

Community Empowerment and Sustainable Tourism: Leveraging Asset-Based Community Development in Botswana's context

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Abstract

Botswana's tourism industry faces challenges of sustainability and economic diversification, particularly in rural areas where local communities possess untapped cultural and natural assets. This study examined how to leverage Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) principles to promote sustainable community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating qualitative interviews with twenty (20) key stakeholders and quantitative surveys administered to one hundred and fifty (150) event participants, local residents, and tourists, using a purposive and stratified random sampling method. The study focused on two case studies: the Annual Desert Bush Walk in Jwaneng and the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge, both grassroots initiatives supported by the CSI Concepts Foundation. Data collection involved focus group discussions, document analysis, structured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews to capture both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The findings revealed that ABCD effectively mobilised community assets, empowered local leadership's accountability in decision making, and fostered a sense of community service without compensation, while partnerships with external organisations complemented the local efforts without undermining the community's norms and beliefs. The survey results indicated that there was an active participant satisfaction, increased awareness of local heritage, and perceptions of economic benefits. The study underlines the potential of ABCD as a strategic framework for sustainable tourism development which advocates for

stakeholder collaboration, continuous monitoring, and a holistic active engagement with local resilient communities in order to diversify tourism offerings.

Key words: Asset Based Community Development, Community Based Tourism, Sport Events and Product Diversification.

Introduction

In the years before the COVID-19 pandemic, the global tourism industry experienced remarkable growth. The industry established itself as a crucial driver of economic development, particularly within the emerging economies (UNWTO, 2020). This upward trajectory was notably evident in the sub-Saharan Africa, where annual tourism expenditure by foreign visitors within a destination country surpassed US\$20 million, contributing approximately 6% to the region's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Mkwizu, 2025). By recognising tourism potential, many countries that include Botswana, adopted tourism as a strategic avenue for economic advancement. However, despite its impressive expansion, the sector has exhibited heightened vulnerability to global disruptions such as economic downturns, natural disasters, and health crises like SARS and COVID-19. Consequently, the promising diversification of tourism offerings got disrupted with no immediate strategic interventions.

In Botswana, tourism traditionally relied on its rich natural assets that included wildlife-based and high volume, low-volume nature based that focused on photographic and hunting safaris in the wilderness areas. This focus has led to increased calls for diversification, especially in the wake of the profound impacts brought by COVID-19 (Saarinen et al., 2014; Mbaiwa, 2020; Stone et al., 2017). Efforts to diversify have predominantly targeted Community-Based Tourism which emphasised on the promotion of cultural heritage and local customs as alternative tourism products (Mbaiwa & Sakuze, 2009; Keitumetse, 2016; Moswete, 2015). The development and promotion of cultural tourism elevate intangible cultural heritage, traditional practices, and local crafts, viewed as crucial components in broadening the Botswana's tourism packages. However, over the past three decades, progress in cultivating these alternative products has been impeded by various challenges that included limited capacity and resource constraints, despite persistent efforts (Centre for Applied Research, 2016; Stone et al., 2017; Mbaiwa, 2020). There remains a notable gap for comprehensive research which focuses on an effective product development strategy within cultural heritage tourism.

A promising approach to address these challenges emerged through the application of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) which is grounded in grassroots initiatives (Wu and Pearce, 2012). This methodology has increasingly been used to enhance capacity building, instil active community engagement, and empower marginalised populations. Nonetheless, the integration of ABCD principles within the tourism sector, and specifically within Botswana's cultural and community-based tourism initiatives, remains limited though underexplored.

Against this backdrop, this research aims to employ the Asset-Based Community Development framework, through the lens of event-based initiatives that critically evaluates sustainable community-based tourism development within her diversification of tourism products in Botswana. The study seeks to contribute to the empowerment of local communities and the promotion of culturally rooted tourism services. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. . To explore the perceptions of event organisers and community members on sustainable tourism development through the principles of Asset-Based Community Development.
2. To assess the impact of events such as the Desert Race and the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge on community-based tourism development, with an emphasis on cultural heritage preservation and promotion.
3. To propose strategies for applying the ABCD framework to facilitate the sustainable development and leveraging of community tourism products, particularly focusing on cultural heritage.

In essence, this research endeavours to harness the potential of cultural heritage and grassroots initiatives to foster sustainable tourism growth, ultimately empowering community resilience and well-being within Botswana's evolving tourism landscape. Consequently, the study seeks to examine the potential of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) as a strategic approach to fostering rural tourism which enhances product diversification within the framework of Community-Based Tourism (CBT). Through emphasising the identification and mobilisation of endogenous community assets, including cultural, social, and natural capital, the ABCD model offers a participatory and sustainable pathway for tourism development. Central to this approach is the active involvement of local communities in the planning and management of tourism initiatives, thereby strengthening local ownership, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting a more equitable distribution of tourism-related benefits. Through this

lens, the study aims to contribute to a more diversified, inclusive, and resilient tourism sector in Botswana.

Unpacking Asset-Based Community Development

The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) holds significant relevance for the context of Botswana due to its potential to empower citizens, amplify community-driven initiatives, by upgrading sustainable development within the country. As emphasised by Lester, Ryakhovskaya, & Olorunnisola (2023) ABCD functions as a mechanism that stimulates community growth through the initiation, control, and managing projects at the local level. This approach is particularly pertinent for Botswana, given its socio-economic landscape in terms of developmental aspirations, and cultural richness.

