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To cite this article: Velan Kunjuraman (2020): Community-based ecotourism managing to fuel community empowerment? An evidence from Malaysian Borneo, Tourism Recreation Research, DOI: [10.1080/02508281.2020.1841378](https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2020.1841378)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2020.1841378>



Published online: 29 Nov 2020.



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Community-based ecotourism managing to fuel community empowerment? An evidence from Malaysian Borneo

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ABSTRACT

Community-based ecotourism in developing countries is often regarded as a rural community development tool, and its value in Malaysia has been acknowledged by the Malaysian government. This paper presents the case one of the pioneer ecotourism destinations in Sabah, called Bilit village, and its role as the catalyst to rural community development. Using qualitative research methods, this article explored the empowerment indicators gained by the local community from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects, through its active participation in community-based ecotourism. The study discovered that community-based ecotourism helped improve the local community and afforded them an alternative livelihood in their rural destination. However, the sustainability of community-based ecotourism projects in rural destinations is still questionable if the relevant stakeholders fail to consider the community's vision and aspirations. Finally, the study extends an empowerment framework with the novel concept of 'socio-cultural empowerment'.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 September 2020
Accepted 19 October 2020

KEYWORDS

Community-based ecotourism; empowerment; livelihoods; community; participation

Introduction

Over the last two decades, community-based ecotourism (CBE) have uncovered several economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits to relevant nations and their local communities. The benefits delivered by the CBE are manifold (Gan, 2020). Appreciating CBE as a development tool, many countries as depicted in Table 1, have introduced CBE as a rural development project for the local community. CBE contribution to the nation, society and environment is well-acknowledged. For instance, CBE is advocated as a means to acquiring new skills and occupations, job training, business investments, enhancing foreign language proficiency, empowering of local communities, enhancing environmental consciousness, conservation and preservation of natural resources, as well as tourism-driven infrastructural development (Afenyo & Amuquandoh, 2014; Ahmad, 2014; Bhuiyan et al., 2011; Walter, 2011; Hussin, 2008, 2009; Hussin & Mat Som, 2008; Nair & Hamzah, 2015; Rowat & Engelhardt, 2007; Scheyvens, 1999; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008; Stronza & Pégas, 2008).

Similarly, Lee and Jan (2019), opined that the community-based tourism (CBT)'s main purpose is to enhance economic, socio-cultural, environmental and life satisfaction conditions, which in turn, stimulates the community members to support CBT development. Nevertheless,

Gan (2020, p. 2) argues 'there are, undeniably, drawbacks to CBT'. In line with this notion, several negative aspects exist, and that there are 'social, psychological, and political complexities of development initiative impacts of CBE on the local communities' discovered in previous studies. These complexities include women's burdens of domestic labour in tourism (Reimer & Walter, 2013), high number of tourist visitation exposing the community to volatile forces of modernity (Gan, 2020), loss of communal land (Sebele, 2010) consolidation of small-scale agricultural exploitations (Zapata et al., 2011) as well as cultural displacement which lead to immoral activities among the community (Wu et al., 2014). Due to these costs of CBE, the community members believe that CBE had incurred more costs than benefits (Mensah, 2017).

However, CBE's latent as a community development approach is still acknowledgeable (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014) and can be seen in community development plans in many developing countries, including Malaysia (Hussin, 2006). Some recent evidences clearly voiced out such a premise. In Indonesia, for instance, CBE significantly contribute to the trust and collective action among the community members in the village as well as empower them to gain knowledge on economic, social and

Table 1. Case studies of CBE from different countries.

Countries	Authors
Africa	Manyara & Jones, 2007; Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011; Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012; Isaac & Wuleka, 2012; Afenyo & Amuquandoh, 2014; Burgin & Zama, 2014
Laos	Kim et al., 2014
Thailand	Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014; Pookhao, 2014
New Zealand	Weinberg et al., 2002
Costa Rica	Weinberg et al., 2002
India	Dogra & Gupta, 2012; Sood et al., 2017; Agarwal & Mehra, 2019
America	Zapata et al., 2011
Botswana	Sebele, 2010
Philippines	Okazaki, 2008
Cambodia	Reimer & Walter, 2013
China	Gu & Wong, 2006
Malaysia	Hussin, 2006, 2008, 2009; Hamzah & Khalifah, 2009; Harris, 2009; Ibrahim & Razzaq, 2010; Kayat, 2010; Hussin & Kunjuraman, 2014; Kunjuraman, et al., 2015; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017

environmental aspects (Pramanik et al., 2019). In another study by Agarwal and Mehra (2019), CBE homestay programmes are seen as a means to deliver numerous socio-economic benefits. For example, for the local community in Tirthan valley, Himachal Pradesh, India, these benefits come in the form of income earned, number of jobs created, women entrepreneurs involved, reverse migration, development of infrastructure and rise in standard of living. In a similar vein, CBE homestay programmes have offered several economic and social advancement on homestay hosts in Thailand, as documented by Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2014). The manifold benefits of CBE on local community in economic and social aspects are evident based on previous studies; yet, the challenges are still endured (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017; Pusiran & Xiao, 2013). Interestingly, a study by Kunjuraman and Hussin (2017) in CBE homestay programmes in Sabah, Malaysia, provide hopeful insights which point to the fact that successful involvement by the local communities in CBE homestay programmes can indeed lead towards positive economic and social developments. As a result, CBE's roles as an economic and social development tool to the rural communities in developing countries are evident and it is 'therefore, premature to say that CBT is not useful for rural communities and it is unfair to generalise that CBT projects are a failure' (Stone & Stone, 2011, p. 111).

To manage CBE in a sustainable way, local community participation in tourism development is warranted (Murphy, 1985; Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Murphy's (1985) work had been further extended by Murphy and Murphy (2004) involving recent elements of community participation issues in tourism development with more emphasis on community participation in tourism planning and management of tourism. Similarly,

Pawson et al. (2016) are also in agreement that Murphy's work on community is acknowledged in tourism academia, and continuous attempts have been made by tourism scholars to pay more emphasis on community participation in tourism planning and management. In view of this, the current study focuses on community participation in CBE schemes in a developing country context. CBE advocates as a management model to provide opportunities to gain empowerment (Ernawati et al., 2017). The empowerment gains by the local community in tourist destination can be convened in social, economic, and political aspects. Scheyvens (2000, p. 233) noted that 'it has only been in the last few years that empowerment has attracted the interest of those writing on ecotourism'- yet studies related to this area, especially in the context of a developing country, are given scant attention by the tourism scholars with some notable exceptions (Scheyvens, 2000; Tran & Walter, 2014; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2016). Moreover, such studies are only focused on women without involving the community as a whole. Thus, there is limited understanding on exactly how the local community's continuous participation in CBE schemes empower and improve their livelihood.

