

Sustainable Community Economy: A case of *Aapshwara* Community *Dalit* Homestay, *Tanahun*, Nepal

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Abstract

Sustainable community economy can be understood as community led local economy (community economy) that are economically viable, environmentally sound and socially responsible (sustainable) can be stated as a sustainable community economy. Located in *Tanahun* district, *Aapshwara* community *Dalit* homestay is the first *Dalit* community led homestay in Nepal. This research includes the changes brought upon by the homestay in the community and in terms of four pillars of sustainability (economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects). The study focuses on the home stay as an economic activity identifying the local women as the primary human resource and the ways that it has impacted their practices. It identifies how an economic activity, as an intervention, can bring about a change in daily habits and behavior that can aid in achieving a sustainable activity along with a sustainable living practice.

Keywords

Sustainable, community, economy, economic activity, *Dalit*, community, homestay

1. Introduction

‘Sustainable community economy’ is composed of three terms which can be separately understood and conceptually combined as follows. The term ‘sustainable’ can be understood from the definition of sustainable development given in Our Common Future also known as the Brundtland Report. Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs[1]. Community is a group of people living in the same defined area sharing the same basic values and organization[2]. Economy is defined as “the state of a country or region in terms of the production and consumption of goods and services and the supply of money”[3].

When the terms ‘sustainable’ and ‘community’ are to be understood together the following definition may be used; “the goal of community sustainability is to establish local economies that are economically viable, environmentally sound and socially responsible”[4]

Similarly, the terms community and economy may be understood in the definition of community economic development. Community economic development

(CED) or local economic development (LED) is a Community driven process where communities identify and initiate their own solutions to economic, social and environmental issues to build healthy, economically viable communities[5]. With this, sustainable community economy may be summarized as a community driven economic activity where communities identify and initiate their own solutions that are economically viable, environmentally sound, socially and culturally responsible.

One of the examples of community economy is ‘*Aapshwara* community *Dalit* homestay’, which can be found 150 km west of *Kathmandu*. *Pokhari Bhanjyang* belongs to *Vyas* municipality of *Tanahun* district in *Gandaki* zone. *Pokhari Bhanjyang* constituted a total of 979 households, as per CBS Nepal 2011. It is a heterogenous community with settlement in clusters. *Aapshwara* village is one of the settlements in the municipality. Essentially a *Magar* village, the other caste groups residing here includes people belonging to *Brahmin*, *Chhettri*, *Gurung* and *Dalit* castes. The *Dalit* community has agriculture as its prime occupation along with remittance from seasonal migrant workers within and outside the country. With the aid of an NGO, Hands-On Institute It was registered in 2016 in Nepal Tourism Council,

Pokhara and Nepal Tourism Board to become the first *Dalit* community led and 63rd listed homestay of Nepal which presently receives guests independently as well as those organized by the NGo Hands-On Institute.

1.1 Need of study

The rural setting of the village provides a suitable setting for the national and international guests to experience the traditional Nepali lifestyle. The essence of Nepalese tourism lies in naturally beautiful rural hills and mountains and its indigenous communities with their mystical lifestyle and culture. These natural and cultural attributes can be showcased best through homestays[6]. The potential of the place is further enhanced by the skills and crafts that the residents possess; namely, bamboo work, iron work, mud jewelry and playing traditional musical instruments. As most of the men are out earning a living, the responsibility of homestay has to be handled by women that ensures women empowerment. Female ownership of homestay businesses secures women's avenues for income generation and involves them in mainstream development[6]. Their use of existing and available natural resource in terms of water, fuel use, agriculture, etc. opens doors to sustainability practice possibilities. Furthermore, their interest in optimal utilization of the available amenities welcome the chances of renewable energy technology integration and an opportunity to establish a sustainable village as well.

