

# Exploring the challenges in initiating community-based tourism: a case study of Thaa Guraidhoo, Maldives

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**ABSTRACT** *Community Based Tourism (CBT) has bloomed in the Maldives in the past decade. However, islanders have yet to explore CBT. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges in initiating CBT in Thaa Guraidhoo. In the Maldives, CBT is identified as “Local Island Tourism” (LIT), where guesthouses are run by families. For the year 2019, state 40% of all guesthouses are in Kaafu atoll. There are only 3 guesthouses in Thaa Atoll alone, indicating that there has been a lack of participation in CBT. Maldives is a country that focuses on selling its sun, sand, and sea (Ministry of Tourism Arts & Culture, 2012). However, with the country becoming more open to the idea of CBT, a study in this field is required. An exploratory research was conducted by collecting qualitative data through purposive sampling via interviews. An inductive approach, to some extent theory-driven, has been taken for the study. Four major factors were identified as challenges in CBT initiation. The study highlights a need for land use planning, a monitoring framework for tourism development and, public transport systems.*

**Keywords:** *Community Based Tourism, Local Island Tourism, sustainability, tourism development, cultural tourism*

## Introduction

Tourism industry in the Maldives started out in the 1970's, and it had taken over four decades for grassroots level tourism to make its way to the Maldives (Ministry of Tourism Arts & Culture, 2012). It was during this time in 1970's, global initiatives were taken to promote and enhance local participation in Community Based Tourism (Tamir, 2015). According to Ernawati et al. (2017), CBT is identified as an alternative for tourism, where the community actively participates in tourism whilst preserving cultural and natural environment (Tamir, 2015). Since the enactment of the Tourism Act 2/99 in 2008, the Maldivian government has allowed guesthouse businesses to start their operations on local islands, hence becoming the core of CBT in the Maldives (Ahmed, 2018).

Due to the development gap between the capital City of Male' and other islands, almost half of the residents of Thaa Guraidhoo, as well as other islands have migrated to Male City (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Guraidhoo, an island in Thaa atoll, is in close proximity to Maalifushi resort operated by COMO, which is the only operating resort in Thaa atoll.

Table 1  
 Number of accommodation facilities and bed capacity from 2014 to 2018, Source:  
 Ministry of Tourism (2019)

Type of Establishments	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018	
	Nos	Beds	Nos	Beds	Nos	Beds	Nos	Beds	Nos	Beds
Resorts / Marinas	111	24,031	115	24,877	126	26,933	135	29,977	145	32,137
Hotels	19	1,704	17	1,648	16	1,713	10	1,456	12	1,862
Guest Houses	220	3,199	313	4,621	393	6,034	458	7,304	521	8,563
Safari Vessels	161	2,739	170	2,939	144	2,694	133	2,518	153	2,857
<b>Total</b>	<b>511</b>	<b>31,673</b>	<b>615</b>	<b>34,085</b>	<b>679</b>	<b>37,374</b>	<b>736</b>	<b>41,255</b>	<b>831</b>	<b>45,419</b>

Statistics show that the number of guesthouse accommodations have gone up by 136% in the past 5 years in the Maldives. However, there is only three tourist

related establishments in the entirety of Thaa Atoll. Historically Thaa Guraidhoo has been a trading point for ships travelling to and from Male' as the island's harbour was built 20 years ago. The island has undergone a 45-hectare land reclamation project. CBT in context of the Maldives, can be defined as developing tourism opportunities for residents living in local islands in order to maximise capacity building whilst improving the quality of life of the locals with minimal negative impact on the three pillars of sustainability; environmental, economical, and sociocultural; (Ahmed, 2018). In doing so, CBT enables an authentic island-life experience to the guests. According to the latest published tourism master plan of the Maldives, guesthouses were operating on local islands even before tourist resorts were developed in the the Maldives back in the 1970's. However, since there were expected negative social impacts CBT could cause on these islands, operations of these tourist guesthouses were restricted to Male' only. Additionally, the tourism industry being largely dominated by private sector parties, and heavy emphasis on selling the Maldives for its sun, sand, and sea (Ministry of Tourism Arts & Culture, 2012), it is questionable whether the previous master plans have had a positive impact on the direction of tourism growth in Maldives.