Guided by the Longwe's (1995) empowerment framework and Scheyvens' (2000) community empowerment framework in ecotourism, this qualitative study aims to seek underlying factors of empowerment gains by the CBE project participants in the social, economic, and environmental aspects. For this reason, a locally established CBE project in Bilit village, Lower Kinabatangan has been chosen as a case study where such a CBE project was introduced in the early 2000s and has been successfully managed by the local community ever since. It is worth to note that the Lower Kinabatangan is a famous ecotourism destination in East Malaysia among both local and international tourists due to its untouched natural resources. The active local community participation in ecotourism activities in the region provide the local community the opportunity to engage in alternative livelihood activities. The participation has also helped Kinabatangan position itself as an example of a locally-owned community-based ecotourism destination in Malaysia, as well as to other potential similar destinations in the world. Ecotourism in Bilit provides the local community with an opportunity to empower themselves in ecotourism as one of the alternative livelihood activities, where traditional fishing activity is the main economic activity. Due to this reason, CBE in Bilit has been chosen as the research venue to study the level at which CBE empowers the local community economically, socially and environmentally. On the other hand, the rationale behind the

adoption of such frameworks is that they are able to provide in-depth insights on empowerment based on the dimensions outlined in the frameworks. Moreover, this study extends the empowerment framework popularised by Scheyvens (2000) with the novel concept of 'socio-cultural empowerment', thus contributing to the current body of knowledge about empowerment in CBE scholarship. The relevance of the findings constitutes to the planning and implementation of CBT as practical contribution of the study.

Theoretical background

Sustainable development goals and community development

Serious consideration paid by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) on community development to achieve sustainable development as recorded in the following statement, caught the researcher's attention (<https://www.unwto.org/our-focus>):

'Tourism should take full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities'

The above focus was one of the key motives owned by the UNWTO to achieve sustainable development for the tourism industry, as well as the destination community. In order to realise the sustainable development in the tourism industry, The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was introduced as a blueprint which practised a balanced approach with regards to tourism resources and consumption. The following section is devoted to the SDGs' introduction and its importance to be adopted in this study.

The end of 2015 officially closed the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). After the MDGs reached its due date, international professional communities began to formulate a new set of development goals similar to, or even extended from, the MDGs (with inclusive and comprehensive goals) known as SDGs (see Figure 1). The SDGs apply to UN member states which incorporate a set of practical and ambitious goals that seek to, *inter alia*, eradicate extreme poverty, enhance human well-being, strengthen human rights and ensure environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2014 as cited in Elkins et al., 2018). With a joint continuous consultation by relevant stakeholders, the SDGs were finalised and were accompanied by 169 targets and 230 indicators (Elkins et al., 2018). According to Griggs et al. (2013), SDGs should be implemented in a way that benefits all mankind as well as safeguard the

existing resources of the Earth. Griggs et al. (2013, p. 305) argued that 'the protection of Earth's life support system and poverty reduction must be the twin priorities for SDGs'. They also argue that 'it is not enough simply to extend MDGs, as some are suggesting, because humans are transforming the planet in ways that could undermine development gains' (Griggs et al., 2013, p. 305).

There is an argument that the revisions of SDGs are quite challenging because they carry the benefits of certain stakeholders' interests or goals such as energy provisions and climate change prevention. However, Griggs et al. (2013) managed to tackle this issue by proposing several sets of goals by combining the MDGs with global environmental targets drawn from science and from existing international agreements. However, such proposed SDGs by Griggs et al. (2013) are still in line with previous MDGs and new SDGs in which the driving principles are retained, updated and extended to 2023. They are reducing poverty and hunger, improving health and well-being, creating sustainable productions and consumption patterns, as well as improving lives and livelihoods.

In the context of tourism and more specifically ecotourism, SDGs have directly and indirectly been linked to tourism where it incorporates the social, economic and environmental aspects. Since tourism has great potential to contribute to the SDGs, relevant policies are still needed, and careful examinations are always a priority. Concerns pertaining sustainability should be inculcated and it is our responsibility to make the visions into reality. Accordingly, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, 'Everyone has a role in sustainable tourism. Every action counts.' (The Tourism Sector and Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2017, p. 5). Tourism has contributed to human development and has helped countries gain economic benefits. In the context of ecotourism, large numbers of international tourists contribute to the economic development of countries that use ecotourism as a development tool, including Malaysia. Thus, it is evident that ecotourism's contributions to the economic and social development of countries are undeniable and have the potential to grow at a great pace. In this study, the SDGs are relevant to be adopted and evidences from this study could contribute to the global development agenda from the context of a developing country.

Community empowerment through tourism

The concept of 'empowerment' has had a strong link and relationship in community tourism studies since several decades ago (Scheyvens, 1999). Such a concept



Figure 1. The 17 SDGs. Source: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>.

has been applied in various fields and is very popular among scholars from political and development studies. For instance, Beeton (2006, p. 88) explained the origin of the empowerment concept by saying that ‘the term comes from political science, usually in discussions involving the re-assigning of power to a community whose power has been taken away by force’. In contrast, Lenao and Basupi (2016, p. 54) asserted that ‘empowerment has become a very popular concept across various fields of study, particularly those dealing with development and politics’. Moreover, the empowerment concept with conceptual and different definitions have been proposed by many scholars in academia. In line with this statement, Lenao and Basupi (2016) delivered their caution in defining the concept of empowerment. They claimed that they did not have any intention to define the concept, rather that it was ‘safe to note how it has been defined by a few users before’ (Lenao & Basupi, 2016, p. 54). For Beeton (2006), the concept of empowerment is embedded in power relations in groups. She argued that the concept of empowerment has several issues such as who (active local community) participates, and the fact that the disadvantaged (those who need it most) are left out of the process and women are restricted to low-paying service roles (cooks, cleaners) (Beeton, 2006, p. 92). Thus, empowerment is multidimensional in nature and this study attempts to explore the empowerment gains received by the local community in the study site.

