

# The public sector as a key enabler in sustainable rural tourism

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Rural tourism routes have the potential to contribute to poverty alleviation by channelling tourism to poor rural areas. Although tourism is essentially a private sector economic activity, the public sector is a key influence in the economic sustainability of rural tourism routes. This exploratory study examines the role of the public sector in the provincial, district and local government spheres in rural tourism route development and marketing. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders in two rural tourism routes that traverse very poor rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal, a province of South Africa. The study revealed inadequate support for tourism, and rural routes in particular, especially in the district and local municipalities. Tourism and the potential benefits of tourism route development is, by all indications, poorly understood, hence the required infrastructure, funding and marketing support are in many instances still lacking. The study concludes that for rural route tourism to deliver benefits to poor rural areas in a sustainable manner, greater co-operation across municipal boundaries and support for rural tourism routes by the public sector will be required in the provincial and local government spheres.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

During a study on the critical success factors for the marketing of rural tourism routes, it became increasingly apparent that a range of public sector stakeholders influence the economic sustainability of such routes. While a varied range of stakeholders enable or hamper route development and marketing efforts, the public sector plays a particularly significant enabling role in this regard. Two tourism routes in rural KwaZulu-Natal were used as case studies to identify the role and influence of the public sector in route sustainability.

Attention is drawn to the uneven distribution of tourism in South Africa, the contribution of rural tourism to local economic development and poverty relief and rural tourism routes in particular. The importance of public sector stakeholders in enabling sustainable tourism routes in rural areas is critically discussed. The methodology used in the study is described with reference to the qualitative nature of the study and the sampling procedure followed. The findings are reported for the public sector entities in the various government spheres, namely the province, including provincial tourism marketing and conservation authorities district municipalities and local municipalities. Recommendations are made with regard to the role of the public sector in enhancing the development and marketing of sustainable rural tourism routes.

## TOURISM ESSENTIALS

Tourism activity and consequently the benefits derived from tourism is unevenly distributed in South Africa with three of the nine provinces, namely KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and the Eastern Cape, capturing an average of 63% of the total nights spent away from home by domestic tourists, while Gauteng and the Western Cape captured 67% of nights spent in South Africa by international tourists in the 2009-2010 period (South African Tourism 2011a:5; 2011b:54). Tourism is furthermore concentrated in the traditional tourism nodes in cities and along the coast, and very little reaches rural areas. One of the objectives of the National Tourism Sector Strategy, which was launched in 2011, is to improve the geographic spread of tourism by increasing the number of bednights spent in rural areas. A draft rural tourism strategy has been developed to this effect (South Africa 2011a:22; 2011b).

The concept *rural* is difficult to define in the South African context (Briedenhann and Wickens 2004a:194). The Rural Development Framework defines rural areas as sparsely populated areas which people farm or depend on natural resources, including villages and small towns that are dispersed throughout these areas. In addition, they include large settlements in the former homelands, created by apartheid removals which depend for their survival on migratory labour and remittances (South Africa 1997).

Large numbers of previously disadvantaged people live in South African rural areas with few employment opportunities, but many poor rural communities own natural and cultural assets that can be developed for tourism purposes (Ashley and Roe 2002:61). Rural tourism presents an opportunity for local economic development and poverty relief by creating employment (Blake *et al.* 2008:107; Chock *et al.* 2007:34). Because tourism is a labour intensive sector, tourism development may favour the unskilled, women and the informal sector (Ashley and Roe 2002:61; Carbone 2005:560).

Several market trends favour growth in rural tourism, such as the search for solitude, interest in culture, heritage and tradition, the appeal of a healthy rural lifestyle, and activities associated with rural environments such as fishing, walking and cycling (Gartner 2004:158). Visitors seek memorable experiences (Pine & Gilmore 1999:11). Experiences are an integral part of tourism, and visitors are prepared to travel to rural areas to seek new and different experiences (Hayes & MacLeod 2007:45). Rural tourism can satisfy a wide range of travel



motivations, which opens up the opportunity to achieve economies of scope rather than economies of scale by offering a range of different attractions that will appeal to different niche markets (Kastenholz 2000:280; Meyer 2004:3). Rural tourism thus lends itself to small local business enterprises run by the local community, and which may be better able to offer the unique and authentic rural experiences that niche markets seek and so extend participation in tourism to the previously disadvantaged communities (Meyer 2004:11; Open Africa 2009).

