

Homestay Operators' Experiences in Initiating and Developing Homestay Enterprises

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Abstract

Community homestay development is one of the strategies to culture-based accommodation, mostly in the rural and remote settlements in Nepal. Homestay tourism has been in practice for more than two decades, and it is rapidly spreading in many parts of the country. This article attempts to bring the views and experiences of community homestay operators regarding their understanding, awareness, perceived benefits, and homestay initiation and development practices from Mahabharat Hills of Bagmati Province. Ethnographic field observations and 'bhalakusari' (in-depth talk) were the dominant methods applied during the data collection process. The findings suggest that due to multiple types of perceived as well as experienced benefits from community homestay tourism, locals have enthusiastically learned and adopted homestay enterprising, in which local-level institutional facilitation and support activities have become main motivators in the processes. In such areas, gradual increase in external facilitation, exposure and capacity development endeavors, increasing tourist arrivals, and wide ranges of direct and indirect economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefits are visible. All these factors have encouraged the locals to engage and expand community homestay development initiatives in their areas. Despite multiple positive facets of homestay tourism, there exist some challenges too. The article also suggests some policy and practice-level implications.

Keywords: capacity development, community homestay, enterprising, Mahabharat Hills

Introduction

Tourism is considered one of the most potential growth sectors of Nepal's economy (Bhattarai, 2019; Shrestha & Shrestha, 2021); and, due to tourism and its limitless resources, Nepali tourism has been famous in the world (Sharma, 2019). Among different types of Nepali tourism, 'homestay tourism' occupies significant space, providing not only the accommodation facility to the tourists but also numerous opportunities to exchange and promote cultural assets with direct engagement of local people/stakeholders (Lama, 2014). According to Taragaon Development Board (TGDB, 2016), due to homestay tourism's multifaceted contributions, such as economic, social, cultural, educational, environmental, and so on; its popularity in Nepal is increasing. Now, there are homestay destinations in all seven provinces, and almost in all the districts of Nepal (TGDB, 2016). The homestay operators/ entrepreneurs (the 'hosts') are the backbone of homestay tourism-based enterprising in Nepal. According to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA, 2021), there are two types of homestays: community homestays and private homestays, which can be opened and run in both rural as well as in urban areas. So far, Nepal's homestay tourism is dominated by community homestay, and its rapid expansion in Nepal is greatly realized by all types of

stakeholders (Nepal Tourism Board [NTB], 2023). The expansion of such endeavors depends on the overall capacity of the operators as well as other stakeholders in the destinations. There are different issues associated with the learning and capacity development of community homestay operators. Due to this, the expected quality growth of Nepal's homestay tourism has also been a challenging issue. In this context, Lama (2014) and Pandey (2011) also assert that the total stay of the tourists and the expansion of homestay businesses are directly associated; because, in each destination, "tourists' stays depend on the quality and hospitality services as well" (Baniya & Poudel, 2016; Devkota & Poudel, 2019; Paudel & Bhandari, 2021).

In the homestays, guests can enjoy practicing all types of rural traditions, cultures, foods, and costumes (Nepal Rastra Bank [NRB], 2015; Sharma, 2019). From these activities, locals earn economic as well as other benefits. These trends and practices have instigated locals to open homestays in many destinations like Sirubari (Syangja); Ghalegaun, Ghanpokhara, Bhujung, Kaulepani and others in Lamjung; Hattibang (Chitwan), Amaltari (Nawalpur), Briddhim (Rasuwa), Shree Antu (Ilam), Bandipur and Tanahunsur in Tanahun; Namje (Dhankuta), Gabhar Valley (Banke), Dallagaun (Bardiya), Bhada (Kailali), and so on (Sedai, 2018; NTB, 2023). These are a few renowned homestay sites in Nepal; and, among them, Sirubari is the first community homestay village in Nepal, which formally began in 1997 (MoCTCA, 2010). It started working as a 'live school of homestay' for many new homestay communities and destinations in Nepal. However, local people's understanding about homestay entrepreneurship and their initiatives for establishing and developing homestay is less studied and less documented in Nepal.