In ecotourism research, there are two analytical models or frameworks available to explore the ecotourism’s contribution on local community’s livelihoods. They are the Longwe Empowerment Framework (LEF) (Longwe, 1995) and the Community Empowerment

Framework (CEF) by Scheyvens (2000). Both frameworks in the past have been successfully applied in community-based ecotourism research as analytical tools to provide interesting insights (Scheyvens, 2000; Tran & Walter, 2014). Table 2 provides the main elements of both frameworks which are potentially applicable in community-based ecotourism research in developing countries.

LEF has been developed with the aim to understand how women’s participation in ecotourism and

Table 2. Main elements in LEF and CEF.

Longwe Empowerment Framework (LEF) By Longwe (1995)	Community Empowerment Framework (CEF) By Scheyvens (2000)
Control - equal control in decision-making over factors of production and distribution of benefits	Political - voice in all stages of ecotourism project; broadly representative decision-making structures; overcoming of cultural constraints on participation
Mobilisation/participation - equal participation in decision-making processes related to policymaking, planning and administration	Social - community’s sense of cohesion confirmed or strengthened by ecotourism activities; equitable distribution of costs and benefits; income used for community projects; greater respect for women
Conscientization - conscious understanding of gender roles and a gender division of labour, and that these can be changed to be more equitable	Psychological - women at centre of cultural preservation; new skills, increased selfconfidence, self-reliance and pride; motivated to participate in community development
Access - equal access to factors of production (land, labour, credit, education, public services)	Economic - participate in formal employment; establish own businesses; challenge restrictive social norms; adopt new gender roles; control ecotourism income; increased access to productive resources
Welfare-equal access to material welfare (food, income, shelter, medical care)	

Source: Longwe (1995); Scheyvens (2000); Tran and Walter (2014); Kunjuran & Hussin (2016).

development projects may or may not promote the empowerment as a way to enhance their livelihoods and personal development. There are five components in the framework outlined and the women progress towards betterment from the aspects of these components: welfare, access, conscientization, participation and control (March et al., 1999). The move towards betterment in the women's lives result from their continuous participation in community-based ecotourism projects over time. Leder (2016) suggests that such a framework is applicable to examine whether the development projects are able to meet the main objective, which is women empowerment. In addition, the framework also emphasized the strong political ideology embedded in the development projects to overcome the gender inequality (March et al., 1999). Interestingly, March et al. (1999) exemplified the division of labour involving three main roles as reproductive, productive and community roles and this division was also popularised by the French philosopher Emile Durkheim's, in his book *The Division of Labour in Society* (or *De la Division du Travail Social*), which debuted in 1893. Tran and Walter (2014) further acknowledge LEF as a transformative model for development projects including ecotourism which 'identifies gaps in gender equity and the potential for change in ecotourism project planning, implementation, outcomes and research' (p. 119).

Secondly, the CEF by Scheyvens (2000) focuses on the gender analysis in ecotourism development in third world countries. The CEF however, does not focus on women *per se*, but women-in-community (Tran & Walter, 2014). There are four dimensions or components involved namely, political, social, psychological and economic as measurement for women empowerment. The applicability of the framework in ecotourism research is evident in the context of developing countries (Tran & Walter, 2014; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2016). Such evidences further enhance its pertinence in ecotourism research in developing countries. The evidences also provide thought-provoking insights, subsequently enriching the body of knowledge.

Yet, through the critical analysis, this study finds both the LEF & CEF frameworks have their own injunctions. One notable limitation is that both frameworks are devoted to the women group as a unit of analysis. Thus, the frameworks may be notoriously viewed as 'gender oriented' without giving emphasis to the whole local community as a unit of analysis. This debate may disclose further understanding to emphasize the need for involving 'community' as a unit of analysis rather than focusing on women as a single unit of analysis. A community not only comprises of women as a different gender - family values, culture

and tolerance are also a part of it. Thus, interesting findings may be provided if such a framework is applied in a community research. The applicability and potential of both frameworks may be limited as they solely focus on only women in ecotourism research. Interestingly, Scheyvens (2002) is optimistic that the CEF may be applied to the analysis of the other group (indigenous people or local communities) and not only women group *per se*. This is due to the fact that all the dimensions in the CEF are experienced by the local communities and it is premature to say that such a framework only focuses on women. Tran and Walter (2014) in a similar vein, call for more comprehensive community study to capture the 'various dimensions of social class, ethnicity, culture, kinship, leadership structures and social context' (p. 129). Thus, with this in mind, this study involves community as a unit of analysis to provide comprehensive findings on empowerment. Secondly, both frameworks overlook analysing socio-cultural issues in CBE projects where ecotourism has been considered as a sustainable development tool for many developing countries which are rich with socio-cultural resources (Cobbinah et al., 2017). The socio-cultural related activities such as meal preparation, dance, local dialect communication and other similar activities should be highlighted in ecotourism projects because they are part of the main source for ecotourism, and are often expected by visitors wanting to experience new culture.

Similarly, LEF has also the potential to be applied in a wider context such as local communities because the main elements may be experienced by anyone in any ecotourism destination. Thus, the current study utilized the LEF and CEF to explore the empowerment gains of CBE on local community in the study site. It is worth to note that, women participation in the CBE scheme in this study is evident and is contextualised as community or ecotourism project participants. As such, both frameworks are relevant to be applied in the CBE scheme in this study, where CEF and LEF empowerment gains in terms of economy, social and environmental aspects are to be explored.