Tourism routes are designed to attract tourists away from the usual tourism nodes to rural areas and small towns that would not normally be visited (Donaldson 2007:316). A route links small towns and attractions, and so encourages tourists to travel from one town to the next along the route, staying in the area longer (Meyer 2004:8, Rogerson 2007:50). Route tourism is a mechanism whereby a number of tourism businesses agree to work together and to market their offerings under a single route brand as a unique tourism experience (Donaldson 2007:316; Rogerson 2007:50). Tourism routes are also an effective way to foster co-operation rather than competition among small towns and to form development partnerships with poor local communities (Donaldson 2007:315; Lourens 2007:475).

A tourism route may run through several small towns; cross private, public or tribal land; include attractions and sites from the private and public sector; thus drawing in a wide range of stakeholders into the route (Hardy 2003:325). Since visitors are increasingly seeking experiences, all stakeholders need to understand what they have to deliver in order to create a memorable visitor experience (King 2002:107). While tourism product owners form the core stakeholders in a tourism route, there are many other enabling stakeholders that can affect, or are affected by the achievement of the route's objectives (Freeman 1984:46). So, among others, the local, district, provincial and national public sector entities influence tourism planning, development, funding, the physical infrastructure, marketing and distribution that provide the enabling environment in which the route functions and the visitors experience the route (Buhalis 2000:104).

## **METHODOLOGY**

An interpretive paradigm was adopted in order to gain insight into the role of public sector stakeholders in the sustainable development and marketing of rural tourism routes. The approach used in this study was exploratory so as to provide the freedom to pursue new aspects discovered during interviews, and qualitative to allow for in-depth enquiry into the real life experiences of stakeholders in the two rural tourism routes in KwaZulu-Natal, that formed the cases for the study (Labuschagne 2003:103; O'Neil s.a:6). The two routes selected have been in existence for more than two decades and both are located in rural areas with poor local populations. The routes differ in that the highly successful Midlands Meander covers a small area in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, is private sector initiated and driven, and attracts mostly domestic tourists with its arts and crafts country theme, while the Battlefields Route, which struggles to survive, stretches over six district municipalities, has a public sector membership base, and attracts predominantly international tourists with its strong military history theme.

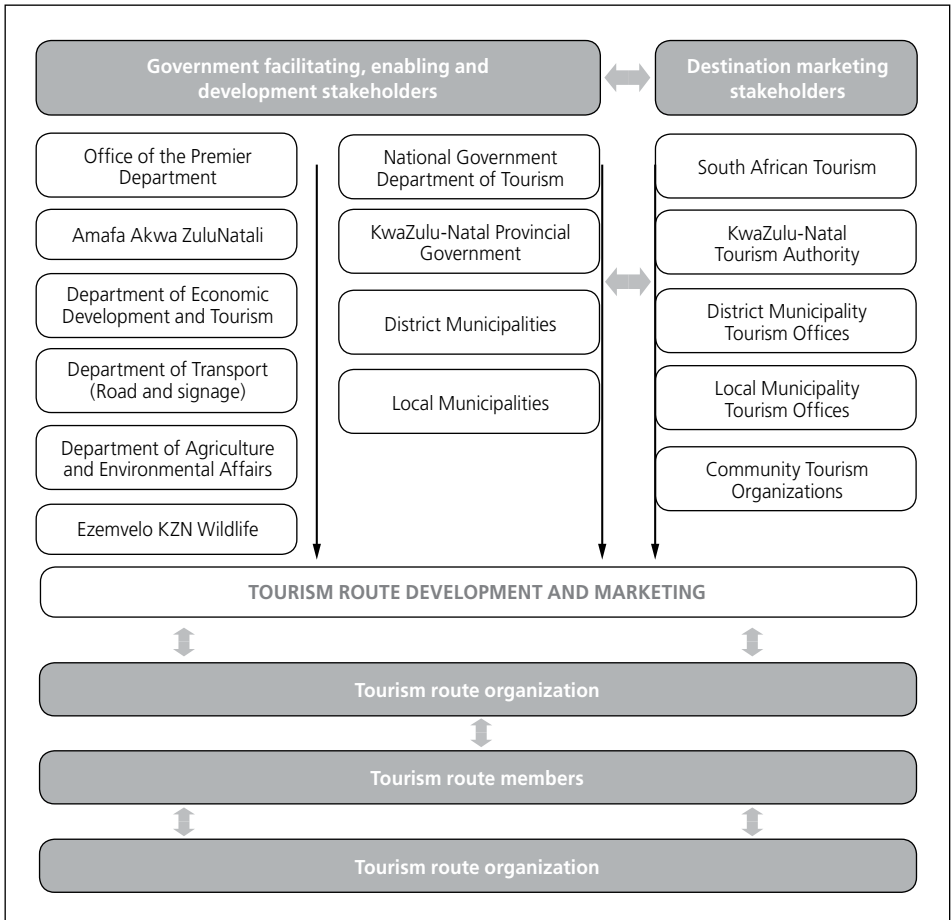
Rather than random representation, a combination of purposive and snowball samples were used to select respondents that could inform the study (Leedy & Ormrod 2005:206;

Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2007:242). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted during the latter half of 2009 with a range of nine different tourism product owners on each of the two routes. Eleven interviews were conducted with enabling stakeholders that have a direct or indirect influence on the success of the two routes, which included public sector officials concerned with tourism in the local and provincial spheres, government agencies and departments whose activities affect tourism, non-governmental organisations, tourism trade organisations, tourism intermediaries and private sector infrastructure providers. Tape-recorded interviews were supplemented by observations and printed material obtained from respondents where available. Verbatim quotes by participants are included in the findings in order to communicate the nuances of stakeholders' views in their own words.

### Findings of the study

A variety of government entities that impact on route marketing decisions and activities were identified by respondents in the study. These include provincial and municipal departments,

**Figure 1 Public sector stakeholders in tourism route development and marketing**



Source: Developed by the authors for this paper

as well as their agencies tasked with particular responsibilities, such as destination marketing and conservation, as can be seen in Figure 1. These entities, and the roles that they play in route marketing, are described below.

## Provincial government

Provincial government and its agencies influence tourism route operations and marketing both directly through their actions and requirements, and indirectly through funding and support provided to local government.

### *Provincial departments concerned with tourism*

In spite of the fact that KwaZulu-Natal is one of South Africa's main tourism destinations, the province does not have a department that is exclusively responsible for tourism. After being assigned to the Department of Arts, Culture and Tourism for a period, tourism is now again housed in the Department of Economic Development and Tourism (KwaZulu-Natal 2009). Several other departments also have a bearing on route tourism, for example roads and road signage falls under the Department of Transport; agricultural land use, which may affect rural tourism developments, is regulated by the Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs and large events such as the 2010 Soccer World Cup, were overseen by the Department of Sport and Recreation (KwaZulu-Natal 2009). Furthermore, Amafa Akwazulu-Natali (Amafa), the heritage authority in KwaZulu-Natal that manages cultural attractions, such as battlefield and San art sites, reports to the Office of the Premier, as well as to Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife that is responsible for nature reserves in the province, reports to the Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs.

The *KwaZulu-Natal Tourism Act, 2 of 2002* (1996 as amended) makes provision for co-ordinating structures in the provincial, district and local government spheres through tourism forums, but meetings do not seem to take place regularly or, in some cases, at all. So, for example, Amafa has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, part of which is

*that we will communicate and we will meet regularly. In practice it is not working (Enabler). Manpower and funding to attend meetings may be unavailable, or, if available, meetings may still be poorly attended because the political will is absent or notices of meetings, notices of training, anything that has got to do with tourism ...doesn't filter down then to us (Enabler). When they do attend, participants are ill prepared: they all had electronic copies ... and [we] were the only two who had read it (Product owner).*

### *Provincial Roads Department*

Route tourism is primarily aimed at self-drive tourists who are encouraged to explore the route and its offerings in their own vehicles. The enabling role of the KwaZulu-Natal Roads Department, therefore, takes on particular significance in the promotion and facilitation of this type of tourism.

Roads proved to be an emotive issue in the study area. Rural roads in KwaZulu-Natal, both gravel and tarred, were described as *in a shocking state* (Product owner). Blame for the state

of the roads was apportioned to the *incompetence of the Roads Department* who allowed the roads to deteriorate to that extent (Product owner); to heavy vehicles such as overloaded timber trucks that haul timber on the gravel roads whether it's raining or dry and it destroys the road (Enabler); to traffic diverted to secondary dirt roads by accidents, and trucks that want to avoid tolls and law enforcement on the N3 toll road (Enabler); and to budgetary constraints resulting in such a backlog in re-gravelling the roads (Enabler). The situation can become so threatening to tourism businesses that in one instance, they all got together and bought the stone or crusher and the Roads Department then just spread it for them (Product owner).