Historically, Botswana, like many nations, has grappled with the limitations of traditional needs-based development frameworks, which often overlook local assets and capacities (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). The emergence of an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) as a critical alternative offers a fresh perspective which is aligned with Botswana's goals for community-driven progress (Mkwizu et al., 2025). Notably, ABCD originated as a strategy to address the development needs of urban poor populations in the United State. However, Botswana found the model lucrative in promoting inclusive growth for her marginalised communities (Moswete et al., 2020).

The ABCD fundamentally differs from Community Based Tourism (CBT) models in its operational terms (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). While (CBT) often focuses on direct benefits to the community, ABCD emphasises on local asset mapping vis viz the resources. This shift from a deficit-based to an asset-based approach fosters community resilience and self-determination (Moswete et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the versatility of ABCD, evident in its application across various disciplines such as health, social work, community development, and tourism, reflects its adaptability to Botswana's multifaceted development challenges (Kaul & Choudhury, 2021). The alignment of ABCD principles with community-based tourism (CBT), particularly its focus on asset mapping, cultural artifacts, and traditions, reinforces its potential to support Botswana's aspirations for a people-centred approach to tourism development.

In Botswana, where nature-based tourism has traditionally been the dominant economic driver, diversifying the tourism sector gains urgency, especially in the wake of disruptions caused by

the COVID-19 pandemic (George & van Niekerk, 2022; Vumbunu et al., 2022). The application of ABCD principles, which focus on identifying and leveraging local assets that include cultural heritage, natural resources, and community knowledge, offers a strategic pathway for re-imagining and revitalising the tourism industry. By engaging local citizens, the system accommodates local talent by instilling self-driven community development opportunities which may significantly contribute to building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable tourism products (Stone et al., 2021).

Through mobilising community assets, including cultural traditions, historical sites, indigenous crafts, and local practices, ABCD encourages communities to take ownership of their development processes (George & van Niekerk, 2022). Such an approach is particularly beneficial for marginalised groups, including youth, the physically challenged, and elders who are often excluded from decision-making. Prioritising these groups ensures more equitable development and promotes social cohesion (Kaul & Choudhury, 2021).

In essence, the relevance of Asset-Based Community Development for Botswana lies in its ability to empower communities and harness local strengths, including cultural heritage, to support sustainable growth (Kaul & Choudhury, 2021). In the context of tourism, this approach facilitates the diversification and enrichment of tourism products by integrating cultural and heritage components, thereby promoting responsible, community-led tourism that respects and preserves Botswana’s rich cultural identity. In fostering inclusive participation, leveraging local assets, and encouraging innovative, community-driven initiatives, ABCD aligns seamlessly with Botswana’s developmental goals, ultimately catalysing a transition toward a vibrant, self-sustaining tourism sector built upon the foundation of cultural heritage and local capacities. A comparative summary of ABCD principles is presented in Table 1 below to provide clarity and facilitate easier comparison.

Table 1: Principles of Asset-Based Community Development

Authors & Year	Principles
Kretzmann & McKnight (1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset-Based Community Development—starting with local community assets rather than needs • Community-led, internally focused development • Strengthening relational ties and social networks

Mathie & Cunningham (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset-based, community-driven development • Mapping assets, building relationships, shared vision • Mobilizing local resources toward common goals
Ennis & West (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on social network analysis to elucidate social ties and community structure • Highlighting how relational networks support and evaluate development
Nel (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ABCD fosters self-motivated, asset-driven communities • Stakeholder involvement with shared power • Moving from needs-based dependency to asset-based self-reliance

Source: Authors' compilation

ABCD emphasises the significance of community potential, strengths, and assets, which aligns with the beneficiaries shared vision with regards to the tourism undertakings. The cornerstone of ABCD model is on involving local citizens who recognise the invested potential to drive development, a sentiment echoed by (Misener & Schulenkorf, 2016; Nel, 2020).

The sequence of steps or stages outlined in ABCD include the commonly referenced six stages that mirrors the approach detailed in the study. These stages comprise of;

1. The identification of the community asset mapping, which recognises the unique resources at their disposal.
2. The formation of local development cooperatives that, in turn, create institutions that enable community members to collaborate and drive initiatives.
3. The skills audit mapping- which documents the skills and resources within the community.
4. The formulation of community visions and strategies that facilitate the development of a shared understanding of community goals and actionable plans.
5. The mobilisation of assets which allows to achieve development objectives that leverage with the existing resources for example cultural and social capital.
6. The implementing of initiatives that utilise identified assets for sustainable community growth as a means of leveraging activities.

According to (Moswete et al., 2020) these stages align closely with the objectives of this study.

Moreover, ABCD's emphasis on community assets and strengths, as well as the identification and mapping of these resources, closely aligns with the study's narrative. The concept of recognising and harnessing the latent knowledge, skills, and competencies of community members, particularly marginalised groups, mirrors ABCD's core focus (Mkwizu, 2025). This study uses ABCD model to impact on rural development which demonstrates the framework's potential to empower all community members (George & van Niekerk, 2022).