Therefore, this article intends to bring some lived experiences about how those homestay operators experienced the initiatives and efforts to think of homestay enterprising and bringing the thoughts into reality in response developing community-based homestays in their respective areas/villages. Thus, the main purpose of this article is to illustrate how the homestay operators describe their experiences in conceptualizing, initiating and developing homestay enterprising in Nepal, particularly focusing on 'Mahabharat Hills' of Bagmati Province, Central Nepal (proper location is not shown in this article due to ethical reason).

This exploration revolves around the following two research questions with an intention of investigating the "lived experiences" of homestay initiation and development processes in the community-based rural tourism destination in the Mahabharat Hills: i. How do the community homestay operators in the area describe their know-how, initiatives, and motivation for setting-up homestay enterprises?, and ii. What key challenges are these homestay operators facing since the establishment of such community homestays in the area?

Review of literature

Homestay benefits and community engagement

Many researchers have claimed that rural tourism and homestay tourism can be a boon for the rural populace creating multifaceted opportunities (Acharya & Halpenly, 2013; Bhattarai, 2019; Lama, 2013; TGDB, 2016); and, according to them, in Nepal, homestay tourism and village tourism are highly appreciated for multiple benefits for the rural inhabitants including economic, cultural, social, environmental, infrastructural, and community empowerment—particularly of women. In the same manner, through an empirical study in the Mid- and Far-Western part of Nepal, Sedai (2018) shows that the tourism development process is expected

to bring several opportunities for the local stakeholders for their overall benefits; otherwise, there would be no meaning of developing tourism or increasing the number of tourists. Similarly, referring to an Indian case (Garhwal), (Nigam, 2002) reported that local tourism would significantly support in creating new employment through the tourism sector, mainly in the businesses such as hotels and holiday resorts, guest houses, river rafting, and water sports complexes, skiing resorts, wildlife sanctuaries, pilgrim places; and, transport and tour agencies. In the same manner, research in India's famous tourism destination Sikkim State, carried out by Lama (2014), reports that homestays have become integral to rural/ecotourism developing local capacities. Many eco-tourism destinations exist in national parks, wildlife reserves, hunting reserves, and surrounding eco-areas, due to which many homestay entrepreneurs have emerged as 'homestay operators' in these sites.

Likewise, the study by NRB (2015) in the western Nepal found that homestay development efforts are also capacitating locals to enhance their knowledge and skills, which have supported in bringing out the local stakeholders, more importantly, women entrepreneurs in the front of the local development processes, and ultimately such endeavors have enhanced their empowerment and social status, giving power to individuals to assert their rights responsibly. The NRB study (2015) further asserted that owing to such empowerment-related actions, the fascination of community people towards homestay, particularly women, has escalated in Nepal as a part of human and community capital development. These contribute to education, motivation, working skills, physical health, mental health, well-being, happiness, and human potential growth.

Capacity enhancement and motivation

Developing human and social capital within the communities is also very important in these scenarios. Based on a research, Dube and Sharma (2018) conclude that homestay host families can have a myriad of motivations ('drivers') for running the homestay enterprises, despite some obvious de-motivating factors or the 'barriers', such as seasonality, irregularity in tourist arrivals, etc. While visiting homestays, some tourists share their culture (called 'cultural interface') and languages with the local host families. A cultural bridge is considered essential to achieve successful and sustainable ventures through collaboration, especially in conservation-focused tourism and development. Homestay can be a good means of cultural exchange (Kandel, 2011), and also a good example of ethical enterprising (Kanel, Bhattarai, & Gnawali, 2023). The main beauty of homestay tourism is that tourists there pay 'good money' and leave a 'good memory' to the host family, which could be a good source of motivation to be indulged further and further.