Most secondary rural roads are gravel roads which, when well maintained, add to the whole feeling of going to a rural area and experiencing the ruggedness of being on that road (Enabler). However, if not maintained, gravel roads become a liability to tourism as potential visitors are diverted away from the area by the state of the roads, especially in deep rural areas such as the Battlefields. Tour operators state they cut out the Battlefields due to the state of the roads, the gravel, and fearing the damage that might be caused to their buses (Product owner). Visitors are mostly unfamiliar with driving on dirt roads and poorly maintained roads are dangerous for them to drive on as the roads not only become muddy and slippery when wet, but are also unsafe when dry because the rocks come up and creating slippery surface (Product owner). Poorly maintained roads increase tourism operating costs, as one battlefield guide explained: "It costs me a tyre a year; repairs, the money goes there; I bought an expensive set of shocks, two years and they're gone, they're finished" (Product owner).

The Roads Department is responsible for signage on the roads. Signage was described as one of the most significant issues (Product owner); a big challenge, non-existent (Product owner); and an absolute heartbreak (Enabler). Because rural tourism draws visitors off the familiar routes into the countryside, without good directional and attraction signage, visitors might get lost even when travelling with GPS. This not only detracts from the visitor experience, but jeopardises their safety too, especially when travelling at night. Missing signage is a particular challenge in rural areas because of the high rate of theft of poles to use in fencing and huts by the community.

Product owners describe signage as their "livelihood to get people to come to their establishments" (Product owner). Signage regulations currently do not meet the needs of product owners on the Midlands Meander: "They won't allow it unless it is right outside your doorstep, which for us is pointless because we need people to turn off the tar [R103]." (Product owner). The result is an on-going problem with illegal signage on the Meander with its high concentration of tourism establishments. Signage clutter presents a traffic hazard and detracts from the rural ambience. Furthermore, without branded route signage, a tourism route is "*invisible*". While KwaZulu-Natal does not allow route branding on road signage, the Maloti Route in the neighbouring Free State Province is signposted at frequent intervals. In KwaZulu-Natal the Roads Department has only recently conceded to branded Midlands Meander signage, though only at the entrance to route members' establishments, which to some extent assists in branding the route and making it more visible.

### ***Tourism KwaZulu-Natal (TKZN)***

The KwaZulu-Natal Tourism Authority, established in terms of the KwaZulu-Natal Tourism Act, 11 of 1996 (as amended, including Act 2 of 2002), operates as Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, and is tasked with the development and implementation of an annual action plan for the promotion, marketing and development of tourism in the province. Three key issues were uncovered during the study:



- **Tourism route members need to make multiple registrations.** All tourism operators in KwaZulu-Natal must register with and pay an annual levy to Tourism KwaZulu-Natal to be allowed to operate in the province. If they join the route organisation and the local community tourism organisation, another two registrations are added, which becomes expensive for small operators.
- **Marketing support provided for routes by Tourism KwaZulu-Natal.** The tourism authority creates an enabling environment for route marketing by actively supporting tourism routes through funding and distribution of brochures, promoting routes to tourism intermediaries and the media. Many respondents were very complimentary about the excellent map of KwaZulu-Natal provided free by the tourism authority. However, because the Midlands Meander has its own website, it is no longer promoted on the Tourism KwaZulu-Natal website.
- **Branding confusion caused by Tourism KwaZulu-Natal.** When the tourism authority defined their *destinations* or tourism regions, they named two of them after the two routes studied, resulting in unclear distinction between the routes and the destinations, thereby diluting the route branding in both cases. The areas covered by the routes and the *destinations* do not coincide, leading to much confusion in the market place, which is exacerbated by the lack of promotion of the Battlefields Route and the Midlands Meander as tourism routes on *Tourism*, KwaZulu-Natal's website, while other routes in the province are listed as such.