Subsequently, the limited application of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) within Botswana's tourism sector underscores the relevance of this study's focused approach. ABCD emphasises leveraging local assets and community-driven efforts, aligning with the exploration of using cultural and heritage events from a local perspective to drive development (Nel, 2020).

In this study, the principles of ABCD significantly shaped both the data collection and interpretation processes. During fieldwork, researchers engaged local communities through the participatory methods which ensured that their collective voice was heard. This approach facilitated a more profound understanding of how cultural and heritage events serve as vital resources for development which allowed access for rich, context-specific data. Furthermore, the interpretation of the collected data was guided by the ABCD framework, which focused on strengths rather than weaknesses. This perspective encouraged researchers to acknowledge community initiatives, local knowledge among the existing cultural practices as key drivers of sustainable tourism development. By focusing on these assets, the study aligns with the principles of ABCD which emphasised on community empowerment and ownership over the development processes. In essence, the principles and concepts of Asset-Based Community Development closely align with the context and objectives described in this study that show a shared commitment to empowering communities.

Tourism development in Botswana

Current statistics from the Botswana Tourism Authority indicate that tourism contributed approximately 13.5% to her GDP in 2022, which was approximately 1.2 million international visitors who generated about \$1.5 billion (Botswana Tourism Authority (BTA), 2023). This shows the critical role of tourism but also underscores the urgent need for diversified approaches to ensure sustainable growth, particularly in light of recent challenges.

This growth has been predominantly underpinned by the country's extensive wildlife and wilderness resources, which constitute a significant portion of tourism. Recent statistics

indicate that Botswana welcomed a substantial number of international visitors, with tourism playing a vital role in the country's economic diversification and rural development (Vumbunu et al., 2023). The tourism sector continues to be a key driver of economic growth, with efforts to diversify tourism products and services underway which focuses on cultural tourism, eco-tourism, and community-based tourism initiatives (GlobalData, 2023).

The northern regions, particularly around Chobe National Park and the Okavango Delta, remain key areas for tourism development. According to recent visitor statistics, the sector is on a growth trajectory, with a notable increase in visitor arrivals (Tourism Statistics Report, 2023). To reconcile economic development with ecological sustainability, Botswana has adopted a 'High Value - Low Volume' (HVLV) tourism strategy. This policy targets a smaller number of high-spending visitors in order to minimise environmental degradation while maximising economic returns (Mlambo et al., 2022; Kgathi et al., 2021; Nthiga et al., 2023). While the HVLV model has facilitated certain economic and conservation outcomes, it has simultaneously reinforced a narrow reliance on wildlife-based tourism and limited the spatial distribution of tourism benefits. Critiques of the HVLV model highlight its equity limitations, particularly the exclusion of local actors from meaningful participation and benefit-sharing (Mbaiwa, 2020; Stone et al., 2021). Indigenous entrepreneurs and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) often face barriers to entry due to concessions being tied up for extended periods, restricting their ability to own permanent, high-end camps (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). Moreover, the focus on high-end tourism can lead to "enclave tourism", where profits are repatriated by foreign-owned companies, limiting the economic benefits for local communities and reinforcing a dependence on international tourism (Ashley & Roe, 2002; Mbaiwa, 2015). This approach can also price out domestic tourists, further marginalising local participation and sacrificing domestic tourism.

In recent years, there has been increasing advocacy for the diversification of tourism offerings, with particular emphasis on the development of cultural and heritage tourism as a means of stimulating inclusive growth in under-represented regions of the country (Mbaiwa, 2020). Botswana possesses a wealth of cultural heritage, including indigenous knowledge systems, historical sites, and traditional practices, which remain underutilised within the tourism economy. Although initiatives such as Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) have sought to promote community participation and equitable benefit-sharing, their impact on tourist arrivals and local income generation has remained marginal (Mkwizu, 2025).

Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) in relation to rural development

Botswana's rapid economic expansion, largely driven by diamond mining, has elevated the country to middle-income status. Nevertheless, the benefits of this growth have been unevenly distributed, with development efforts disproportionately focused on urban centres. As a result, approximately 21% of the population, predominantly in rural areas, continues to live below the poverty line (Sekwati, 2017; Besada & O'Bright, 2019). In response to these disparities, tourism has been positioned as a strategic instrument for rural development and economic diversification. By leveraging the country's abundant natural, cultural, and heritage resources, tourism offers considerable potential to enhance livelihoods and reduce rural poverty.

To support these objectives, the Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) model was introduced in the 1990s as a policy framework aimed at simultaneously conserving natural resources and empowering rural communities to manage and benefit from them (Mbaiwa, 2008, 2015; Moswete & Thapa, 2015). Although CBNRM encompasses various resource types, including historical sites, wilderness areas, and cultural landscapes, its practical implementation has been predominantly associated with tourism and wildlife-related activities. For the purposes of this study, the focus is confined to tourism-orientated initiatives under the CBNRM framework.