Reflecting on the research experience from Chitwan Terai, which would be, to some extent, applicable to similar areas of Bagmati province and in the Mahabharata Hills, Kunwar (2002), Pradhanang (2002), and Poudel (2014) also suggested developing various village-tourism products linked with conservation sites taking into consideration various factors such as short- and long-term tourism development strategy; ecological perspectives; active participation of local stakeholders through user groups, functional groups, and management committees; local ethnicity and culture; human and wildlife behavior; interrelationships and chain reactions in the local economy; multiplier effects of local tourism enterprises; rural-urban (village-city) linkages; and so on. Likewise, a study in the eastern side of Nepal, Barahachhetra, Sunsari, by Prasai (2023) also reveals that if proper education and training are given and business environments are created, local people can profoundly change their

economic status and tourism business capacities through an enhanced employment opportunity with greater confidence. Ghimire (2013) also found similar examples from Ghalegaun, Lamjung. Homestay and small hotel operators' enhanced exposure and awareness in such areas are crucial.

Similarly, in the western part of Nepal, Sedai (2018) found that local stakeholders of homestay tourism lack the proper skills and knowledge to manage their homestays. Also, he noted that proper facilitation at the local level is also a missing part. Likewise, the research carried out by Acharya and Halpenny (2013) in the Annapurna region of Nepal concludes that the homestay enterprise focuses on women's capacity development and empowerment with an understanding that empowerment creates many opportunities for dignity and prosperity. However, KC (2003) notes that women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector face several challenges, including lack of proper skills and knowledge, lack of financial support, limited marketing opportunities, etc. In addition, in our observations too, lack of business literacy, limited exposure on information and communications technologies (ICTs), and lack of technical backstopping were some of the hindrances faced by the entrepreneur women.

Gaps in the capacity and motivational issues

Different researchers have indicated some gaps in the capacity development issues as well as motivational issues. For stance, based on research on awareness, capacity enhancement, and human resources issues in Nepal's tourism, Pandey (2011) illustrated four major gaps experienced in the community-oriented tourism training and workshop programs or capacity development endeavors in the fields. He also advocated for timely updates and periodical revisions, as well as improvised curricula and reading/reference materials for bettering training programs and their effectiveness. Likewise, Bhandari (2013) and Mahato (2013) concluded that homestay's main contributions are economical, followed by social, infrastructural, cultural, environmental, educational, etc. In the motivational efforts, such issues are to be dealt with cautiously (Yaza et al., 2023). There are observations that community-based tourism (CBT) in the Annapurna region, where, for example, in Manang, most of the households are engaged in tourism businesses (mostly hotel/tea-house) and they do not allow any outsider to enter as 'hotel operator'. Thus, homestay's multifaceted roles are acknowledged and recognized widely (Ghimire, 2023); and gaps in the capacity enhancement and local facilitation processes need to be addressed accordingly (Bhandari, 2021 & 2023; Chimariya, 2014; Kunwar, 2002; TGDB, 2016). In this regard, the learning from the project (Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program- 'TRPAP'; 2002-2007), run by Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA) and the UNDP in six districts of Nepal, were remarkable (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). The lessons were further replicated by various institutions/projects in Nepal, such as The Himalaya Trail Project, Sustainable Tourism Livelihoods Recovery Project (STLRP), and others (Choegyial, 2011; NTB, 2023).

Policy instruments and local codes of conduct (CoC)

In this last section of the literature review, let me discuss some of the policy/legal provisions associated with homestay establishment and development in Nepal. Replacing the old Tourism Policy- 1972, the Government of Nepal (GoN) brought a new Tourism Policy- 2008 (BS 2065) (MoCTCA, 2008). It particularly envisioned bringing tourism benefits to the poor communities, especially in the rural areas. Later, 'Nepal's Tourism Vision 2009- 2020' envisaged attracting two million tourists and providing jobs to one million people by 2020 (MoCTCA, 2014). After the formulation of Tourism Vision 2020, efforts are made to

translate this into action by preparing and implementing a 10-year National Tourism Strategy and Action Plan, 2016-2025 (MoCTCA, 2016). Equally important, Nepal's new 'Constitution' (Constitution Assembly, 2015), for the first time in history, under the 'Directive Principles, Policies and Obligations of the State (Part 4)' has inscribed the importance and roles of the tourism sector for the overall development and prosperity of the country.