## **Literature Review**

### **Defining Community Based Tourism**

A community approach to tourism or CBT was first explained by Murphy (1985), as cited in Álvarez-García et al. (2018), where components of tourism are closely related to the rural areas of disadvantaged countries which work towards poverty alleviation. According to Hall (1996), as cited in Blackstock (2005), CBT revolves around involving the host community of a destination during the planning and maintaining stages of tourism development for a greater sustainability via the tourism industry.

### **Success factors and issues related to CBT**

Karacaoglu and Birdir (2017), states that there are no studies that define the success factors of CBT development and that the perceived success factors of CBT initiatives are unique to each destination. However, Karacaoglu and Birdir (2017) agrees with Nitikasetsoontorn (2015), claiming that, for CBT to develop successfully and be beneficial to the community, the three aspects of sustainability should be actualised. Yet, Asker et al. (2010) and Tasci et al. (2013) as cited in Nitikasetsoontorn (2015), considers local ownership and innovation, collective responsibility and participation in decision making process, sharing of resources and benefits among members, management and leadership, partnership with outside affiliations, achieving distinction, and achieving authenticity as factors associated with the success of CBT.

On the other hand, due to the intricacy of CBT ventures, Rocharungsat (2008), as cited in Dodds et al. (2018) also argues that tourism development plans and community planning aspirations is most likely unachievable. de Groot (2015), as cited in Dodds et al. (2018), claims CBT as a complex process which has often under-achieved the ideal outcomes in practicality. In addition, Craig (2003), as cited in Blackstock (2005), states that CBT can be perceived as an "imposter" due to it being pushed as a neo-liberal agenda by economic obligations rather than upholding the values of empowerment and social justice. This is further elaborated

as a lack of transformative intent toward community development via CBT as it is showcased as a form of long-term survival of the tourism sector rather than local empowerment (Blackstock, 2005). Moreover, CBT initiatives do not take into consideration the constraints of local control as well as ignore the fact that communities will have internal power struggles thus perceiving local communities as homogeneous blocks (Blackstock, 2005 as cited in Fathi et al., 2018).

### Community Based Tourism in the context of Maldives, Thaa Guraidhoo

According to Ahmed (2018), some form of CBT has reached to all of the 202 inhabited islands. This window of opportunity was opened to local islands with the passing of the Tourism Act Law No. 2/99, permitting locals to establish tourism based lodging facilities within local islands after registering at the Ministry of Tourism. Additionally, Jamal (2007) have concluded the importance of land use planning in tourism development in SID's such as the Maldives. The Maldives is currently in the process of developing land use plans on individual islands (Bertaud, 2002 as cited in Jamal, 2007). With reference to Gunn (1994), as cited in Jamal (2007) tourism developers, important stakeholders, organizations and planners, existing tourism businesses, and resident groups need to be involved in land use planning or development of destination zone planning. Yet, even after a decade later, there has been no officially recognised land use plan developed and published for the island of Thaa Guraidhoo as of June 2021 (Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, 2021).