Central to the CBNRM model is the principle of community participation, operationalised through the establishment of Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), often referred to in the literature as Community Trusts (CTs) (Mbaiwa, 2013; Centre for Applied Research, 2016). These entities serve as institutional mechanisms through which local residents can collectively manage natural resources and engage in tourism enterprises. While more than 100 CBOs have been registered across the country, fewer than 60 remain active, with the majority concentrated near high-value tourism areas such as the Okavango Delta and Chobe (Centre for Applied Research, 2016). Prior to the 2014 hunting moratorium, many CBOs generated significant revenue through the leasing of wildlife concessions to safari operators, with proceeds reinvested into community infrastructure, education, and health services.

The current situation regarding Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) in Botswana still grapples with similar challenges identified over a decade ago. Despite its potential, CBNRM's effectiveness is hindered by inadequate institutional frameworks, limited funding and resources, insufficient capacity building, and weak accountability and governance

(Muposhi et al., 2023; Kgathi et al., 2022). Recent studies by Muposhi et al. (2023) and Kgathi et al. (2022) suggest a number of reforms, including the promulgation of a CBNRM law and the establishment of a dedicated CBNRM institution. Furthermore, research by Motsholapheko (2024) emphasises the importance of improved community engagement and participation in CBNRM decision-making processes. These scholars underscore the necessity for change and improvement in CBNRM implementation to realise its transformative potential as a driver of rural development.

In contrast, the ABCD (Asset-Based Community Development) framework may address some of the pitfalls encountered in CBNRM, such as donor dependence and elite capture. In focusing on existing community assets and strengths, ABCD empowers local communities to take charge of their development without heavy reliance on external funding. This self-sufficiency can reduce donor dependence while promoting equitable participation and benefit-sharing, thus mitigating elite capture. In fostering grassroots engagement, ABCD ensures that the benefits of tourism and resource management are distributed more broadly among community members, enhancing the overall impact on rural development.

Event management and community development

In the context of event management and community development, the Desert Bush Walk and the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge serve as empirically grounded examples of the application of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) principles. These events extend beyond the conventional aims of fundraising or promotional tourism, functioning instead as strategic, community-driven platforms aimed at fostering income-generating activities, enhancing local self-reliance, and contributing to the broader objectives of rural development and tourism diversification. Both initiatives are firmly rooted in the core theoretical foundations of ABCD, which emphasise the mobilisation of endogenous assets, capabilities, and social capital as the basis for sustainable development (Wu & Pearce, 2014; Dolezal & Burns, 2015). Unlike deficit-based models that prioritise external interventions, ABCD seeks to build on existing community strengths, be they cultural, environmental, or institutional, to achieve long-term, locally owned progress.

The Desert Bush Walk, established in 2014 by CSI-Concepts FOUNDATION, exemplifies the operationalisation of ABCD through a participatory and inclusive model of event planning and community engagement. The initiative directly involves local populations in the fundraising and organisational processes while simultaneously fostering partnerships with private sector

actors. Its explicit objective to support community-based projects, non-governmental organisations, and socially vulnerable groups aligns closely with ABCD's emphasis on internally driven change and community empowerment (Ennis & West, 2010). The Desert Bush Walk has evolved into one of Botswana's most prominent sport tourism events and has received national recognition, including collaboration with the Botswana Tourism Organisation. Furthermore, the event's organising committee has provided mentorship to other communities, notably the Tsodilo Hills community, thereby illustrating ABCD's capacity for knowledge transfer and cascading empowerment (Mengesha et al., 2017). Established in 2018, the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge represents a deliberate attempt to adapt and replicate the Desert Bush Walk model within a rural context of significant natural and cultural value. Tsodilo Hills, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is renowned for its archaeological, spiritual, and environmental significance. The Heritage Challenge was developed through a multi-stakeholder partnership involving the Tsodilo Community Development Trust, UNDP Botswana, relevant government agencies, and CSI-Concepts FOUNDATION. The event was designed as a benchmark exercise that drew on the Desert Bush Walk as a reference point to explore how similar ABCD strategies could be harnessed to unlock the socio-economic potential of the Tsodilo Hills region.

The event itself incorporates a range of culturally grounded and community-centred activities that include heritage walks, traditional performances, and cultural competitions. These elements serve to give importance to local traditions, promote community cohesion, and enhance the visibility of the region's tourism potential. Importantly, the event aligns with key ABCD principles such as shared vision, participatory decision-making through asset mobilisation (Mathie & Cunningham, 2005; Green & Haines, 2017; Nel, 2020). By fostering local ownership and cultural revitalisation, the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge contributes to both rural development and the diversification of Botswana's tourism offerings. One may observe that the Desert Bush Walk and the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge illustrate the practical impetus of Asset-Based Community Development in the context of tourism and community empowerment. Established in 2014 to 2018, respectively, these initiatives demonstrated how locally driven, culturally informed, and participatory strategies could serve as effective mechanisms for sustainable rural development. As such, they offer valuable models for integrating ABCD into national development frameworks, while simultaneously enriching Botswana's cultural and tourism landscape (Wu & Pearce, 2014; Dolezal & Burns, 2015).