1.2 Importance of study

“The contribution of tourism sector to GDP of Nepal for fiscal year 2011/12, however, was estimated to be 2.0% only and it is estimated to have provided direct employments to 1 hundred 60 thousand people (MoF, 2012/13)” [7]. So, the impact on tourism sector will be evident. With a number of people coming in, the services will be required accordingly and hence the opportunity of business in the respective areas open up as well. This study also addresses an ongoing Nepal Tourism aim, launched in 2011, to expand homestays and rural tourism activities in a greater degree across the nation [6]. As the homestay is officially recognized, the Government sector will be involved in terms of providing pre-requisites and being a part of its results. Furthermore, as the user group in the village will increase, the impact on the resources. The relationship between population and

the environment is a significant issue due to its impact on chances for achieving sustainable development, especially in developing countries [8]. In the context of providing necessary services, the health sector of the region will have a chance to grow. “Environmental degradation in turn leads to adverse effects on population, particularly with regard to public health. These negative effects on health lead to lower labor productivity, and thus hinder the state's ability to sustain development”[8]. It is found that deployment of renewable energy use in rural areas has shown significant positive effects on income increase of rural households[9]. The implementation of renewable energy technologies will identify new possibilities in the case area. Renewable energy technologies have a multiplier effect in spurring the economy and the development of not only the energy sector but also all the supporting activities related to such industry [10]. Hence the other areas that may be concerned with this study will include those involved in tourism sector, business, policy makers, Government officials, environmental studies, health sector, sociology studies and further sustainability studies.

1.3 Problem statement

“Nepal retains its centuries-old caste system. Dalits, the discriminated people under this system, suffer from restriction on the use public amenities, deprivation of economic opportunities, and general neglect by the state and society.”[11] “Unity among the Dalit organizations is a big obstacle. They all share a common vision: equitable and just society for the Dalits. But with Dalit caste hierarchy and intra-caste discrimination, they lack unity to be able to achieve the goal”[12]. “Legally, it is not allowed to do discrimination in spear of social activities on the basis of caste and ethnicity even though it is still in practice” [12].

According to CBS data of 2011, 11.75% of households in the Pokhari Bhanjyang VDC have uncovered wells as the water source. Relatively, in the village, due to unreliable water supply, the tendency to collect rain water in open tanks and using it without filtration is seen. This increases chances of contamination and health hazards. The people in the settlement present scarcity of water as one of their main concerns in the settlement. The introduction of homestay the number of users increase leading to problems of quantity and quality of water requirement.

Furthermore, in terms of fuel use, the CBS household

data for the VDC shows that 91.2% depend on wood/ firewood, 5.4% depend on LPG and 2.5% depend on biogas. With the increase in consumer number (guests), traditional ways of fuel use can deteriorate its source if not controlled in time. A study state that "... the fossil fuel-based and import oriented consumerism-based economy cannot be successful today and in future" [13].

The waste management in the settlement is done by segregation of decomposable and non-decomposable wastes. The decomposable ones are used in the kitchen garden and the non-decomposable ones are incinerated. The incineration "... can increase the risk of heart disease, aggravate respiratory ailments such as asthma and emphysema, and cause rashes, nausea, or headaches, damages in the nervous system, kidney or liver, in the reproductive and development system"[14].

With remittance as their main source of income, as the homestay is in an initial stage, the operators are not completely dependent on this economic activity. Generating economic opportunities from their very own houses, from their unique culture, helps to make a community strong, independent, and a timeless museum for the rest of the world[15].

1.4 Objectives

Firstly, the main research question was formulated as: What are the impacts that an economic activity (home stay) has on the community (Dalit community) ?

The sub-questions were:

- What is the status quo of the homestay?
- Who gets the benefits?
- Are the practices sustainable?

As per these research questions, the general objective of the study was defined as: To find out the impacts of the homestay on the Dalit community.

The specific objectives were:

- To find out the development scenario and status quo of the homestay
- To find out the people affected by the homestay
- To analyze the pros and cons of the impact in terms of the four pillars of sustainability

1.5 Validity

Being the first registered Dalit homestay, there were new implications in the environmental, social and economic aspects. Furthermore, it had new horizons and dimensions of study that has not been comprehended in the form of academic research yet. Even though studies on community economies and homestays have been done, this case area, having been recently initiated, has not been academically researched. Hence, with this study gap and opportunity, this research was validated.