Likewise, the above-mentioned 10-year 'Strategic Plan for Tourism Sector (2016-2025)' seeks huge investments from the government, private sectors, and international investors (MoCTCA, 2016), aiming to bring 2.5 million international tourists by 2025. However, COVID-19 seriously hampered the efforts, and global tourism suffered an unprecedented setback (UNWTO, 2022). Now in the years 2023 and 2024, Nepal's tourism is reviving, which has put special emphasis on homestay tourism as well. Homestay Federation of Nepal (HOFAN) is helping the homestay operators to unite, capacitate and raise the quality of homestay services in Nepal. 'Homestay Operation Directive 2010' (MoCTCA, 2010) is the main base for initiating and developing homestay services in different provinces and local municipalities in Nepal. Lately, all provinces and most of the local governments have also been facilitating local communities to establish and develop homestay enterprises through policy provisions, grant support, training activities and also linking local products/services with different markets in close collaborations with Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) and other organizations.

The 'Homestay Operation Directive' entails basic criteria for establishing a homestay, registration, and renewal procedures, types of homestays in Nepal, homestay management committee's formational and operational process, reporting obligations and techniques, monitoring mechanisms, auditing processes, code of conduct (COC), etc. According to the Directive, homestay facilities can be operated in rural and urban areas (Karki, 2013). Generally, rural homestays mainly focus on two services: accommodation services and cultural exchange services. Commonly understood, homestays should always serve as 'cultural homestays' (Kandel, 2011). To serve those purposes, the 'Directive' encompasses seven important objectives. After the formulation of the Directive, rural communities in tourism sites were encouraged to open their houses as homestay service providers, further expanding the tourism accommodation infrastructure in the destination (MoCTCA, 2010; TGDB, 2016). In the homestay development, locals develop certain rules for effectively managing the system.

Certain 'codes of conduct' ('aachaar-samhitaa') are similar to every municipality or province because centrally developed codes of conduct mostly influence them (Bhadgaunle, 2022). Such 'codes' outline some important rules like rotational distribution of guests, common menu (package) and price, no entertainment activities/no noise after 10 pm, no special demands to be made by the tourists, respect to each other, emphasis on the pre-information system for the visitors, tourists' arrival in the village before the sun-set; respecting each others' religion, caste, language, culture, dresses, etc.; no debate on religion, caste, and political matters. However, based on its various federal and provincial level interactions, TGDB (2016) concluded that those codes are not properly implemented in many homestay destinations. Furthermore, the monitoring of the implementational parts is also lacking (Kandel, 2011; TGDB, 2016). These situations demand more coordinated and concerted efforts to effectively develop those policies and guidelines and subsequent executions of community homestay development.

Methodology

In this research, the researchers are guided by the philosophy that each person and each community has different experiences, methods, opportunities, abilities, perceptions, and capabilities. Different homestay operators have different experiences and feelings. Thus, to properly grasp the ideas and experiences, while designing this ethnographic research, we have adopted an interpretive paradigm with a 'reflective approach' (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Saldana, 2015), which enabled us to seek the meaning of the 'social world' of homestay operators in the 'Mahabharat Hills' of Central Nepal. According to Gobo (2011); Khan (2011); Saldana (2009, 2015), and Van Maanen (2011), ethnographers observe, participate, interact, analyze, reflect, write, rethink, and describe cultures, their members, and their involvement with them.

For the study, we chose one of the homestay sites ('Mahabharat Hills': MH, name changed) in the Bagmati province, Central Nepal, where dominantly ethnic people Chepangs reside. Other castes are Giri-Puri (Dasnami), Magar, and Brahman-Chhetri. Here homestay tourism development efforts, although on a limited scale, have been going on for almost two decades. All initiatives here have been geared towards developing hill tourism, like 'hill-station tourism' based on community homestay initiations. This area is one of the famous rural tourist destinations in Nepal.