Research context

Bilit Village is located along the Kinabatangan River, between the Sukau (downstream) and Batu Puteh (upstream) villages. In terms of distance, Bilit is reachable about 130 km from Sandakan city, which is an approximately three-hour journey (Figure 2). Now, locally owned private buses (minibus) are provided by the villagers. However, there is no public transportation service to date due to low demand and the fact that the

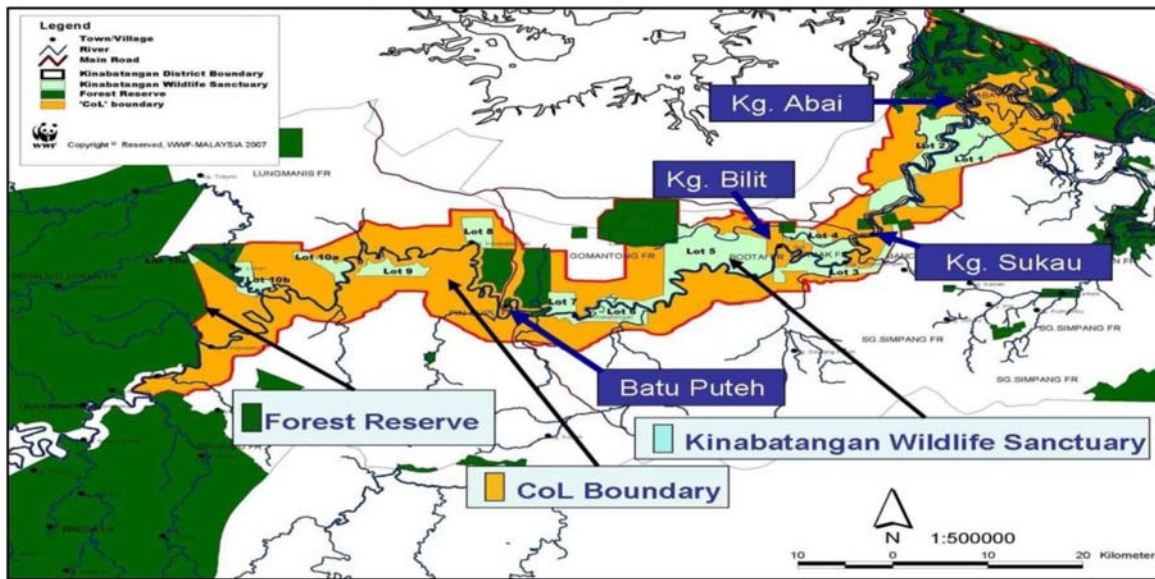


Figure 2. Location of Bilit village (*Kg. Bilit*) in Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah, Malaysia. Source: Fieldwork, 2018.

majority of the locals have their own transport. Alternatively, Bilit is reachable by an approximately 30-minute (25 km) drive from Sukau. The journey may also possibly take only 20 min, due to the improved road conditions. Many locals still practise fishing as their main livelihood and economic activity. Some of them are engaged in small businesses (e.g. grocery shops) and some work at nearby palm oil plantation companies such as IOI, Hap Seng, Bukit Kretam, Sime Darby and Avicess.

In the late nineteenth century, Bilit became a prominent hub for birds' nest harvesting and this activity continues to date. This activity is an important source of income to the locals. Moreover, bird harvesting in the *Gomantong Caves* located in Bilit has also become an attraction for tourists, prompting efforts by the local stakeholders to popularise it. A bird nest harvesters' trail to the *Gomantong Caves* used to be actively travelled in the old days (Vaz & Pyne, 1997). Presently, the *Gomantong Caves* have been visited by both domestic and international visitors to watch the bird nest harvesting, and, if they are lucky, the chance to also watch orangutans and other wildlife animals such as birds and squirrels. Bilit began its first ecotourism project in 2002, when the locals incorporated themselves in the homestay programme introduced by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment, Sabah (previously known as the Ministry of Tourism, Environment and Technology, Sabah) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Malaysia (Hussin, 2006). Similar to Sukau, Bilit offers a variety of ecotourism products through the nature available in the Kinabatangan River.

Bilit has been transformed through ecotourism where now, many lodges, resorts, B&Bs, Jungle Camps and

homestays are established to provide multiple types of accommodations to the visitors. In fact, many service providers in Bilit outnumber locally owned accommodations. It was found that many locals are still not interested in being involved in the resort and B&B business as the operational cost is high, preferring to be involved in operating homestays instead as they are relatively cheaper to run. The villagers view homestays as another option for them to be involved in ecotourism-related activities income despite many still mainly depending on fishing. People of Bilit acknowledge that ecotourism has multiple benefits in the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects, which is the main focus in this study. The social transformation of local communities which leads to empowerment through ecotourism was explored in the Bilit context where the community has been involved in ecotourism development since 2002, and continue to be involved to date.

Research methodology

There is a concern amongst researchers (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017b; Rajaratnam, 2018) where many qualitative studies in tourism often fail to justify the research paradigm. This is a serious issue as a qualitative study should employ an appropriate research paradigm to guide the researchers to achieve study objectives. Accordingly, the current study adopted the constructivist research paradigm, which is also known as the interpretivist research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Jennings, 2010; Neuman, 2006) in literature aiming at capturing the subjective norms and realities of the

informants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The field study resulted in a thick and rich description on CBE benefits to the local community, which contributed to the empowerment process in the community level. This, enabled the researcher to adopt an exploratory qualitative research design. A qualitative research study using in-depth interviews and field observation was performed in order to get primary data required for this study. A fieldworker, a local Malaysian from Kota Kinabalu carried out the fieldwork in Bilit village and stayed in the village homestay as a paying guest. Before the actual fieldwork took place, the researcher had identified the gate keeper in the village who is a local homestay coordinator in Bilit village. Being a tourism sociologist, the researcher was given several opportunities to embark on tourism and biodiversity related research in the Lower Kinabatangan region, which enabled him to build rapport with the local community in Bilit village.

In qualitative research, the smallest acceptable sample for an in-depth interview is one and it is suggested that this number can be of great use for increasing one's knowledge (Boddy, 2016; Kaur & Kumar, 2020). To justify the adopted sample size, qualitative scholars should refer to data saturation and homogeneity of the population (Boddy, 2016). A small sample size is enough when the research participants belong to the homogeneous group and data saturation can be achieved after six in depth-interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Accordingly, Kaur and Kumar (2020) carried out a qualitative study involving seven informants which provided meaningful insights and achieved the study's objectives. In this study, a total of sixteen informants (see Table 3) were recruited based on the purposive sampling technique (Sekaran, 2003) to conduct in-depth interviews. In addition, maximum variation sampling in purposive sampling technique was adopted to gain multiple perspectives of individuals about the issue under investigation (Omona, 2013), as well as to show variations in perspectives by informants regarding the issue under studied (Creswell, 2002).