2. Methodology

The ontological stance of the study was that the introduction of an economic activity (homestay) stimulates change in the existing community (Aapshwara). The people in the case area and literature studies were the source of information (epistemology). Conducted within the pragmatic paradigm using mixed methods, the study was more qualitative supported by quantitative data as well. the study was done under pragmatic paradigm. With the community as the basis of research, the data were collected to make a wholesome analysis of case area with an inductive research approach. The stakeholders were identified and semi-structured in-depth interviews accompanied by participatory observation were used, in the case area, as the methods of this explorative study. Stratified sampling methods was used to formulate homogenous subgroups of people as per their relationship to the homestay. Key informants were identified accordingly and random sampling was done as per the availability of the respondents up to the point of data saturation. The data were collected in form of narratives. Online questionnaire was used to communicate with the guests of the homestay. Photography, audio recording and field notes were used as tools. The collected data were segregated and analyzed with respect to the literature study on the four pillars of sustainability.

3. Case area

The settlement in the case area was believed to be initiated by the arrival of a group of people that included those who identified themselves as Aabuje khalak, Kajikari khalak, Gothe khalak. The Aabuje khalak, Kajikari khalak were gold-smiths and the Gothe khalak were iron-smiths. Agriculture was their

primary occupation.

The land that they used was not owned by any one the. When the documentation of land ownership was to be done, they claimed the land as their own. Hence, they have the ownership of the land contrary to the common notion of Dalits being associated with landlessness.

Currently believed to be the eighth generation of the original settlers, the Dalit groups residing in the Aapshwara community include Sunar and Biswakarma castes. Presently the agriculture as a primary economic activity has reduced to a great extent. The practice of raising goats and selling them for money is prevalent considering animal husbandry. The main source of income is remittance. According to a key informant, the chairman of the homestay, Mr. Resham B.K., “our generation has the first group of people who chose remittance as the main income source. The influence were the opportunities of foreign employment in the Gulf countries.” At least one male member of a household was found to be out of the village or the country to earn through labor. Hence the resources and potential of the case area were left unused.

Identifying the potential of available resources, an NGO, Hands-on institute, came up with the idea of establishing a homestay in the existing Dalit community with the intention of uplifting them from the already established social stereotypes. The case area of Aapshwara Dalit community homestay is included in two settlements on varying heights segregated by road as a boundary between them. The upper settlement was the Aapshwara tole and the lower one was the Cotton tole. 28 out of 57 HH in the Aapshwara tole and 7 out of 53 HH in the Cotton tole belonged to the Dalit community. With 9 homes registered, out of total 17 well-functioning homestay houses, 5 Dalit HH were in Cotton tole and 12 in Aapshwara tole.

According to Mrs. Madhumaya B.K. (an official acting member of the municipality), when the idea of homestay was initially pitched, the members of the municipality office were skeptic about the concept as the practice of ‘untouchability’ was still associated with the Dalit castes. The Dalit representative and chairman of the homestay Mr. Resham B.K. however saw a potential and decided to take on the responsibility. He convinced the Dalit members and the introduction of homestay became an intervention for the people involved.

Hands-on institute designed a step by step process to meet the ultimate goal of establishing the homestay and set up 10 target points to be met, one after the other. They are as follows:

a) Home stay committee : The formulation of a committee is an essential step according to the ‘Homestay Working Procedure, 2067’ formulated by the Nepal Government. An eleven-member committee was formulated by the community for the Dalit homestay that included 5 decision making members, 6 members and 9 advising members.

b) Training : In the request of Hands-on institute and the committee members, Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management (NATHM) organized voluntary a 7-day training program for the homestay operators. Theory and practical classes were given to 44 participants for cooking and hospitality. The participants were certified for successful completion at the end of the session.