### Challenges in initiating CBT (Conceptual framework)

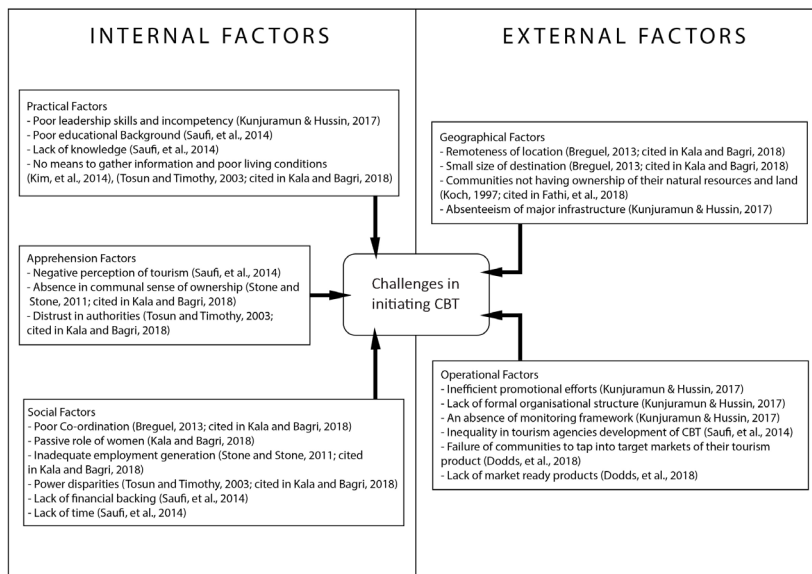


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework, Source: Modified from Tosun (2000), Kunjuraman and Hussin (2017), Kala and Bagri (2018).

### Internal Factors

Practical factors include poor leadership skills and incompetency (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017), poor educational background, lack of knowledge (Saufi et

al., 2014), poor living conditions, and no means to gather information (Kim et al., 2014), (Tosun & Timothy, 2013 cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018). Social factors include poor co-ordination (Breguel, 2013 cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018), passive role of women (Kala & Bagri, 2018), inadequate employment generation (Stone and Stone, 2011, as cited in Kala and Bagri, 2018), power disparities (Tosun and Timothy, 2003, as cited in Kala and Bagri, 2018), lack of financial backing, lack of time (Saufi, et al., 2014). With this, negative perception of tourism (Saufi, et al., 2014), absence in the communal sense of ownership (Stone & Stone, 2011 cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018), distrust in authorities (Tosun & Timothy, 2003 cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018), all contribute to apprehension factors.

### **External Factors**

External factors include geographical factors such as remoteness and small size of a destination (Breguel, 2013 cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018), communities not having ownership of their natural resources and land as poor communities having difficulty in attracting investors to build necessary infrastructure (Koch 1997, as cited in Fathi et al., 2018), and the absenteeism of major infrastructure (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). Operational factors include inefficient promotional efforts, lack of a formal organisational structure, an absence of monitoring framework (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017), inequality in tourism agencies development of CBT (Saufi et al., 2014), failure of communities to tap into the target market of their tourism products, and a lack of market ready products (Dodds et al., 2018).

## **Methodology**

### **The Research Design**

This research follows an inductive approach, which is theory driven and reflected upon the conceptual framework. A case study method is used as a research strategy as there is a need to find out the case or phenomena that is occurring in the island of Thaa Guraidhoo where people are hesitant to participate in CBT. Mono-method has been adopted as a research choice since the research is purely qualitative. Data collection included just one-on-one discussions.

### **Sampling**

For the data collection process, interviews were conducted with participants from 5 different segments. The 5 areas are Island Council heads (segment A), business entrepreneur (segment B), employee currently working in the tourism industry (segment C), person from the community working in another sector currently residing in the island (segment D), and a person from the local community who is currently residing in Male' (segment E). Council heads are an important part of making major decisions among the community. Interviewee B was included as usually entrepreneurs will be the ones with major financial backing and open to new business ideas. Interviewee C is required for the need to understand the thoughts and opinions from the perspective of a person working in the Tourism industry and how their answers vary from the other participants. Finally, interviews from participant's D and E are necessary with the need to identify how much the perception between the two participants vary as the respective participants reside in different islands. Whether a difference in the geographical location plays a role

in their ideas towards questions asked in the interview. Hence, the sample for this research can be considered heterogeneous as people that are working in different sectors make up the population of these groups. Additional interview for each segment was carried out to ensure data saturation. Table 3 (Appendices) shows the question guideline followed in the interviews. The questions were somewhat altered in context of the segment who are being interviewed and the questions were asked in Dhivehi language, which was later changed back to English. Each interview was between 30-40 minutes.

### **Data collection methods**

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted via the app “Google Meet” or phone calls. In order to gather data for the research, the 10 participants was interviewed in the form of one-on-one. Questions were repeated along with probing questions to further understand the answers given by the participants. A moderator was present in the discussions.