The Bagmati province is the epicenter of Chepangs' inhabitation in Nepal (Gautam & Thapa-Magar, 1994). Chitwan, Makawanpur, Dhading, and Gorkha are famous for Chepang-dominant communities in this province. Chepangs have their language (but no separate script), rituals, foods, and costumes. Irrespective of difficult life conditions (Gurung, 2016; Khanal, 2014; Mukul & Byg, 2020; Sapkota & Uranw, 2013). Chepangs' unique lifestyle, traditional cultures, and geographical landscapes are great assets/resources for CBT development/ promotion in the MH. Considering the nature of the inquiry, we designed the research to adopt a purposive sampling technique to find the 'natural' and 'actual' worlds, where first-hand experiences do naturally and explicitly exist. Thus, as mentioned above, in such a subjectivist inductive study, the research participants were the "homestay operators" of the MH. In this study, we chose seven homestays as our research units. Families having homestay experience and being able to provide such services at present were the main basis for selecting as research participants. Both male and female participants were observed in their day-to-day life activities, particularly focusing on homestay operational works and other cultural activities. The field research was accomplished from 2019 to 2021. For ethical reasons, pseudonyms of the research participants are used in this article.

During the field study processes, different techniques and tools were applied for qualitative data collection, including observations, bhalakusari/kurakani, and focus group discussions (FGD). The scratch notes ('rough notes'), field notes (elaborative notes from those rough notes), conversational interview/bhalakusari records (audio) and transcripts, photographs (with their prior approval), local artifacts, and key participants' diaries/copies, as well as the homestay management records, were the main sources of research 'data.' The data were further synthesized manually and appropriate "themes" and "issues" were developed and analyzed to illustrate the findings logically and systematically.

Keyinsights, and discussions

Research participants' experiences and reflections, along with our observations, have been

categorized into four major themes as described below. Related discussions are also embedded within those themes as key issues on how the locals get tourism-related information, how they develop their knowledge and skills, how they are motivated and facilitated to run homestay enterprises, as well as on what sorts of challenges are these homestay operators (mostly women) facing at present in the Mahabharat Hills of Bagmati Province, Central Nepal.

Knowing, observing, and experimenting

First, let's share a brief story about how the homestay operators of the MH got an opportunity to hear and know more about homestay enterprising as a possible new economic and social venture in the area. As mentioned in the previous sections, in Nepal, homestay tourism is considered a reliable vehicle for economic growth and overall development of the local area and its people/stakeholders' capacities (from a 'human capital' perspective). Based on the empirical experiences, UNDP/TRPAP (2002-2007) was an example from Nepal to implement a pro-community rural tourism initiative that developed several CBT-based products, including SRT models and homestays in the pioneer areas. According to the project document (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007), the main aim was to make the local people aware of the potential of their area and encourage them to engage in tourism enterprises directly and/or indirectly to increase household-level incomes with preservation/ conservation of natural and cultural resources and their promotions. In this context, one day, the key researcher was talking to one of the research participants, she was Shukrikala. She shared that:

From the tourism project I learned many things, and gradually I started experimenting with them in my daily life. Initially, the tourism development project gave an introductory orientation about local tourism potentials. It was—at the start—just a two-day event. The event taught us about tourism, rural tourism, and the importance of the Mahabharat Hills area from rural tourism development potentials. We heard a lot about the need to protect and develop local cultures and traditions; and also the protection of plants, trees, animals, soil, water, and many more. We also learned about waste management, health, and hygiene, etc. After the event, I also showed my interest in getting engaged more in tourism-related activities and businesses. I was very hopeful of getting more and more benefits from the tourism businesses.

In the same connection, while having a bhalakusari with the research participant Buddhi Maya, who was Shukrikala's neighbor too. She also shared that after some developmental support from the rural tourism project, the locals started getting some tourists from different parts of Nepal and some from foreign countries too. And, due to the absence of accommodation (hotels) in this area, "we decided to open homestays in our village", she happily shared. She further stated that, before, tourists used to come with camping equipment and gears (e.g., tents, utensils, etc.) and used to stay in the open grounds.; and, realizing this, the locals decided to start homestays in their houses.