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach that integrated qualitative techniques, document analysis, and quantitative survey methods (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The rationale for using a mixed-methods approach was to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the application of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) principles in community-based tourism initiatives (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This approach allows for triangulation of data which provides stronger inferences than using either approach alone (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

The study followed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design, where qualitative data collection and analysis preceded quantitative surveys. This sequence was chosen because qualitative insights were critical in framing survey questions that could measure broader community perceptions. This design is particularly useful when quantitative results need further exploration or contextualisation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The population included local residents, tourists, and event participants. Purposive sampling identified 20 qualitative interviewees, while stratified random sampling was applied to select 150 survey respondents. The mixed-methods approach was adopted to triangulate findings and enhance validity by integrating numerical trends with contextual depth (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

In addition to qualitative research methods and document analysis, the study employed quantitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Quantitative data was collected through surveys and structured questionnaires administered to a broader group of participants, including event attendees, local residents, and tourists. This approach offered insights that supported and enriched the qualitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The surveys helped assess participants' perceptions, satisfaction levels, and the assessment and evaluations of the impact of the Desert Bush Walk and Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge on community development and tourism diversification. The questionnaire was designed to capture data on various dimensions that included the economic benefits generated by the events, participants' awareness of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, and their views on the events' roles in fostering community empowerment and sustainable tourism. Analysing this quantitative data allowed researchers to identify statistical patterns and relationships that may not have been visible through qualitative methods alone (Bryman, 2016). The use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches enhanced the

study's validity, credibility, and analytical depth, contributing to a more holistic understanding of the subject matter (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

For the quantitative phase, a survey was administered to a sample of one hundred and fifty (150) survey respondents that comprised of local residents, tourists, and event attendees. This sample used a stratified random sampling technique. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 23 (Pallant, 2020) which employed descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to identify patterns and relationships (Bryman, 2016). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the demographic characteristics of the sample and the key variables of interest. Correlations were employed to examine the relationships between variables (Pallant, 2020).

The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with twenty (20) key informants that included community leaders, tourism operators, and representatives from local organisations. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. The interviews explored participants' perceptions on the impact of tourism on community development, their experiences with the ABCD approach, and their suggestions on the sustainability of tourism initiatives.

The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework has been successfully applied in community-based tourism research, for instance by Nel (2015) in South Africa and by Giampiccoli & Mtapuri (2020) in evaluating rural tourism initiatives. Their findings affirmed that ABCD empowered local community participation through its application in this study. In accordance with ethical research standards, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the data collection (BERA, 2018). Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, voluntary involvement, and in return were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity (BERA, 2018).

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants which ensured that participants were fully aware of the study's purpose. Again, it was explicitly communicated on their right to withdraw at any time alongside the measures in place to protect the individual's anonymity and confidentiality. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Chinhoyi University of Technology Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure compliance with ethical standards.

Quantitative findings that included the thresholds of awareness of the ABCD model, satisfaction index on community events, and the perceptions towards economic benefits, are presented alongside the qualitative themes under the discussion section. This integration enabled meaningful comparisons as well as the convergence of data (Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2013). The mixed method approach contributed valuable empirical evidence to ongoing discussions in the field on active sustainable community engagement tourism management growth (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Several researchers have successfully employed the ABCD approach in various community development contexts. For example, Mathie and Cunningham (2003) demonstrated the effectiveness of ABCD that promoted community-driven development in marginalised communities. Similarly, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) highlighted the role of ABCD in inclusive social cohesion through empowering the local residents. These studies provide valuable insights into the application of ABCD principles and their potential for promoting sustainable community development.

Participant Demographics

The study sampled a total of one hundred (150) participants that included local residents, regional visitors, and international tourists. Descriptive statistics revealed that 53.3% of participants were male (n = 80) and 46.7% were female (n = 70). The age demographic table comprised 20% aged 18–25 years, 30% aged 26–35 years, 26.7% aged 36–45 years, and 23.3% aged 46 years and above. The educational levels comprised 33.3% secondary education, 26.7% diploma, 33.3% degree, and 6.7% postgraduate qualifications.

Table 2

Participant Demographics (N = 150)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	80	53.3
	Female	70	46.7
Age (years)	18–25	30	20
	26–35	45	30
	36–45	40	26.7
	46+	35	23.3
Education Level	Secondary	50	33.3
	Diploma	40	26.7
	Degree	50	33.3
	Postgraduate	10	6.7
Participant Type	Local Residents	102	68
	Regional Visitors	33	22
	International Tourists	15	10

Application of Asset-Based Community Development in Community-Based Tourism

The ABCD model was applied to the case of the Desert Bush Walk and, to a lesser extent, the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge, both grassroots initiatives grounded in community participation and local asset mobilisation. While the Desert Bush Walk has been held annually since its inception in 2014, the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge was conducted once in 2018 before its interruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, both events exemplify ABCD’s application to cultural and heritage tourism, particularly in rural contexts where tourism is increasingly considered a viable tool for economic diversification and cultural preservation. *In terms of participation, quantitative survey data revealed that approximately 68% of attendees were local residents, 22% regional visitors, and 10% international tourist which demonstrates that the events’ ability to attract diverse groups and to expand rural tourism markets is possible.*

Identification of Community Strengths and Formation of Local Organizing Groups

A central tenet of the ABCD model is the recognition of existing community asset mapping in terms of human and social capital, as the fundamental for development. The findings revealed that the Desert Bush Walk was initiated and sustained by a group of six young volunteers who brought together expertise in event management, marketing, motivation, and leadership. This core group demonstrated a strong commitment to community empowerment, health promotion, and tourism development. Their shared vision and collaborative approach were instrumental in the event's success and scalability.