### **Data analysis methods**

A theory driven approach was taken for the data analysis. Data was grouped and categorised according to the themes that emerged. Pattern matching was carried out and explanations were built. Triangulation and discourse analysis was conducted. QDA Miner Lite software was used to organise the data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Internal factors**

A lack of leadership skills from the stakeholders and lack of formal organisational structure in the development of community work is identified as factors which inhibit CBT initiation. Moreover, findings reflect that there are power disparities among the community which prevents participation initiating CBT ventures. Therefore, in the case for Thaa Guraidhoo, CBT ventures have not been initiated as the stakeholders have exhibited poor leadership skills and having conflicts with community members and minimal effort in developing CBT.

Participant A1 went on to claim that the locals need assistance from experts in the government or private sector regarding CBT initiatives. In addition, other than through the use of internet, participants feel that there aren't many ways that they can gather information regarding CBT. These findings align with findings from Saufi et al. (2014), as lack of knowledge regarding the tourism industry is a factor which proves to be a challenge in starting CBT. Furthermore, these findings align with the work published by Kim et al. (2014), Tosun and Timothy (2013, cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018), as there are minimal means to gather information from the authorities.

Participant E2 states that a lot of the infrastructural development work such as harbour, school, and college, has been done by the islanders as a community effort which was prior to the first multi-party election in the Maldives back in 2008. Participant A1 explains that the community works such as making of fish related products and the operations of the women's café are still present. According to Breguel (2013, cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018), poor co-ordination and lack of cohesion among community members hinder CBT initiation. It can be concluded that the political tension among the locals have slowed developmental growth of

the island. This could have most likely been a reason why CBT ventures on the island has not been explored as it requires a high degree of co-ordination and social cohesion in order to be successful.

### **External factors**

A lack of scheduled public transport system in between atolls have been a major challenge to the development of all the islands along with the high cost of domestic flights. This is reflective of the conceptual framework proposed by Breguel (2013, cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018), that identifies remoteness of the destination as a factor preventing the startup of CBT ventures. It can be understood that the geographical location is a challenge to initiate CBT.

Locals require permit from the Island Council to conduct infrastructural work in the reclaimed area. The lack of a land use plan inhibits any development work from being conducted in the reclaimed area. According to Interviewee A2 and E1, Thaa Guraidhoo is one of the most developed islands in terms of infrastructure, land, natural resources and facilities in the entirety of the atoll. However, all of the participants have raised their concerns regarding the harbour which has been deteriorating. According to Koch (1997, cited in Fathi et al., 2018), communities not having ownership of their land is a factor that prevents CBT initiation in a community, which aligns with the findings from Thaa Guraidhoo. Additionally, absenteeism of major infrastructure as mentioned by Kunjuraman and Hussin (2017), was identified at Thaa Guraidhoo.

Findings indicate no initiatives were taken by the operational resort in the atoll to conduct to conduct CSR activities on the island. Participant A2 elaborated that the Council has filed an official complaint to the Ministry of Tourism regarding this issue, and the ministry has done their survey promptly. However, the issue still persists. In addition, respondents believe that the resort avoids bringing tourists to the island. Furthermore, during the time COMO Maalifushi resort was first opened, people conducted promotional activities such as exhibitions at the school, as well as welcoming tourists to the island. However, as tourists rarely visit the island, people do not invest their time and effort for marketing initiatives. It can be concluded that COMO Maalifushi management has put up barriers between the island and the guests visiting the resort. These visitors are the most readily available target market for Thaa Guraidhoo to initiate CBT. No improvement from the resort after the survey from MOT indicates a lack of monitoring framework from the government side. Due to unavailability of the target market the islanders have given up on conducting promotional efforts to attract tourists for CBT. This aligns with Kunjuraman and Hussin's (2017) observation that CBT initiation in a community is prevented by the lack of monitoring framework on such ventures by government bodies. Additionally, a failure to tap into the target market (Dodds et al., 2018) is evident from these findings. Lack of marketing and promotional activities as mentioned by Kunjuraman and Hussin (2017) are thus observed in Thaa Guraidhoo.