### ***Provincial conservation authorities***

Two conservation authorities in KwaZulu-Natal impact on tourism activities, namely Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and Amafa. Ezemvelo was not discussed much by respondents, but Amafa was a frequent topic in the Battlefields Route interviews. Amafa, established in terms of the KZN *Heritage Act*, 1997 and which has since been replaced by the KZN Heritage Act of 2008, is the heritage conservation authority in KwaZulu-Natal (Amafa 2010). As the custodian of cultural heritage, Amafa develops and maintains heritage sites, such as battlefields, graves and rock art attractions, which are key attractions on the Battlefields Route, and to a lesser extent, the Midlands Meander. Amafa is “a heritage body first and a secondary objective would be tourism” (Enabler). Amafa appears to be greatly underfunded for its task and respondents indeed complained about poor maintenance of battlefield sites, which impacts negatively on the quality of the visitor experience on the Battlefields Route. The apparent lack of communication between Amafa and municipalities exacerbates the maintenance problems where, by putting a sign up, people who drive past will go in, which “*de facto* opened up a site that [Amafa] were not able to maintain” (Enabler). Tour operators' productivity and visitor itineraries are also curtailed by the opening and closing times stipulated by Amafa, as funds do not sustain longer opening hours.

### **Local government**

Municipalities outside metropolitan areas in South Africa have a two-tier structure, consisting of district municipalities that have executive and legislative authority in an area that includes more than one local municipality, with which it shares such authority (*Local Government*



*Municipal Structures Act*, 117 of 1998: Definitions). However, *tourism knows no boundaries* and tourists on a route are often not even aware of them (South Africa 2011a:37).

### **District municipalities**

In spite of the fact that Section G5 of the *White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in KwaZulu-Natal* obligates district councils, *inter alia*, to "... budget for the effect[sic] implementation and growth of tourism in line with the Provincial objectives ... and to create and co-ordinate ... tourism experience routes across its district and beyond municipal boundaries" (KwaZulu-Natal 2008:55). There is a perception among stakeholders on the Battlefields Route that the district municipalities never really quite understood or are willing to take on the responsibility to continue this project [Battlefields Route] as they don't give any monetary support at all and still expect things to work (Product owner). Two key themes emerged from the study:

- **District municipalities do not appreciate the potential contribution of tourism routes to the local economy.** It was therefore considered necessary "to get the district municipalities to realise that the (Battlefields Route) are bringing probably most of their tourism income through the rates they collect from the guest houses, from the retail, from the restaurants, that is what the municipality make money out of (Product owner), and that for the little bit that they're asked to support it" [Battlefields Route]. (Product owner).
- **District municipalities need to demonstrate their support for tourism.** The provincial tourism authority deals only with the district municipalities and not with local municipalities. District municipalities thus form a conduit for tourism funding provided by Tourism KwaZulu-Natal. The money is not allocated to the district municipality, who is then supposed to distribute it. Sometimes it disappears and it doesn't seem to get to the right places (Product owner). This was confirmed by a local municipality where funding from Province for tourism doesn't filter down (Enabler). The Battlefields Route, with its municipal membership base *struggles* to survive and *almost went broke* at one stage due to non-payment of membership fees (Product owner). Communication from Tourism KwaZulu-Natal also goes to the district municipalities, and like the funding, does not always reach the local municipalities: "So, notices of meetings, notices of training, anything that has to do with tourism lands on [district municipality] and doesn't filter down then to us [local municipality] .... and then they say you don't attend meetings, you're not interested". (Enabler). Where the district municipality embraces tourism, both funding and support are forthcoming for tourism development and marketing, as is the case in the Zululand District Municipality where they see to it that there is a highly equipped tourism interest (Product owner).

### **Local municipalities**

A route organisation has the closest relationship with the local municipalities through which the route goes. A range of problems were revealed by the study.

- **Lack of appreciation of tourism's contribution to economic welfare.** Because politicians and even tourism officials do not really understand what tourism is about, there is a lack of understanding of the role of routes in tourism development and promotion. Decision makers "are clueless as to what is happening in the tourism industry" (Product owner) and therefore do not appreciate the implications of their decisions on tourism. There





is also little understanding of tourism routes and the big problem is to get the local authority to understand why they should be funding the route association, what the benefits are to the people" (Product owner).