Quantitative results indicated that 74% of surveyed participants agreed that the events enhanced community cohesion and promoted volunteerism, while 62% highlighted improvements in local leadership capacity. Similarly, the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge was grounded in a community-based approach that emphasised volunteerism, inclusion, and the strategic use of cultural heritage to stimulate rural tourism. *Survey results revealed that 59% of respondents identified cultural preservation as the most significant benefit of the event, while 41% emphasised its economic potential.* Both initiatives focused on sustainability, income generation, community wellbeing, and the promotion of cultural identity objectives closely aligned with the ABCD framework and the broader goals of heritage-based tourism.

Mapping Community Capacities, Vision, and Strategy

The mapping of community assets played a critical role in shaping a coherent vision and strategy for tourism development. To guide this process, the study adopted Emery and Flora's (2006) Community Capital Framework (CCF), which identified seven interrelated forms of capital that is cultural, social, human, political, financial and natural landscape. This framework allowed for a multidimensional analysis of the resources available within the communities and highlighted the interconnections necessary for holistic development. *Quantitative analysis showed that 65% of respondents were aware of at least three forms of community capital mobilised through the events, with human and social capital most frequently mentioned.*

Application of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

The ABCD model was applied to both the Desert Bush Walk and the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge. Approximately 68% of attendees were local residents, 22% regional visitors, and

10% international tourists. The survey results showed that 74% of participants agreed the events that enhanced community cohesion, while 62% envisaged improvements in local leadership engagement. For the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge, 59% highlighted cultural preservation as the main benefit, and 41% emphasised on economic potential.

Asset Mapping, Mobilization, and Partnerships

Using the Community Capital Framework, respondents identified seven forms of capital: cultural, social, human, political, financial, natural, and built. About 65% were aware of at least three forms of capital mobilised. Both events demonstrated effective leveraging of partnerships with local and external stakeholders that included the Botswana Tourism Organisation and UNDP. Survey data confirmed 71% believed partnerships enhanced sustainability, and 54% reported increased access to funding and technical expertise.

Correlations Between Key Variables

Table 3

Correlations Among Key Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Event Participation	1				
2. Perceived Economic Benefits	0.54**	1			
3. Cultural Preservation Awareness	0.48**	0.37*	1		
4. Volunteer Engagement	0.41*	0.29*	0.51**	1	
5. Community Cohesion & Leadership Capacity	0.44*	0.39*	0.35*	0.46**	1

Note. $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$

These correlations indicate that higher participation and awareness of ABCD principles were associated with stronger perceptions of economic benefits, cultural preservation, volunteer engagement, and community leadership.

Asset Mobilization and Leveraging of Partnerships and Activities

After identifying and mapping the assets, both case studies illustrated how asset mobilisation activates and utilises community resources to initiate and sustain tourism activities.

In the Desert Bush Walk, this process was evident through the strategic engagement of local volunteers, private sector stakeholders, and public institutions. Financial and human capital were mobilised to support event logistics, marketing, and broader community outreach. This contributed to the event's sustainability and enabled reinvestment into community-based projects that supported education, health, and vulnerable populations. The organising team also successfully leveraged institutional partnerships with organisations such as the Botswana Tourism Organisation and local businesses, illustrating how external collaborations can enhance local efforts without undermining community agency. Importantly, these partnerships did not override community leadership but instead complemented locally driven initiatives—an essential feature of the ABCD model, which values endogenous growth and participatory governance.

Survey data confirmed that 71% of respondents believed partnerships with external institutions enhanced the sustainability of events, while 54% indicated that partnerships increased access to funding and technical expertise.

In the case of the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge, similar efforts were made to activate local cultural, social, and natural assets. Although held only once before being interrupted by the pandemic, the event was established through collaborative planning that involved the Tsodilo Community Development Trust, CSI-Concepts FOUNDATION, UNDP Botswana, and various government departments. These partnerships were crucial in mobilising the necessary technical, financial, and logistical support while maintaining local leadership at the core of the event management.

Asset Mobilisation and Leveraging of Activities

According to the findings, Jwaneng and its surrounding areas were identified as key physical assets for hosting community-based tourism events. This strategic selection aimed to position the region as an emerging tourism destination, thereby contributing to the broader goal of diversifying Botswana's tourism offerings beyond the established hubs of the Okavango Delta

and Chobe. Similarly, the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge capitalised on the unique cultural and natural significance of the Tsodilo Hills, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to promote historical, cultural, and event-based tourism.

The community members involved in the Tsodilo Community Development Trust (TCDT) played an active role in organising the event. However, due to the complexity and logistical demands of the event, the community required external technical support to achieve its objectives. The Jwaneng-based Desert Bush Walk Local Organising Committee provided mentorship and technical assistance in event planning.

Asset Mobilisation

In the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework, assets are understood as access to tangible and intangible resources that contribute to sustainable livelihoods (George, R., & van Niekerk, 2022). The study revealed that both internal and external resources were effectively harnessed through an articulation of the events' visions and objectives. Community members formed the core of internal resources who served as volunteer marketing teams. For instance, one participant was engaged in sponsoring outreach activities in order to secure funding for local development initiatives.