People believe that it is the responsibility of the government to conduct information sessions and capacity programs. It has been over 10 years since CBT first started in Maldives. Yet, there is evidence that the local population have not received any sort of capacity building programs with respect to CBT. Thus, it can be concluded that the authorities have failed to spark interest among locals in CBT, indicating inequality in tourism development from the government side. Majority of the participants have stated that, self-interest to dive into the field of

CBT is not exhibited by many people. Therefore, inequality in tourism agencies in developing CBT in a destination is a reason why community has not invested in CBT ventures (Saufi, et al., 2014). This factor has thus been exhibited in the island of Thaa Guraidhoo.

### **New findings**

According to the participants, CBT will lead to an economic growth within the island and an abundance of foreign exchange within the community. Locals want to explore CBT due to the land reclamation project. The islanders understand negative impacts of CBT, therefore believes a designated location away from residential areas should be selected for CBT development. Findings have highlighted that a portion of the 45 hectares of reclaimed land should be used to develop CBT. According to Saufi et al. (2014), negative perception towards tourism was a factor which prevents community participation in tourism. Additionally, Breguel (2013, cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018), have explained that the small size of land has been a factor which inhibits the start of CBT. Nevertheless, these two factors are not observed from the island.

Contrary to key literature, most participants believe that the government authorities will assist them in entrepreneurial work. Respondents have stated if the Island Council, social committees, or local entrepreneurs approach the government bodies, they are likely to get some form of support. It is evident that all the previous governments have provided funds for the development of the island. The government granted funds when the harbour was initially developed for the island. According to Tosun and Timothy (2003, cited in Kala & Bagri, 2018), one of the major inhibitors of community participation in CBT is the distrust they have towards government authorities. Moreover, a lack of financial backing from the government authorities is reported in the literature as a hindrance to the startup of CBT ventures (Saufi et al., 2014). However, these factors do not seem to apply for the island of Thaa Guraidho and contradicts the literature.

From the findings it was evident that the community as a whole have educated youth who can lead CBT. The people on the island are financially independent. Residents also have a lot of spare time, and are ready to make more time for CBT activities if it starts in the island. Therefore, it can be understood that collectively the island has reached at least three levels on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Key literature by Saufi et al. (2014) indicates poor educational background was one of the reasons which prevent the initiation of CBT. Additionally, poor living conditions as stated by Kala and Bagri (2018, citing Kim et al., 2014; Tosun & Timothy, 2003), are not observable in Thaa Guraidhoo. Furthermore, lack of time as stated by Saufi et al. (2014), does not seem to be an issue for the community of Thaa Guraidhoo.

Findings show that the women actively participate in the development work and successfully leading entrepreneurial ventures. Women of Thaa Guraidhoo manufacture and produce many products that can be considered as a souvenir for tourists along with the existing natural products for CBT. Community work in the island have also created employment generation for the women of the island even though it does not generate a significant revenue for them. Thus the finding challenges Kala and Bagri's (2018) assertions that a passive role of women, a lack of communal sense of ownership, and inadequate employment generation could be limiting factors in the initiation of CBT. Furthermore, Lack of market-ready products available within a destination have posed as a barrier to introducing CBT

as stated by Dodds et al. (2018). Nevertheless, these factors are not exhibited in the island of Thaa Guraidhoo.

The findings from this study, identifying the challenges in initiating CBT in Thaa Guraidhoo, is summarized in Figure 2. According to the participants CBT will lead to an economic growth within the island and an abundance of foreign exchange within the community. Locals want to explore CBT due to the land reclamation project. The islanders understand negative impacts of CBT, therefore believes a designated location remote to where residential areas should be selected for CBT development. Findings have highlighted that a portion of the 45 hectares of reclaimed land should be used to develop CBT. According to Saufi et al. (2014), negative perception towards tourism was a factor which prevents community participation in tourism. Additionally, Breguel (2013, cited in Kala & Bargi, 2018), have explained that the small size of land has been a factor which inhibits the start of CBT. Nevertheless, these two factors are not observed from the island, thus this is a new finding.