The actual fieldwork was carried out in Bilit village over 6 months, between 2017 and 2019. The key informants of the study are the local community who are the pioneers of CBE projects since it began in 2002.

Table 3. Summary of key informants.

Informant No.	Role category	Total interviews
1–13	Local community	13
14, 15	Local government	2
16	NGO director	1
Total		16

Source: Author (Fieldwork, 2018).

The informants are natives of Bilit and are involved in ecotourism activities as an alternative livelihood activity besides engaging as fishermen, small entrepreneurs and oil palm workers. The selection of informants was made on the basis that they are Bilit's pioneers of CBE projects in which they have been actively engaged since 2002. The informants were also selected as they are viewed as being highly capable in empowering themselves from the economic, social and environmental aspects. Additionally, two government officials and a locally operated Non-government organization (NGO) were approached by the researcher to gain additional data required for this study, mainly on the significance of the CBE in the village. The CBE projects' participants in this study are the natives who operate homestay programmes and privately-owned resorts, as well as Bed and Breakfast (B&Bs) in the village. The empowerment issues of CBE on local community betterment were discovered by the researcher and this motivated him to explore them empirically.

All interviews were conducted in the informants' homes and government offices. Letters of concern were distributed to the informants involved and these letters were signed by the informants to signify agreement to be informants in this study. Several interviews were performed twice with the informants, especially the homestay operators and B&B owners, to gain more data related to empowerment issues. All the interviews were done in both *Bahasa Malaysia* (national language of Malaysia) for the CBE project participants and English for the local government officials and NGO director. After the interview session with the CBE project participants, the data were then translated into English by the researcher and finally checked by the English language expert for internal consistency.

Special care was taken by the researcher to ensure parameters for validity in qualitative research known as trustworthiness, which includes four criteria for qualitative inquiry: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All these criteria were established in this study as shown in Table 4. In addition, the triangulation technique was utilized through the variety of sources and methodological techniques, which warranted the quality of the data. Each interview lasted between one to two hours and was audio-recorded after gaining permission from the informants. Field observation was performed during the fieldwork to observe the CBE operations, physical environment, infrastructural development in the village, and ecotourism activities. All observations were captured in the form of fieldnotes and photographs which add value to the main qualitative interview data. In order to explore the empowerment

Table 4. Four criteria for qualitative inquiry adopted in this study.

Types of trustworthiness	Adopted by the researcher
Credibility	Credibility was established by the researcher using techniques of prolonged engagement, continuous observation and member checks. The researcher is a local Malaysian who has been engaged in ecotourism, conservation and community development projects for more than five years in the study sites. The interview and observation data were viewed by the study informants as a form of the researcher's interpretation on data collected.
Transferability	Transferability was enhanced in this study through the purposive sampling used.
Dependability	Dependability was accounted in this study through the development of details research plan, which includes the research process, audit trails of the transcripts and discussion of the project over time between two researchers.
Confirmability	Confirmability was enhanced through the research audit process. In this process, the researcher was aware of the variety of explanations used in discussing the phenomenon being studied.

indicators gained by the informants through their active engagement in CBE projects in Bilit, the six stages in thematic analysis techniques were applied. These six stages are: familiarising the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report, enabled the researcher to identify several themes based on the study objectives (Sood, et al. 2017; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). In accordance with the principle of writing up qualitative research, the informants' quotes illustrating responses were selected 'through judicious selection of statements emblematic of an issue being illustrated and often indicative of the voices of other participants who felt similarly' (Sood et al., 2017, p. 338).

Research findings

The findings of the study reveal that the dimensions embedded in both LEF and CEF have been captured. Those identified dimensions were found in the findings based on economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects as CBE impacts on the local community, and these are presented in the next section. The essence of the CBE impacts is described in the text, illustrated by the relevant quotes, and triangulated to present rich information. As shown in Table 5, CBE project participants are mainly involved in homestay programmes which are their primary and secondary form of employment. Fishing is also performed by some informants to gain additional income. Interestingly, there is an informant, who is a local, who successfully set up a lodge and was able to venture into the ecotourism business.

Table 5. Background information of CBE project participants.

Informant No.	Gender	Age	Main job	Secondary job
1	M	46	Homestay	Fishing
2	M	56	Homestay	Fishing
3	F	56	Homestay	Fishing
4	F	39	Homestay	Fishing
5	M	30	Homestay	Fishing
6	F	53	Homestay	Fishing
7	F	42	Homestay	Fishing
8	M	44	Homestay	Fishing
9	F	59	Homestay	Fishing
10	F	47	Homestay	Fishing
11	F	32	Homestay	Fishing
12	F	46	Lodge servant	Homestay
13	M	47	Teacher	Lodge owner, contractor & palm oil farmer

Source: Author (Fieldwork, 2018).

He may be considered as a local 'champion', who is a role model to other CBE project participants to venture into ecotourism business. Out of the thirteen informants, eight are women. These women manage homestays which exemplify their capabilities. The informants are between the ages of thirty and fifty-nine. It was observed that the young people in the community who are below thirty, also participated in CBE projects as helpers for their parents. They mainly helped with guiding the tourists, preparing food and cleaning the homestays.

CBE economic impacts and empowerment

CBE offers green job opportunities

The social transformation of local communities through ecotourism can be seen in the economic aspect, especially transformations of jobs from fishing to homestay programmes and lodge entrepreneurs which are considered as green job opportunities in the rural areas. Bilit is blessed with untouched natural resources, namely flora and fauna, which have great potential for ecotourism development. By being involved in the homestay programmes, the informants are aware that Bilit's natural resources can be promoted as an ecotourism product to the tourists and at the same time, generate income. The establishment of ecotourism in Bilit provide opportunities for the local community to be engaged in more sustainable livelihood activities such as the homestay programme to enhance their lifestyle. There was a general agreement among the informants that ecotourism delivered a positive social transformation to the local community in the employment sector. Through the access to ecotourism, it is evident that some in the local community in Bilit had transformed their employment from traditional fishing to

homestay operators. For instance, an informant commented:

'Here [Bilit], the majority are working as fisherman, and some of them are involved in farming. Whenever a homestay exists, it is considered as another economic activity and alternative job opportunity for the interested villagers.' (Inf. No. 5, homestay operator at Bilit)

The informants who were involved in the homestay programmes had gone through a social transformation in the context of employment whereby ecotourism gives them the chance to improve their economic welfare, which is not provided by fishing and subsistence farming. In addition, the informants also agreed that the homestay programme not only provides an alternative green job opportunity to the local people, but also reduce their dependence on traditional fishing activities.