To attract external support, event objectives such as promoting healthy lifestyles and expanding tourism offerings were communicated through strategic media partnerships. Collaborations were established with organisations such as DUMA FM, Botswana Guardian, and the Sunday Standard which resulted in extensive publicity through free advertising, radio segments, and interviews. This media coverage significantly increased participation, with pre-COVID print media circulation exceeding 50,000 copies. Survey findings further indicated that 64% of respondents learnt about the events through media publicity which highlighted the importance of communications in asset mobilisation.

The distribution networks like Webtickets facilitated nationwide ticket sales and promotional awareness, while a local signage and printing company donated branded materials. Social media platforms that included Facebook and Twitter, were used to engage audiences in real time because the streamed event graced global visibility. Strategic partnerships also included the Botswana Tourism Organisation (BTO), which featured the events on its official calendar.

A Board of Trustees was formed that comprised professionals and local leaders who among other roles guided the event's execution. Since its formal registration in 2015, the CSI-Concepts Foundation has managed the Desert Bush Walk through the Local Organising Committee and has remained instrumental in fundraising through community outreach programmes. The Tsodilo Hills Challenge, though held only once before COVID-19 disruptions, was organised through a partnership between the (TCDT) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with technical guidance from the Desert Bush Walk committee.

Leveraging Activities

Some leveraging activities involved the integration of multiple stakeholders who were aligned to diverse resources so as to achieve community-driven aspirations. The Desert Bush Walk successfully expanded its reach over time and attracted approximately 3,000 participants annually from across Botswana, the Southern African region, and from countries such as Australia, the United States, and Germany. Despite its international appeal, the event has remained grounded in the Jwaneng-Mabutsane community, which continues to play a central role in planning and implementation.

The quantitative feedback showed that 82% of participants rated the Desert Bush Walk as “very satisfactory” in terms of organisation, while 66% agreed that it contributed positively to local economic development.

Likewise, the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge was conceived as a locally organised initiative which focused on cultural heritage tourism. Event activities included a cultural night featuring performances by local ethnic groups who showcased traditional dance, poetry, and music, thereby enhancing community participation and cultural valorisation. *Survey responses indicated that 72% of attendees highlighted “cultural pride” as the key benefit of the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge, with 58% also recognising its potential to generate rural income.*

The event was aptly themed "Walk for Rural Development", which aligned with the broader objectives of ABCD to stimulate sustainable community-led initiatives.

Discussion

Overall, the findings demonstrated that while both the Desert Bush Walk (DBW) and the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge (THHC) applied principles of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), their outcomes varied in terms of sustainability and empowerment. The quantitative data showed that 74% of participants linked the initiatives to stronger community cohesion, while 62% highlighted improvements in local leadership potential. Findings that align with the research emphasised the role of social capital in community-driven tourism (Green & Haines, 2017; George & van Niekerk, 2022).

The DBW illustrated both the unlimitedness and limitations of the ABCD application. The early years were highly successful in mobilising local assets, such as youth voluntary brigades and partnerships which led tangible benefits like launch of an educational infrastructure. Since its inception in 2014, the Desert Bush Walk has raised over BWP3 million, with proceeds invested in funding the construction of carpentry workshop in Sese village, a school library and the acquisition of a mobile resource centre. However, a notable shift was observed in 2018 and 2019, where revenue increasingly supported donations rather than self-sustaining, income-generating projects. In 2018, BWP 200,000 funded the construction of a reception class, while in 2019, BWP 375,000 was distributed across various national initiatives that included centres for the blind, school donations, and the COVID-19 relief fund.

While such contributions are commendable, they reflect a departure from the ABCD principle of long-term community empowerment. This aligns with the findings of scholars like Stone et al. (2021), who argue that reliance on external funding can undermine local agency. A key challenge lied in ensuring that development projects are sustainable and driven by community members equipped with adequate management skills. Indeed, several initiatives reportedly declined once external funding ceased which echoed concerns raised by Meyer (2019) with regards to the sustainability of community-driven projects. Similar challenges have been noted in South African heritage tourism projects, where community benefits often become diluted when initiatives over-rely on external donor agendas (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019).

In the case of the (THHC), the findings suggest a promising alignment with ABCD, particularly given that 72% of participants reported enhanced cultural pride. Reinvestment of proceeds into healthcare and campsite upgrades illustrated a localised impact consistent with what Mathie & Cunningham (2020) identified as “catalytic asset activation”. Yet, the event’s

short lifespan due to the pandemic highlighted vulnerability, underscoring Mkwizu's (2025) caution that ABCD initiatives must build resilience mechanisms in order to survive from external shocks. This outcome resonated with similar findings in other ABCD cases in Southern Africa, where local re-investment proved effective in the promotion of community well-being (Meyer, 2019).

Comparatively, both cases confirmed that endogenous leadership is vital. The DBW's youth-led Local Organising Committee mirrored successful models in Namibia's conservancy-based tourism, where local governance structures drove decision-making and resource re-investment (Novelli & Gebhardt, 2018). However, tensions around the marginalisation of local vendors in the DBW also revealed gaps in inclusivity, an issue echoed in the Zimbabwean community-based tourism projects, where external actors sometimes overshadow local entrepreneurs (Muchapondwa & Stage, 2015). To ensure preferential access to these opportunities for local entrepreneurs remains critical. This observation is supported by Tosun (2000), who emphasised on the importance of local involvement in community tourism in order to enhance economic resilience and ownership.