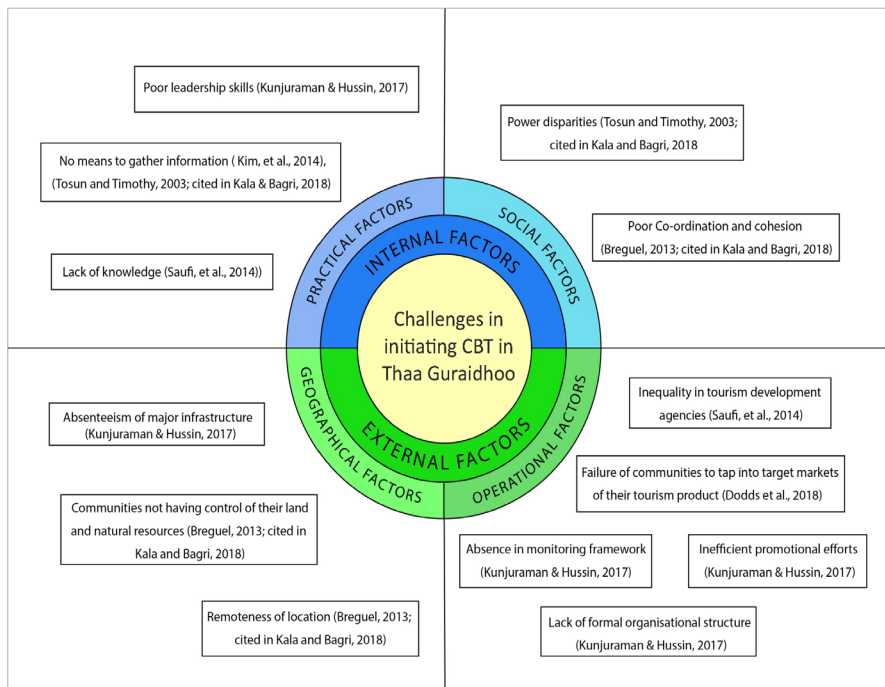


Figure 2. Modified Conceptual Framework for the study

### Limitations of The Study

Empirical publications on CBT are limited in the Maldives. As this research is solely done for the island of Thaa Guraidhoo, it cannot be generalised. Time constraints were a major limitation as this was an academic research. It is likely

that the participants may lack in knowledge on the subject. Political ideologies could likely cause participant bias when answering questions in the interviews. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not safe to travel to the islands to collect data. Hence, some participants were uncomfortable in using online applications for interviewing.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

The community itself is powerless to overcome the major barriers observed in the island. The island councils need to have more authority with regard to the use of land. Nevertheless, there are no governing laws or policies to operationalise local participation in tourism development, even though community participation is encouraged in the fourth Tourism Master Plan. Thus, the involvement of public and private sector entities as well as NGOs for capacity building is a necessity to bridge the gap regarding the aforementioned concerns (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). A collective effort from the stakeholders could act as a catalyst to overcome power disparities and political differences. A highly functional public sea transport system on sea within the atoll, and via seaplane services between atolls is essential to overcome the geographical challenges due to the dispersion of islands. Moreover, the restrictive and lack of interest to participate in CBT from locals have stemmed from the poor connection between Thaa Guraidhoo and COMO Maalifushi resort. Due to the absence of a monitoring framework in CBT development by authorities, the entire community is unable to achieve inclusive growth from tourism. Significant importance must be given to this topic as Maldives itself is trying to figure out ways to ensure a sustainable future for tourism development. Expansion of the study to cover the said issue for the entirety of Maldives is required. Developing a framework to overcome these factors are necessary to achieve holistic growth, reduce leakages and increase the multiplier effect within the economy. Therefore, it is imperative to link the findings in such literature and apply them within the context of Maldives to achieve new tourism milestones.

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