c) List of homes and home owners : A list of 11 homes usable for homestay were identified by the Hands-on Institute. The availability of room and the condition of house were the basic physical considerations and the approval of the home owners for the expected tangible and intangible services were considered as well.

d) Home improvement work : A room in every house (that agreed to participate) was to be segregated for the guests. With funds from the municipality, 10 low beds were purchased. As the houses were traditional and old, regular cleaning, covering of ceilings were done. Refinishing and refurnishing of the rooms were done as well. Furthermore, toilets were repaired and bathrooms were newly constructed for 10 houses with a fund of 2.5 lakhs from the municipality office, specifically for the homestay.

e) Registration : The registration was done in 2067’ in Pokhara Tourism Board in 2016, by following the procedures as per the specifications mentioned in the ‘Homestay Working Procedure, It became the 63rd in registration and the 1st Dalit community led homestay of Nepal. Among the 11 identified homes, only 9 houses were officially registered as the remaining two did not have the required property papers.

f) Field visit : In order to explore the possibilities, a group of 19 people went for a field visit to the homestay in Sirubari. Here they were able to interact and learn with the people operating the business there.

g) Marketing : About dissemination and marketing,

‘Homestay working procedure, 2067’ states that Nepal Tourism board and VDC will coordinate with private travel and trekking agencies to disseminate and market the homestay by helping in production of hoarding board, signboard, brochure, poster, cd etc., by collaborating with NRIs, by advertising through websites, newspapers, radio, television, fairs, development of travel packages and a preliminary guide to the tour operators and journalists.

As a part of marketing and advertising the homestay use of both traditional and virtual media platforms were conceived. Sign boards were prepared to be allocated in different places, in and outside the village. Presently only two signboards have been placed at the village entrance and in the homestay location.

Furthermore, interviews of the chairman Mr. Resham B.K. was aired in local radio F.M. and in the local news as well. A national daily newspaper The Kathmandu Post published an article about the homestay. A promotional video was made and shared through an official page created in the social media. There were plans of advertising the homestay starting from the local television networks as well.

h) The guests : After the training the guests were arranged through the Hands-on institute as a part of their collaborative learning program. They were different international groups of university students and teachers. The homestay received its first independently acquired guests on January, 2019. They were a group of students from Kathmandu University. 280 national and international guests have been hosted until now.

i) Cultural preservation and skill improvement : As a part of conserving and practicing the tangible and intangible part of the culture, a community hall was established. The need of a community space for cultural activities and community meetings was felt not only for the residents but also for the guests. Funded by the community and donation, the community building construction was completed with labor aid from international university teachers and students.

The community hall area was used as a public space for communal activities. The space outside the community hall was used for welcoming guests with traditional dance and music. The interior walls of community hall are to be adorned with exhibits of Dalit history and the traditional skills, to become a sort of a museum space for the local people and visitors alike.

j) Formal inauguration : The formal inauguration part was the final and the only target left to be met. There were plans of making this a grand event by inviting the national and local political personalities along with people from the neighboring villages. The preparations of this phase were still underway.

The homestay was found to operate in order to meet the objectives defined by the ‘Homestay working procedure, 2067’ as follows:

- To help rural areas gain the benefits of tourism industry
- To get the rural population involved in tourism services
- To improve living standard of the rural community by increasing their sources of income
- To use the homestay operation as a medium of developing self-employment at rural and local levels
- To inform the tourists about rural lifestyle and culture
- To help the tourists experience homestay not only in terms of accommodation but also in tradition, art, culture and lifestyle

4. Findings and discussions

The findings from the data have been discussed as per the six phases used in the formulation of the questionnaire.

Phase - 1: The Arrangement

With the 9 targets complete, the homestay was equipped and prepared to operate. It has been 2 years since the registration of the homestay in 2073-08-25 BS. The guests received have been international guests arranged by the Hands-on institute. The University students who visited were a part of academic cultural exchange programs. People have also visited for work and research purposes.