From a global perspective, our findings resonated with the broader literature that advocated for ABCD in cultural and heritage tourism. While ABCD encouraged local ownership, its success depended on balancing external support with internal leadership. As Kaul & Choudhury (2021) argued sustainable outcomes emerge when partnerships enhance rather than replace local agencies, a dynamic that (DBW) partially achieved whilst (THHC) excelled satisfactorily despite its short duration.

In conclusion, both the Desert Bush Walk and Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge illustrated the tangible benefits of asset-based approaches in cultural and heritage tourism development. However, to ensure long-term impact, future efforts must focus on capacitating communities in event management, ABCD principles, and the valorisation of cultural heritage assets to enhance economic sustainability and local ownership. This call for a more integrated approach is echoed in recent studies which suggests that continuous support and capacity building are essential for the success of community tourism initiatives (Mkwizu, 2025). Our study, therefore, contributed by showing that, while Botswana's initiatives embody key ABCD values, their long-term sustainability will depend on deliberate investment in leadership, inclusivity, and heritage valorisation.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the transformative potential of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework as a strategic approach to strengthening Community-Based Tourism (CBT) which fosters the diversification of tourism products in Botswana. By critically examining the Desert Bush Walk and the Tsodilo Hills Heritage Challenge, the research provided compelling empirical evidence of how ABCD principles centred on community strengths, participatory decision-making, and local ownership can be operationalised to achieve sustainable tourism development in rural contexts.

The findings demonstrated that these event-based initiatives not only mobilise local cultural and natural assets but also promoted inclusive community empowerment that align with broader national development goals. Notably, the emphasis on engaging marginalised groups such as youth, the elderly, and persons with disabilities represents a departure from conventional (CBT) models that often treat communities as homogenous entities. In doing so, the ABCD approach offers a holistic and equitable framework for tourism development, one that acknowledges intra-community diversity and seeks to broaden participation in the benefits derived from tourism.

Despite the successes achieved, the study also identifies critical challenges, that included over-reliance on external funding, limited technical competencies, and inconsistent community participation. These factors emphasised the value of building long-term institutional and managerial capacities within local communities that ensured the sustainability and scalability of ABCD-inspired initiatives. Moreover, the research highlighted the need for continuous monitoring, strategic partnerships, and preferential access for local entrepreneurs to maximise economic and social returns from tourism events.

Consequently, this research directly addressed the study's objectives by affirming that when rooted in local capacities and cultural heritage, ABCD can serve as a catalyst for rural development, tourism diversification, and community resilience. Future research should explore the applicability of the ABCD model across different tourism settings in Botswana and beyond, thereby enriching comparative insights and informing policy frameworks that prioritise inclusive, community-led tourism development.

Recommendations

The impending community-based tourism initiatives should prioritise capacity building for local residents by investing in training programmes focused on event management, financial management, and ABCD principles, thereby enhancing sustainability and reducing reliance on external support. Strengthening local partnerships among institutions, NGOs, and businesses is essential for collaborative planning that leverages resources while ensuring community leadership, with a particular emphasis on skill transfer to promote long-term local empowerment. Additionally, inclusive community participation in event planning and implementation should be prioritised to ensure equitable involvement of all members that include women, youth, and the marginalised groups. That way it fosters social cohesion and shared ownership. Finally, communities should develop sustainable funding strategies that emphasise income-generating projects linked to tourism events, rather than relying solely on donations. Local tourism initiatives ought to align with ABCD principles in order to ensure continuity even in the absence of external funding. Future initiatives should also integrate cultural and natural heritage assets into tourism offerings which emphasises local identity, cultural pride, and economic opportunities.

Limitations of the Study

The study had a relatively small sample size, which may limit the representativeness of the findings. This limitation was mitigated by using purposive and stratified random sampling to ensure diverse perspectives from local residents, tourists, and event participants. That way the research enhanced the depth and credibility of the data. Data collection occurred at a specific point in time, limiting long-term trend analysis. To address this, document analysis and historical records of past events were incorporated to provide context and supplement current survey and interview data. Self-reported data may include social desirability bias. Triangulation with qualitative interviews, observations, and document reviews was used to validate survey responses which reduced the impact of potential bias. The focus on two case studies in Jwaneng and Tsodilo Hills limited generalisability to other community-based tourism initiatives. This limitation was mitigated by selecting case studies with diverse community characteristics and incorporated comparisons across the two initiatives to offer more details about the ABCD application.

Future Studies

Future studies on ABCD-based tourism initiatives should include longitudinal research to track their long-term impact on community development, which will reveal sustainability and evolution over time. Additionally, expanding the geographic scope to other regions of Botswana and Southern Africa would allow for comparisons of ABCD applications across diverse community contexts. Quantitative impact assessments using advanced statistical modelling could enhance the accuracy of measuring the economic, social, and cultural impacts of community-based tourism initiatives. Lastly, research should focus on exploring how national tourism and development policies can better support ABCD principles and empower local communities in the realm of community-based tourism.

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