Income generation

Fishing and subsistence farming have been the main livelihood activities among the local community in Bilit for decades. However, ecotourism has provided the selected local community (those interested in ecotourism) a chance to transform their socio-economic welfare. Generally, the income Malaysian Ringgit (MYR) from employment are diverse in Bilit. The informants stated that the side income was directly and indirectly received through the participation in ecotourism activities such as homestay programmes, B&Bs and resorts, becoming tour guides, being involved in forest restoration programmes, handicraft making, providing boat services, bus services and taking part in local cultural performances in homestay programmes in Bilit. For instance, a teacher from Bilit has successfully established a lodge known as the Kinabatangan Sunshine Lodge due to his motivation to diversify his income. Being a teacher, he felt that the ecotourism business brought him economic social transformation through increased sustainable income. He noted that the income obtained from operating the lodge is significantly much more than what he makes from teaching. He commented:

'The lodge, which is based on ecotourism, increased my monthly income from MYR300 to MYR120 K. This motivated me to be involved more actively in ecotourism projects and I will continue to be actively involved.' (Inf. No. 13, Lodge owner at Bilit)

It is clear that ecotourism in Bilit had diversified this informant's income through his involvement in other economic activities like running the lodge which can be viewed as a new job opportunity to the local community in Bilit. Such engagement in ecotourism projects by the informant motivated him economically to find ways to boost his business. However, based on the research

findings, the study indicates that the income from ecotourism received by the local community, especially those who were from the homestay programmes (as opposed to those who run lodges), is relatively small and this leads to disempowerment. Nevertheless, the informants of the study (the homestay operators) reported that they were satisfied and felt grateful for the ecotourism revenue. In addition, the study found that the villagers perceived working in ecotourism as relatively easier in comparison to other economic activities such as fishing, farming and subsistence activities. It was discovered that the ecotourism activities in Bilit provided sufficient income to the homestay operators if the number of tourists increases every month. A number of informants reported that the minimum income received from the homestay programme was MYR300, and this was mainly used for daily household activities. This income is still insufficient to fulfil the daily needs of the households and contributed to an economic disempowerment; but the informants are grateful to receive such income. Although the homestay programme provides a small income to the homestay operators at Bilit, the contribution towards the enhancement of community bonding, cultural preservation and conservation awareness was acknowledged by the informants of the study.

CBE socio-cultural impacts and empowerment

Strong social capital

Developing social capital within and outside the community will bring many positive benefits to the local community in the tourists' destination. Similarly, social capital among the informants is one of the community's strengths to secure future livelihood. It was revealed by the informants that before ecotourism existed, the local community did not have any contact with outsiders, especially issues related to development. The local community paid less attention to the cooperation and its importance to human development. There was a time when the local community did not care to work together with outsiders due to little exposure and awareness at the community level. This was explained by the homestay coordinator of Bilit as follows:

'The local community is now well-connected due to ecotourism and this was not seen in the past decades. They were busy with their own lives to generate income for the family. After the introduction of the homestay programme in the early 2000s, they received exposure to be involved in tourism activities.' (Inf. No. 1, homestay operator at Bilit)

Due to community's earlier attitude of not working together with outsiders, Bilit was not able to diversify

its economy and failed to enhance the community's livelihood. As a remedy, the stakeholder's participation through Non-government organizations (NGOs) was first established in the Lower Kinabatangan region in the 1980s to develop and introduce conservation efforts. In Bilit, WWF Malaysia was the first NGO that managed to establish the first homestay programme in 2002 with support from interested households. With the establishment of the homestay programme, CBE became an influence on the local community – they were now quick to embrace the importance of the external factors in contributing to the village ecotourism development. The collaboration of stakeholders in ecotourism development to embrace social networks among the local community still prevails. Without a social network, establishing ecotourism in Bilit would not have been possible. Social transformations and empowerment of the local community would also then be missing.

Local Orang Sungai culture as ecotourism product

The informants of Bilit feel proud of their local culture, and even more so after the introduction of ecotourism in the village. This is because ecotourism-based activities such as homestay programmes and lodges emphasise the importance of the local culture through cultural performances to the guests. The homestay programme is the main platform for the informants to promote their culture of *orang sungai* through cultural performances and a welcome dance for the tourists. The commodification of the local culture through ecotourism was consulted by the local community and received consent. Evidently, according to one of the informants:

'The local traditional activities like dancing and cooking have been promoted as homestay products since their introduction in the village. After the local community agreed, we wanted to promote them through the homestays.' (Inf. No. 3, homestay operator at Bilit)

The local culture is preserved by the local community through decades of practise. There was an agreement among the informants (homestay operators, government officials and NGO director) that the commodification of the *orang sungai* culture can be promoted as an ecotourism product in the homestay programme to receive potential economic benefits. The consultation was properly done to discuss the extent to which the local culture should be promoted through the homestay programme. Amongst the points discussed was the benefits the local community stand to gain, by promoting their culture. It is clear in the interviews with the informants that the representation of the *orang sungai* culture can be manifested through traditional costumes,

food, dances and singing, all of which are often demonstrated and performed by the informants regardless of gender, age and social status. Through the homestay programme, the informants perceived positive impacts such as the preservation of the local culture and the feeling of pride towards their own *orang sungai* culture. It is also worth noting that the informants did not realise the importance of the local culture until its promotion through ecotourism. They revealed that the *orang sungai* culture was not exposed to outsiders as they did not consider sharing it with others as good practice. After the introduction of ecotourism, the informants came to realise the potential of the local culture as a resource for ecotourism. However, the informants also realized the authenticity of the *orang sungai* culture should be preserved and not overly commercialised. For this reason, they try to minimise exhibiting and conducting all activities related to their local culture to only once in a week, for stays that are at least a week long.