Phase – 2: The Preparations

In order to visit the place, 37% of the Nepali respondents directly coordinated with the Hands -on institute. These guests visited for research and work. 25% of the respondents coordinated directly with the president of the homestay. Another 25% coordinated with their teacher who also coordinated with the president. The 13% of the respondents who coordinated with their friend also dealt directly with

the homestay. Hence for Nepali visitors, the homestay seems to have been directly responsible when the actual interaction is initiated. When the visit is confirmed, the homestay operators are gathered in the community building. They were informed about the number, arrival time, stay period and purpose of visit of the guests. The visitors are fairly and equally divided among them with consent of the whole community involved.

Phase – 3: The Arrival

The international guests arrive to Kathmandu and travel to the homestay in either a van or the tourist bus arranged by the Hands-on institute. The Nepali guests also arrange their commute with ease. However public bus service is also available in the area. A hiking route from Damuli bazar to the homestay area is present as well.

As specified in the ‘Homestay Working Procedure, 2067’, the whole Dalit community gathers in the community hall to welcome the guests who arrive in the homestay with garlands, tika, cultural music and dance performances whose responsibility is taken up by the women themselves.

Phase – 4: The Stay Period

Some of the points included as a part of being environmentally friendly home are related to the specifications of the ‘Homestay working procedure, 2067’ like: a. Toilet and bathroom - toilets should be properly facilitated and clean. - Separate bathroom or at least a private, closed bathing space - Bathroom should include water bucket, mug, soap, towel etc

b. Kitchen and eating facilities - Cattles should not be reared near the guest house/ room - The kitchen should not have too much smoke (use of improved cooking stove) - Proper water facility and provision of filtered and boiled water - Provision of properly cooked local food items - Proper sitting space for Nepali guests - If possible, provision of a small dining table - Availability of a menu with dishes and their respective price

c. health, hygiene and security - protection from mouse, mosquitoes, tick, flea etc. - living space should be away from foul smell or cattle shed - availability of primary health service in the community level - absence of open drains and sewerage

The alignment has been beneficial to the operators to achieve a proper ambience. As the practices are changed for the better, a lifestyle coherent with the one

similar to the requirement of this economic activity was established. However, points of improved cooking stoves, health facilities, water availability, food menu etc. have not been met.

With the accommodation to be extended in up to 17 houses, the capacity of 3 houses is 1 guest and that of 14 houses is 2 guests. During the stay, the women of the house become the prime service providers. 55% of the Homestay committee are females. Furthermore, 64% of the respondents belonging to the homestay settlement area were female. In almost all the households, the male members travel outside the village and even the country for employment making remittance the main source of HH income in the place. The president Mr. Resham B.K. mentioned that the improvement of the homestay as an economy may not bring back the men but will definitely empower the residing females.

According to the Hands-on institute, the introduction of homestay has led the operators to start their own kitchen garden. This practice has helped to make the food supply sustainable, not only for the economy but also for their daily lifestyle.

In terms of fuel preference, 4 young females out of 28 respondents said they would choose LPG over the traditional stove because it is easier and cleaner. However, all the respondents agreed to providing firewood cooked food to the guests because they believed it is tastier and better cooked.

Even though hygiene and sanitation have been said to be improved, the responses show that there is a significant level of dissatisfaction in these areas. The absence of health service in a closer proximity makes it difficult to deal with emergency.

‘Homestay Working Procedure, 2067’ specifies the following points to be included as a part of tourism activities: - Arrangement for the tourists to observe cultural heritage, museum, handicrafts, sightseeing, forest, animals and birds. - To involve the tourists in local agriculture, skills and crafts along with getting them to learn and experience lifestyles, art, culture etc

Children and young people in the area take the responsibility of guiding the guests through the village tours. The communication skill that they have was associated with the importance of education. Mr. Bijay Poudel mentioned that “children becoming interactive and social with the guests was one of the best transformations that I have seen in the village”. The women in the village understood the necessity of

having to communicate in the process and hence realized how important education would have been for them and will be for the younger members of the community. The homestay also offered skill sharing activities like mud jewelry making, basket weaving, metal works and music. The committee had plans to collect and exhibit historical and cultural characteristic edifices in the near future.

