important role on making these things happen. Local community involvement contributes to sustainable tourism development of any destination (Chambers, 2009) and this local initiative serves as a good example for other localities to emulate. The local community can make a difference in any destination as a partner for change. Generally, a government-community partnership or any form of collaboration creates better, positive results.

Currently, the project is now on its second year. The costs of operations are shared by all members of Misfah LLC and incomes are also divided amongst them. In both properties, things are running and operating smoothly with no particular issues or problems. MoT acknowledges this project and continuously provides support and assessment. This project has also helped MoT to enhance their licensing and classification of heritage inns under their new hotel categories. On the other hand, local members are satisfied with the benefits that they are getting and notably, Misfah LLC is now planning to buy old houses and/or convert some of their members’ other residential properties (old houses) into bed and breakfast accommodation or as a tourism establishment. Indeed, the project is a model where local community embraced tourism through capacity development, resulting to better awareness and understanding and promoting better entrepreneurial commitment, education and management of idle properties. A project that adopted a ‘cooperative’ and ‘proactive’ approach has led both to community empowerment and ownership. Capacity development has brought positive results to the members and the partnerships between the government and local community is an effective mechanism.

Figure 8. Community Empowerment through Capacity Development in Rural Destinations



Adapted from Bolger, 2000; Costa, Panyik & Buhalis, 2013; Hofwegen, 2008; and UNDP, 2015

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The collaboration between the Ministry of Tourism, local community and private individuals has provided a practical and effective approach in transforming idle properties such as

old houses and community facilities into tourism assets that benefit the local people, such as in the case of Misfah Heritage House and Ertihal Trekking Centre. The project has helped at least forty members of the local community

who are benefiting from this small-scale tourism initiative. The members who are all Omanis have positively embraced tourism as a source of livelihood or extra income after participation in a number of trainings and capacity development programmes.

Through the collaborative efforts of the Ministry of Tourism and private individuals, capacity development has improved their tourism understanding as well as their personal knowledge and skills. Accordingly, the transformation of unused properties has resulted to benefits such as additional source of income, job creation, cultural interaction and appreciation of heritage and community assets. The project has proven that capacity development strengthens rural communities through partnerships.

Transforming idle properties is more straightforward if concerned institutions and decision-makers embrace 'proactive' approach, where local community and government are well-engaged. By applying a 'bottom-up' approach, management of tourism activities in rural destinations can be more progressive and essential in situations where government institutions lack institutional capacity (Swaminathan, 2003) or tourism leadership (Smith, Krannich & Hunter, 2001; Aref & Redzuan, 2009). Misfat Al Abriyeen, as an example of a community that progressed due to individual and collective efforts, has empowered its residents - a remarkable outcome. Furthermore, any type of partnerships is crucial to the overall development of rural destinations. It must be sustainable, which improves local residents' quality of life, encourages local employment and economic linkages, considers carrying capacity, protects natural and built heritage and provides high-quality

visitor experience among others (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; Eusébio, Kastenholz & Breda, 2014). The project's positive results show the need to facilitate initiatives which are adaptable in other areas confronting similar problems or issues. Rural destinations must have the capacity to utilize tourism inclusively and future capacity development initiatives must be designed to achieve sustainable outcomes.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the nature of the study, this research was based largely on qualitative method. The project plan is small-scale, which was applied as a pilot initiative in a rural setting. Although multiple sources of information were used - from site visit, field observation, inventory and interview for the feasibility study; field observation and interview were taken as primary data sources for the presentation of this paper. While the project plan was prepared and conducted between the period April 2014 and September 2015, results are limited by the available data. The project is currently running with a contract term of five years, subject for renewal. It is therefore recommended to closely monitor the management and operations of this project until 2021 in order to ensure its continued benefits for the community and collect relevant information for future research efforts. The project also sets as a good example of collaborative efforts between stakeholders, either on the aspect of tourism capacity development or utilization of idle properties, which can be initiated in other rural settings, localities or regions.

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