Women empowerment

The establishment of ecotourism in Bilit showed equitable gender involvement in ecotourism-related activities. Both men and women were equally and justly acknowledged for their contributions in ecotourism development as an output of conscientization. Traditionally, the *orang sungai* culture emphasised the patriarchal system where the men are the dominant group in the society. It is increasingly challenging for women to break the system which has been inherited for centuries. However, this system has slowly been broken down due to ecotourism and women are empowered socially and politically through their engagement in the homestay programmes. Presently, women who are engaged in the homestay programmes are more confident in managing the homestay and in communicating with outsiders compared to those who are not involved in the homestay programmes. The observation data revealed that women in the homestay programmes learn management skills such as organising cultural events for tourists, preparing daily meals, making handicraft, managing nurseries and developing proper communication skills. Such social benefits received by the women are recognised as social transformation impacts delivered by ecotourism in Bilit.

There are some evidences in this study that show how women are socially empowered through their involvement in the homestay programmes at Bilit. The evidences are based on the social aspect such as cooperation, knowledge on ICT, and management skills. The female informants (Inf 3, 6 & 7) in the study documented their positive social transformation by

engaging in the homestay programmes. For instance, the women homestay operators learnt management skills in operating the homestay programmes from the registration until the end of stay of the tourists. Another informant described her role in the homestay programme where she had learnt to market her homestay programme to outsiders through the internet. Such a skill was cultivated by the homestay programme after her participation and she credited ecotourism for the opportunity for empowerment.

CBE environmental impacts and empowerment

Increasing awareness on environmental protection

The informants of the study clearly shared their views that the natural environment of Bilit has been receiving more attention since the 1990s, when ecotourism slowly started emerging as a remedy for illegal activities such as deforestation and illegal logging, which were rampant in the Lower Kinabatangan region. As shared by the homestay operator:

'Many years ago, logging was rampant in this area and it slowly stopped after the local government announced Lower Kinabatangan as a 'conservation area'. The local community still depends on the natural resources for their daily survival such as fishing and farming.' (Inf. No. 1, homestay operator at Bilit)

The environment of Bilit was challenged by many parties including the local community who depend on the resources to sustain their livelihood. Outsiders aimed the Lower Kinabatangan region as a 'golden land' where the commercial value can be seen through the abundance of natural resources. The empty land was converted into agricultural land and was home for many plantation companies which mushroomed in the early 1980s, in the Lower Kinabatangan region, including Bilit. Due to such attempts, the environment of Bilit was seriously affected and became a threat to the nature. A noble initiative to safeguard the nature was then undertaken by the WWF, with support from the state government. This initiative resulted in a conservation centre which is known as the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary (LKWS).

Initially, the LKWS was not fully accepted by the local community as it restricted the daily livelihood activities of the local community who relied on the natural products of the forest such as wood and marine resources. However, continuous initiatives by the state government and several NGOs successfully transformed the mind-set of the local community as psychological empowerment to love nature and prevent it from depleting. Obviously, ecotourism became a development tool which

transformed the local community into becoming aware of the importance of the nature of Bilit. The importance of the environment in Bilit became a priority in ecotourism activities which is in line with one of the ecotourism principles. The lack of awareness on the environment was limited before ecotourism was introduced in the village. The informants acknowledge that ecotourism has successfully transformed them into having an eco-friendly mind-set. On the other hand, the informants are also aware of the fact that an influx of tourists, or crowding, would bring negative impacts to the environment. However, to date such a phenomenon has not yet occurred, because the homestay programmes are receiving smaller numbers of tourists every month (below fifty). This may limit the environmental costs.

Discussion and conclusion

With the focus on how CBE schemes impact the community empowerment, this study reveals that local community involved in CBE projects (homestay programme & B&B) are able to transform their livelihoods from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects. There is a strong agreement among the CBE project participants that ecotourism exerts positive influences on their livelihoods, in terms of providing green job opportunities, generating income, strong social capital, preservation of local culture, women empowerment and awareness on environmental protection. Such benefits identified in this study further increased the value of ecotourism as a livelihood activity in rural destinations as well as enhance support for tourism development (Lee & Jan, 2020). In terms of the economic aspect, CBE's benefits can be discovered through the job opportunities in the ecotourism scheme where previously, the community was largely made up of fishers and farmers. Such phenomenon observed in this study managed to reduce dependency on marine fishing resources (Porter et al., 2015). Such transformation from fishing to ecotourism entrepreneurs (homestay operators and B&B owners), can be taken as economic empowerment (Scheyvens, 2000). It is evidently reported that the transformation in rural destinations like Bilit enhanced the potential of ecotourism as a development tool and this is also observed in other CBE destinations in Malaysia (Hussin et al., 2015).

With focus to sustainable community development, the study reveals that socio-cultural impacts of CBE on community empowerment outnumbering economic and environmental impacts in a developing country are hardly found in the previous literature. For instance, strong social capital within and outside the village, resulting from participation in CBE has given the local

community an opportunity to 'accept' and 'welcome' an alternative livelihood opportunity. The acceptance of CBE as an alternative livelihood activity by the local community in Malaysia was revealed in this study which values the contribution of CBE as an empowerment tool. Limited studies on local community participation in CBE activities in Malaysia fail to acknowledge ecotourism as a community empowerment tool. Consequently, by having a case study from Malaysia, the current study adds value to CBE having the potential to enhance local community's social well-being. The findings of this study also add new perspectives to the current body of knowledge on CBE and community empowerment literature. Moreover, incorporating tourism along with traditional activities like fishing may enhance livelihood sustainability and this study observed findings similar to that as reported by Su et al. (2019) in China. However, there is evidence that fishing is no longer a popular livelihood activity after ecotourism was introduced as an alternative livelihood.

This study discovered that the local community has been empowered by ecotourism in line with CEF's political, social, psychological and economic dimensions (Scheyvens, 2000). LEF dimensions of welfare, access, conscientization, participation and control were also captured in this study. Most importantly, women have improved their social status by participating in CBE projects. Women within the community have been empowered by the CBE (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013) as equal decision makers, and active participants who are also given access to additional income. This study is in line with a previous study by Irandu and Shah (2014) where the women in Isecheno Women's Conservation Group in Kenya managed to enhance their management skills by participating in the project with 100 per cent participation rate. However, this study did not support the findings of the study conducted in Cambodia, by Reimer and Walter (2013), where women are intensified with burdens of domestic and tourism jobs yet, played a vital role to the ecotourism development (Scheyvens, 2000). On the other hand, ecotourism principles as a natural conservation tool (Nair & Hamzah, 2015) were evident in this study where the local community is aware of the importance of nature to the ecotourism development.