Accordingly, as she claimed, before launching homestays in the village(s), locals learned more about the basics of homestay development and management with some cultural considerations. More importantly, local tourism facilitators helped them from the very beginning; and, later, the then local government—village development committee (VDC)—also started talking about rural tourism and homestay development activities. In an FGD, they also shared that the locals gradually knew about the profitability of homestay, being a good source of earning (additional) money, and more. They also got a chance to visit Sirubari, Syangja—the pioneer homestay village in Nepal—which provided a better understanding of

homestay entrepreneurship. According to them, the trip also helped develop an understanding that, if properly developed, it can provide many things and many benefits such as new knowledge, hygiene, and sanitation-related ideas and concerns.

It was also added by the participants that from Sirubari they learned about local women's leadership, green development, local infrastructure development, and so many other things. They developed their overall confidence. Likewise, in a separate bhalakusari, research participant Shanishchara, highlighting the initial stages of her involvement, shared that she was also one of the participants in the exposure-visit team, and once she got that opportunity, as an experiment, she immediately decided to open a homestay room in her house and also decided to be in the homestay entrepreneurs' group of MH.

Inspiration and motivation for homestay enterprising

According to the research participants, as primarily shared during bhalakusari and FGDs, the initial facilitator of the homestay initiative was a tourism project, supported by foreign aid, oriented towards community homestay entrepreneurship. From this perspective, research participant Som Maya's voice was worth noting:

My husband and I both attended a two-day workshop organized by the project, and we got information about tourism potential in our area and the possible participation of men and women in different tasks and businesses. Also, we got to know about entertaining guests in our houses. But, initially, we (my family) were not interested in keeping guests in our house since our house was so small compared to other's houses in this area. We first decided to get involved in handicraft-making (bamboo-based crafts) and then started getting many opportunities to have more training in other subjects. After a few years, we added an extra room to our house with a thatched roof, and gradually we could also welcome guests. Thus, primarily, the project's facilitation and support motivated us to participate in homestay enterprising and other skill-based activities, including handicraft-making, bee-keeping, poultry, etc.

According to locals, besides the project, some other organizations and local VDC offices also supported further skills development ('software') and some logistic or materialistic/ 'micro-finance' supports ('hardware') (Lamichhane, 2020). Those inspiration and support were their main foundations or 'drivers' for starting homestay and other related businesses. However, after the devastating earthquake of 2015 (April 25), most of the houses were damaged; and now rebuilt with support from the government (National Reconstruction Authority- NRA). Before there were thatched houses, but now they are all metal (tin)-roofed. Under this support, each victimized household was expected to make a new single-story building with two to three rooms. Equally, as 'special model' for such reconstruction work was provided by the government through NRA; accordingly, most of the reconstructed houses in the MH are uniform in key patterns and features, with blue, red, or green tin roofs. Now some families have two buildings too, the old one (repaired/ retrofitted); and the new one. Now, those who have two houses can offer better homestay services than before. Nevertheless, those with just a single house constructed under the 'earthquake-grant-support' from the government cannot adjust the guests (tourists) as such since rooms are insufficient, and they are involved in other types of micro-enterprises, such as bamboo-based handicrafts, vegetable farming, poultry-keeping, etc.

In this context, in another follow-up *bhalakusari*, participant Som Maya quite frankly shared that she had a very good and positive experience with the tourism project. Recalling her

experience, she added that the seed money as 'Ghumti-Kosh' (revolving funds/micro-finance) provided by those organizations was one of the major factors for being motivated towards new initiatives (tourism) in the village. Now, from that fund, the homestay operators and other members of the community have established a multipurpose cooperative in the village. They said, "Our savings in this cooperative have increased, and we have no trouble getting small loans when needed for business or (even) social causes".

This way local women and men were inspired and motivated to be engaged in homestay enterprising and associated enterprising in the area. In gist, we can say that potential direct economic gains from homestay business and micro-finance facilities through different governmental and non-governmental organizations were prime factors for their initiation and motivation towards homestay tourism in the MH. Small groups have come together through a cooperative as well.