Phase – 5: The Return

The return commute was similar to the arrival commute. One of the respondents mentioned their visit to Bandipur and Pokhara after their stay ended. According to the president of the homestay Mr. Resham B.K. mentioned that “the road is a hiking route to Bandipur” suggesting that the homestay can be made an on-route stop for the guests.

Phase – 6: The Aftermath

The time interval between the arrival of guests was from 1 to 3 months. As the flow of guests was not continuous, the women claim to have forgotten the skills they were trained in due to lesser opportunity for practice. 75% of the respondents said they would recommend others to visit the place for its rural authenticity and promotion. The 25% wanted improvements in the hygiene conditions for them to come back or recommend the place to anyone. Hence the place needs a strong promotional campaign along with an effective and clean living space.

5. Conclusion

The intervention of homestay as an economic activity, in a tangible sense, has improved the physical condition of the house; clean surroundings, proper sanitation facilities, improved beddings and afforestation. In an intangible sense, the need of following the guidelines and the wish to serve the people has established behavioral transition in the residents of the Aapshwara community Dalit Homestay. These are exemplified in not only what they are practicing but in the expectations that they have considering awareness about need of education, opportunity of women empowerment, symbiotic living and mutual cooperation. It is however seen that the impact on the economic status of individual household is not significant as the operation has not been continuous. In spite of this fact, the women of the area have become more responsible and empowered in terms of making an impact in the

society. The economic activity has helped define a better lifestyle for the people whose sustenance will define the sustenance of Aapshwara community Dalit homestay.

6. Recommendations

Environmental aspect

Renewable energy technologies have a multiplier effect in spurring the economy and the development of not only the energy sector but also all the supporting activities related to such industry[10]. It is found that deployment of renewable energy use in rural areas has shown significant positive effects on income increase of rural households[9]. “...the fossil fuel-based and import oriented consumerism based economy cannot be successful today and in future”[13]

“A water harvesting system in which rain falling on a roof is led through connecting pipes into a ferro-cement water collecting jar”, as demonstrated in ICIMOD may be used in the area. “The technology was introduced in the Jhikhu Khola watershed to demonstrate an alternative source of water for domestic use (mainly drinking water). This technology is appropriate for scattered rural households in mountainous areas. The harvesting system consists of a catchment roof, conveyance pipes, and a storage jar. The pipes include a gutter system made from longitudinally split polythene pipe which has a flushing system that allows the system to be periodically flushed clean.” [16]

Furthermore, as heating of water takes up a lot of fuel, the respondents in a focus group discussion agreed to use solar water heaters. As the homes are at a farther proximity, the pathways are usually pitch dark at nights. The idea of using solar street lights were also agreed upon.

The practice of incineration of waste needs to be reduced. “It can increase the risk of heart disease, aggravate respiratory ailments such as asthma and emphysema, and cause rashes, nausea, or headaches, damages in the nervous system, kidney or liver, in the reproductive and development system.” [14]

Social aspect

“People are starting to believe in themselves” - Resham B.K., Chairman With the intervention of homestay, various positive changes were seen in the livelihood of

the villagers. As the Dalits are gaining confidence, this needs to be amplified with further training classes (first aid, disaster emergency actions) and English language classes. Furthermore, the marketing for guests need to be done, gradually independent of the Hands-on institute so as to make them self- sustained.

Economic aspect

The people in the village had an organized way of dealing with their monetary assets. The utilization of local labor i.e. women and materials needs to be promoted. Furthermore, independent marketing strategies involving the youth in the village needs to be done as well.

Cultural aspect

“Nepal with rich ancient cultures set against the most dramatic scenery in the world is a land of discovery and unique experience. For broad minded individuals who value an experience that is authentic and mesmerizing, Nepal is the ideal destination.” [17] The essence of a traditional rural Nepal livelihood can become the basis of nationally and internationally promoting the homestay. Hence the adulteration in its tangible and intangible aspects need to be checked.

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