The current study offers some significant theoretical contribution. First, through the critical analysis of previous ecotourism scholarship, the current study contributes to the ongoing discussion about the achievement and short comings of the CBE in developing countries. Towards this end, the research findings positively influence the fact that CBE has empowered the rural communities in developing countries, as well as

being acknowledged as an alternative livelihood approach (Tao & Wall, 2009). Second, the research findings added new insights to the CBE and empowerment to the body of knowledge where the local culture has an independent dimension in the empowerment framework, which was missing. This study observed that local culture has been commercialised through ecotourism by the CBE projects especially homestay programmes. The preservation of local culture should be highlighted because it is considered as a part of prime ecotourism products, second to nature-based products like wildlife/animal watching. The promotion of the local culture which is embedded in social life through ecotourism, provided the local community with a sense of pride and established in what is known as socio-cultural empowerment gains. To enrich the literature, this particular interesting finding needs to be highlighted as an individual empowerment indicator in CEF as 'socio-cultural empowerment' rather than having named it as psychological empowerment *per se*. The psychological empowerment indicator by Scheyvens (2000) notes women as *the group which is central to cultural preservation*; however, the current study argued that the community as a whole, is the one that bears the responsibility to preserve their local culture. In the case of CBE in Bilit, socio-cultural empowerment was clearly discovered by having the *orang sungai* culture as the main source of ecotourism products for the visitors. Thus, this study extends the CEF with the new concept of 'socio-cultural empowerment' (see Figure 3).

In addition, this study has provided new insights to the relevance of LEF and CEF in ecotourism research which were commonly applied on women in ecotourism and development studies. As a result the researcher consider them as 'gender oriented' frameworks. This particular study is the pioneer in utilizing the LEF and CEF in CBE studies which focus on the local community as a unit of analysis, as compared to other studies which give emphasis to women as a single unit of analysis (Scheyvens, 2000; Tran & Walter, 2014; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2016). The use of LEF and CEF in CBE studies help to identify the empowerment indicators experienced by the local community in developing countries, and the current study represents a case study from Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Similar studies utilizing LEF and CEF to explore the empowerment gains received by the local community of other ecotourism destinations, are needed to confirm the utility of such frameworks. On the other hand, this study positively influences several SDG goals, namely one, four, five and sixteen (see Table 6). By having a case study from a developing country like Malaysia, it is proven that ecotourism has

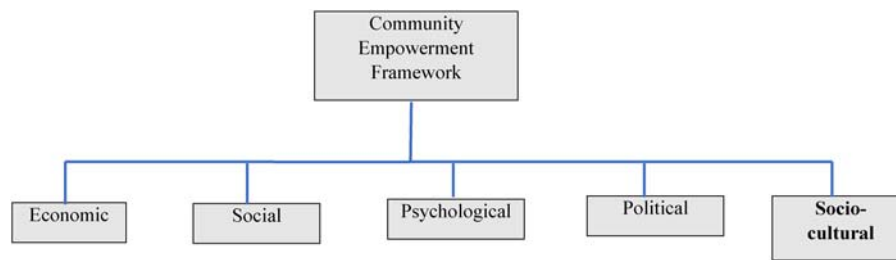


Figure 3. Revised Community Empowerment Framework. Source: Author's plot, 2020.

been acknowledged as a development tool for nature protection as well as for rural community development.

This study alerted that the sustainability of the ecotourism in the study site is questionable in delivering benefits which are perceived by the local community. This is due to the fact that, the CBE project participants, especially homestay hosts, gained limited economic benefits, and this subsequently led to economic disempowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). Due to the limited number of tourists arriving and staying at homestays under the homestay programme, income generation is limited. However, the homestay hosts are still optimistic and grateful for the limited income, as it still helps pay for daily household expenses. Their motivation to be involved in ecotourism may enhance the sustainability in the long run with the support from the relevant stakeholders. Thus, the current study proposes several managerial implications to support the survival of CBE projects in Bilit, in order for them to continue flourishing as a community development tool. For instance, the government and NGOs working in development projects, including ecotourism, should introduce mentorship programmes. These programmes, which may include talks that raise motivation, awareness and skills, can help the local community address fundamental issues and venture

into ecotourism scheme on a higher level. There are several success stories in the region where several households managed to transform their homestay to B&B and resorts with better facilities and services. Access to the above-mentioned information is required to sustain the ecotourism operation in the village. To encourage the community to participate in tourism and be empowered socially and economically, access to information is necessary (Cole, 2006).

Reflecting on the title of this study, the findings indicate that CBE in the Bilit village has fuelled empowerment among the local community who are actively involved, thus, further empowering them in economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects. The empowerment gained by the local community is due to their continuous participation in CBE, since it began in 2002. The current study has the limitation in its scope of exploration. For instance, the current study only focuses on community empowerment issues in CBE operation without emphasizing the challenges faced by the local community. Throughout the process to gain empowerment, the local community might face some challenges to sustain the ecotourism. Thus, this study recommends more studies to explore such issues. Moreover, future studies may also consider the reasons for non-participation in ecotourism (Sood et al., 2017) by the local population in a similar ecotourism destination. This is because this study is limited to only those who choose to cooperate and be actively involved in ecotourism projects. It is suggested that future research may explore the views of non-participants', in order to understand the impacts of CBE to the whole community in the study site. More empirical studies on ecotourism contribution as a development tool in similar ecotourism destinations may provide interesting findings, as well as contribute to the field of community-based ecotourism and development.

Table 6. SDGs application in Bilit CBE projects.

SDGs points	Application of the agenda in Bilit village
SDG 1-End poverty in all its forms	CBE as a source of local community development, and capable to provide new job opportunities and income generation
SDG 4-Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all	Education and trainings concerning environmental awareness through capacity building by stakeholders (NGOs) provided to the villagers
SDG 5-Achieve gender quality and empower all women	Empowerment of women through active participation and income generation through homestay programme and B&Bs
SDG 16-Promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all and build inclusive institutions	Promotion of tolerance and multicultural understanding as a result of interaction between local community and tourists

Source: Author (Fieldwork, 2018).

Acknowledgements

The research was supported by the Universiti Malaysia Sabah and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. A special thanks to the all the informants involved in this study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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