Tourism resources mobilization, marketing support, and networking

There is a general saying that 'tourism marketing begins from the products'. Once initial homestay products and services were available in the MH, according to the research participants, several travel and trekking companies started promoting 'MH Tourism' as a new tourism product with different hiking and cultural trekking opportunities. Based on Sirubari's experience (as they gained first-hand experience through exposure visits), they were also able to be more clear that homestay tourism cannot vibrate and flourish until and unless a good promotion is carried out. In such cases, external facilitation and support mechanisms are instrumental in promoting national and international tourism products. These facilitational supports trigger the processes of local resources conservation and mobilization, product development, promotion, branding, and marketing, as well as equitable benefit sharing. In the FGD, one local leader expressed:

As competitive sites, other rural destinations are also emerging in this area/province. We have been promoting this area as a culturally rich tourism site having a two- to nine-day package of tours considering the availability of time, energy, and money of the visitor(s). These increased developmental exposures and enhanced institutional support and networking have also facilitated us to conserve and preserve our natural as well as cultural resources, develop a homestay-based production system, such as green vegetables, off-season vegetables, organic farming, emphasizing on local and traditional resources; as well as initiating some new activities to reduce imports and increase exports. These all have helped us develop MH as a new rural tourism destination.

From various observations, it was clear that due to beautiful hills, nicely settled settlements/villages of different ethnicities and castes (such as Chepang, Brahmin/Chheteri, Gurung, Magar, Dashnami, Tamang and Newar); old forts, green jungles with rhododendron national flower, spectacular waterfalls, and some unexplored caves; the area is also considered a good destination from natural attractions as well. The Himalayan and mountainous views from here are stunning. Thus, there are many excursionists (only day-trippers) in the area. "These excursionists make a short trip of half-day or three to five hours; and return to their place or other destination(s) on the same day.

All these initial transactions and vibrations in the Mahabharat Hills also encouraged local men and women to be members of the local homestay group, allowing at least one room for visitors. Gradually, promotional and marketing networkings kept rising, raising the local

hopes and aspirations further.

Challenges experienced and observed

As mentioned above, homestay enterprising in this area started almost two decades ago with a special branding- "Naturally and Culturally Rich 'Mahabharat Hills'". The area was considered feasible for developing homestay-based community tourism efforts in the Bagmati province. Different international and national organizations (e.g., MoCTCA, Ministry of Local Development, UNDP, SNV Nepal, DFID, local NGOs, some private companies, etc.) supported the initiative. Initially, the settlement had seven homestays, and later some more were added, making a total of 12 now, although all are not active and not very functional. In this context, research participant Aaita Kumari adds,

During the project period (which was most intensively between 2004-2007); we had some businesses in all homestays. But now only very few homestays are getting business. Especially after the termination of support from that tourism project and after the deadly earthquake of 2015, the homestay enterprise here in the MH is almost docile.

Supporting Aaita Kumari's views, a local guide also mentioned that, for the last seven-eight years the homestay business in the MH has been shrinking unexpectedly. Instead, "hometel" (individual home/family-based small hotel) is gradually growing and occupying the homestay spaces. In the area, some homestays have been transformed or converted into "hometel". However, national or local guidelines do not mention the "hometel" system. In the MH, now old signboards of homestay could not be seen in these hometels. Instead of small wooden sign-boards commonly placed in every homestay household from the very beginning, now they display big flex-boards saying: "यहाँ अर्डर बमोजिमको खाजा, खाना र जलपानको राम्रो व्यवस्था छ ।" ("*Yeha order bamojim ko khaja, khana ra jalpaan ko ramro byabastha chha*": literally, "Here we provide all types of snacks, food items, and different types of drinks as per your interest and order"). These notices denote that, unlike homestays, hometels are more demand-driven than supply-driven. These hometels, thus, lately, are affecting the motivation of other old homestay operators. Now-a-days tourists (mostly youngsters) are attracted towards such hometels where 'order' comes first, then is served accordingly. Relatively, as per the field interactions, hometel prices are a bit expensive as well; thus, more profit is possible from the hometel service than from the usual homestays.