- **Tourism is not a priority in the local municipality.** Some of the poorest districts in South Africa are located in the study area. While it is appreciated that there are pressing demands made on local municipalities to improve the quality of life of the poor, respondents felt that the political will to support tourism is lacking. Some municipalities do not even have a separate budget item for tourism, which is simply included in the operating budget, in spite of the fact that tourism is one of the two main drivers of the economy in this area (Product owner).
- **Tourism development and planning are insufficient.** In the light of the previous two points, the absence of tourism plans is not surprising. However, some municipalities are starting to show some signs of being interested in tourism (Product owner) and some have appointed consultants to assist them in developing strategies for tourism development.
- **Politics and corruption permeate tourism decisions.** It is unfortunate that personal gain and political expediency influence decisions, especially where projects are given to the wrong people and those wrong people are often connected (Enabler). Political appointments also mean that incumbents do not necessarily have the skills that the job title implies, with the result that specifically for tourism, they do not have capacity (Enabler), while tourism graduates cannot find employment. A further problem arises where the district and local municipal councils have different political parties in control, which places the local municipality at a disadvantage.
- **The lack of a business orientation in local municipalities is problematic.** Respondents across the board made scathing remarks about the incompetence evident in local government sphere. Accusations were made that local councils have not yet come to accept that they have to run themselves like a business of sorts (Enabler); that looking to them to take responsibility for marketing cannot work, they do not have the capacity (Enabler); they have never been trained, they do not understand what they are handling (Product owner). Yet tourism product owners have no choice but to deal with local municipalities as they "can't do anything, whatever development ... without the permission of the municipality" (Product owner).
- **Lack of co-operation across political boundaries hampers routes.** Tourism routes cross municipal boundaries, which means that different municipalities need to co-operate, but unfortunately there is often no co-operation (Enabler) and the prevailing attitude is one to spend the money in the district and the particular local municipality (Product owner). This lack of a common vision precludes the benefits that can flow to all municipalities from increased tourism to the two routes in this study.
- **Destination marketing by local municipalities is seen as inadequate.** Lack of capacity, described as worse when it comes to marketing (Enabler), not appointing the right people to market the town (Product owner), and being passive by just paying for the part of the marketing done by TKZN on their behalf, all contribute to a poor perception of the destination marketing done at a local municipality. By contrast, Vryheid, in the Abaqulusi Local Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, actively promotes the town; includes neighbouring villages, supports the Battlefields Route; and conducts an excellent school programme to educate learners about tourism and its significance to the community.

- **Promoting the route versus promoting the destination.** Local municipalities have a mandate to promote the whole tourism area, which automatically includes the route (Enabler). With one exception, none of the towns in the study area promoted either of the two routes in their brochures, a fact that is particularly surprising since 15 towns are actually members of the Battlefields Route Association. Visitors attracted to a route directly or indirectly benefit the entire area that the route passes through, not just the route members.

### **Community tourism organisations**

Local municipalities must establish community tourism organisations to promote tourism to their own areas (*KwaZulu-Natal Tourism Act, 11 of 1996* (amended by Act 2 of 2002): Section 25). Just as the local municipalities do not work together, community tourism organisations “seem to be working independently,... all doing their own little things and they are all very protective of their own turf”, instead of getting together to set some sort of vision of what they are trying to achieve” for the region (Product owner).

## **CONCLUSION**

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of the public sector in route tourism. Rural tourism routes have the potential to alleviate poverty in deep rural areas by creating employment, especially for the unskilled, women and small businesses. To succeed in this, routes need to be sustainable on the long term. Tourism is essentially a private sector based activity and, where a route is promoted by business owners, it does not depend on the public sector for its primary funding, though this does not mean that the route should not be supported by the provincial department and municipalities for particular development and marketing projects. The role of the public sector needs to be that of an enabler of tourism development and marketing by providing the necessary infrastructure to support and promote tourism activities in the area, such as good roads and tourism road signage; well-functioning tourism information offices; development, support and maintenance of public and community owned tourism resources; facilitating umbrella branding and marketing initiatives for the areas under their jurisdiction; and treating the route as part of the destination’s tourism offering and not as a competitor.

The public sector is likely to succeed only in its enabling role, if it understands tourism and the benefits it can bring to local communities; is clear on the nature and extent of its enabling roles and its relationships with other tourism role-players; gets its system in order by acquiring knowledgeable and competent staff through training and appointment on merit; ensuring that funding is channelled as intended and that recipients are held accountable for how the funds are spent; effectively using both horizontal and vertical communication channels; and by tapping into the knowledge and experience of private sector parties who really know and understand tourism. Furthermore, the mindset needs to change to a more open one that can appreciate not only the contribution that tourism routes can make, but that is willing to work for the greater good by co-operating across administrative boundaries and the public-private sector divide. Further research is suggested into just how the public sector needs to be engaged in the route organisation. The study was limited to two routes in one province. Investigation into routes in other provinces and neighbouring countries may reveal further insight to guide the



development and marketing of sustainable rural tourism routes that can ultimately contribute to the upliftment of the poor communities in rural areas.

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