Another challenge is local actors' mobilization due to less number of tourists in the area. According to the former social mobilizer (SM) of the area, a reduced amount of facilitation by the concerned organizations has also discouraged local people from getting engaged in rural tourism development and homestay business operations, including engagement in various types of skills-focused tourism-related enterprises, as compared to the past. Since COVID-19 (Gautam & Khatri, 2021; UNWTO, 2022), tourism in this area has further faced a new challenge, unexpectedly the lowest number of tourists in those homestays. This is another big challenge in the enterprising homestay. Similarly, according to the key persons of the homestay operators, lately, there has been less focus on sustainable concepts in homestay and local resources management from related authorities; no special loan/grant support provisioned for the area, and also there are no new programs or activities to revive those homestays, established some two decades ago. In addition, as they mentioned, after the restructuring of the local government system, the homestay registration process hasn't got priority; and due to this, the provision of extending different support and grants in the name of the homestay is being missed or delayed. Lately, "climate change issues" in the local

tourism system are also in discourse (KC, Giri & Khadka, 2021; Nyaupane & Chhetri, 2009). Such discourses have raised the issues of increasing temperatures, decreasing biodiversity, unprecedented disasters, shrinking water resources, increasing deforestation, and so on, which are directly related to tourism resources and activities threatening its sustainability.

Another pertinent issue, based on the physical infrastructures and facilities, the 'classification of homestay' (as advocated by TGDB, 2013; 2016) is also not done, due to which best/better homestays and medium/poor homestays in the MH have not been identified yet. This has also been a critical issue for genuine homestay entrepreneurs. Among others, the lack of a proper system for capacity development of the Homestay Committee was another noticeable issue as found during several interactions/bhalakusaris in the study site. The value chain concept in homestays, including the overall local tourism system, has also not gotten adequate attention.

Conclusion

From the study, it can be concluded that the social mobilization processes were implemented as a step-wise 'combined package,' which included: the basic orientation through tourism awareness, group formation/ reformation; saving and credit schemes, management skills development training, production-focused various skills-oriented training, exposure/ educational tours to famous tourist/ homestay destinations, venture capital fund or revolving fund supports, business plan development related capacity enhancement, market linkages, and so forth in the process of developing community homestay in the MH. The homestay operators got a chance to get some introductory and motivational sessions from the facilitator organization(s), and they also got a chance to make some study/ observational visits to some of the pioneer (model?) sites of community homestay tourism, which inspired them to be homestay-entrepreneurs in the area.

Based on participants' experiences and reflections, it can also be interpreted that when the facilitating organizations provide multiple opportunities, including monetary back-ups like 'seed money' for micro-enterprise development, local people prefer working in groups, remain intactly in groups, and continuously show interest in taking new ventures through such groups. And, gradually, those groups can be converted into cooperative(s). This was a good example of the CBT initiative in Nepal, evidently citing the case from the Mahabharat Hills. Further, the above experiences demonstrate that the tourism program (project) shared lots of knowledge, provided some materials, and tried to boost the courage to do something even by continuously placing locally-recruited social mobilizers/ rural tourism facilitators in the area; however, due to less focus of local and other governments, such initiatives face a hitch after the termination of the project. Local leadership development endeavors are also crucial in such efforts.

Implications

The study implies that the facilitating organization(s) should have both hard- and software-support for motivating and backstopping the locals to be engaged in new ventures, like homestay. Community's own initiation and locally developed leadership is also vital, for which the supporting institutions need to think from the very beginning. Furthermore, a new venture for conceptualizing, developing, and institutionalizing the "hometel" practice within and/or beyond the 'community homestay system' is also equally important. Convincingly, a new mode of village-based accommodation "hometel" is gradually replacing the homestay

concept in the MH.

It can also be implicated that due to less focus of marketing agencies and promotional authorities, homestay enterprising has not been an attractive initiative in this area for several reasons, including the inactiveness of the entrepreneurs after the devastating earthquake of 2015 and also the global pandemic COVID-19. Here, additional income sources are also being increasingly shifted from traditional farming and homestay enterprising to various types of off-farm jobs, modern commercial vegetable cultivation, more commercialized "homotel" (albeit limited), and poultry-farming, among others. These need further investigative studies and also locally-devised policy instruments with better plans and budget.

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