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Employment traits within the Zanzibar tourism industry

Abstract

Driven by foreign investment, tourism in the archipelago of Zanzibar has experienced substantial growth over the last thirty years. Even though it was meant to promote local employment and economic development, foreigners – and Europeans in particular – remained the largest investors as well as the primary beneficiaries. Tourism development has created new employment opportunities, but it has only benefited the local communities to a certain extent, in part because it has promoted a considerable migration of workers from mainland Tanzania. Nowadays, Tanzania mainlanders constitute a very large share of workforce employed in the Zanzibar tourism sector. Focusing on foreign managers and entrepreneurs (who play a major role in the industry), this study investigates the mechanisms that influence recruitment of the workforce in the tourism formal sector. This research suggests that the recruitment process undergoes dramatic alterations within the inherent economic, political and religious context in a far more tangled way than has been hitherto portrayed.

Key words: tourism; employment; mobility; migration; Zanzibar; Tanzania

Background

In the archipelago of Zanzibar (politically part of the United Republic of Tanzania), as has frequently been observed in developing countries (Mowforth & Munt, 2003), tourism development has marginalized local communities (Lange & Jiddawi, 2009). Driven by foreign investment, tourism has experienced substantial growth over the last thirty years: official tourists arrivals increased from 19,368 in 1985 to 56,415 in 1995, and reached 132,836 in 2010 (ZCT, 2011), and in 2013, Zanzibar welcomed 181,301 tourists (ZATI, 2014). Tourism developed in a restricted way and, even though it was meant to promote local employment and economic development, foreigners – and Europeans in particular – remained the largest investors as well as the primary beneficiaries (Meyer, 2013; Keshodkar, 2013). Furthermore, a considerable percentage of the employment opportunities created by the sector has been enjoyed by migrants. More specifically, Tanzania mainlanders constitute a very large share of workforce employed in the Zanzibar tourism sector (ACRA, 2009; Lange & Jiddawi, 2009; Gössling & Schulz, 2005). The official statistics on tourism employment are neither comprehensive nor reliable; however, some studies have provided interesting insights. According to a study conducted by SNV, VSO and ZATI (2010), Zanzibaris hold the minority of managerial positions in hotels and restaurants (46% and merely 11% respectively), but the majority of unskilled positions (83% in hotels and 70% in restaurants). The migrant presence is also significant in the informal tourism sector (ITS). Research by Gössling and Schulz (2005) estimates that about three-quarters of the total workforce in the ITS was made up of migrants. The varying levels of education and training between migrants and Zanzibaris are the most frequently-mentioned reasons used to justify the conspicuous presence of non-Zanzibaris in the sector (Anderson & Juma, 2011; Lange & Jiddawi, 2009). Zanzibaris seem to

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be at a disadvantage, since, despite the central role of tourism in the archipelago's economy, the supply of training institutes is still inadequate (Sharpley & Ussi, 2012).

This article investigates the mechanisms that influence and determine the recruitment of the workforce in the Zanzibar tourism formal sector. The focus is on employers, who, as MacKenzie and Forde (2009) have remarked, are often neglected in the literature on migrant work and employment, despite being crucial actors in the labour market.

Method

For the purpose of this study, data were collected by semi-structured interviews (n=16), which were conducted in 2013. Interview candidates were identified by the author with the support of aid workers and informed stakeholders working in the tourism industry.

As previously mentioned, Europeans play a major role in the tourism industry in Zanzibar. This research focuses on these foreign workers, and therefore only deals with the formal tourism sector (defined as including officially registered economic activities), in which their role is crucial.

The author interviewed nine women and seven men from different age groups (30 - 40: 7; 40 - 50: 6; 50 - 60: 2; 60 - 70: 1), all Europeans (Italians and British) who had moved to Zanzibar at different times but had been living there for at least five years. Besides gender, age and length of stay, other elements were taken into consideration in the choice of respondents, such as fluency in the local language, which can be considered to be an indicator of integration (Hofstede, 1994). All of them are able to communicate in Swahili (though with different levels of fluency).

All the respondents work, or have worked, with both locals and mainlanders, and are involved in the recruitment and management of human resources. Some are entrepreneurs, while other are managers, and they work in the major tourism areas in Zanzibar: the North, the East Coast and Stone Town. This variety was chosen so as to include different kinds of accommodation, and bars and restaurants.

The interviews lasted for an average of an hour and a half. There were no communication problems, as the languages of both respondents and the interviewer, English and Italian, matched. The purpose of the interviews was communicated in general terms ('research on tourism employment') and anonymity was assured. Most respondents agreed to being recorded. Notes were taken during those interviews that were not recorded.

The interview began with an initial series of questions that sought to collect general information on the respondents (such as age and working experience) and reconstruct their personal and professional experience in Zanzibar. The focus then shifted to the work force and its recruitment (for example, the level of satisfaction regarding employees and performance, the way they recruit personnel as employers and the elements they take into account when recruiting). Given the evidence of a significant presence of migrants among employees (despite the high level of local unemployment), respondents were asked to comment on this phenomenon and its potential consequences and implications, if in fact the respondents thought there actually were any. Specific questions were asked on the mainlanders' performance and behaviours as employees and on the possible differences between them and locals. Similarly, the respondents were asked about the low level of participation by locals in the tourism industry as employees and the reasons behind this.

The transcriptions and notes were reviewed by the author, who then identified the main thematic ideas and began to code the text. The codes were principally created from transcriptions and notes, but

were also derived from the research questions and the literature on tourism development in Zanzibar. Once the data had been coded, the author retrieved similarly coded data and explored connections, similarities and differences across cases (Gibbs, 2008).

Findings

The employers interviewed for this research confirmed that locals and migrants differ in terms of the training they have received, and that this plays a role in the recruitment process. Together with training, the interviewees also acknowledged that education influences recruitment. According to the respondents, migrant workers are more 'employable' because they generally have a higher level of education (English language, mathematics skills and the like). More so than vocational training, which is also very much needed, it is education that seems to be essential in order to improve the employability of Zanzibaris. In the eyes of the respondents, mainlanders are often better trained, but above all they are on average more educated; however, even though they may be more skilled and educated on average, the general level of the labour force recruited in Zanzibar rarely meets the recruiters' needs.

Training and education are recognized by respondents to be factors that undoubtedly influence the recruitment process, but they are not the only ones, and not necessarily the most important. The factor most frequently mentioned by respondents is 'commitment' (which is also referred to as 'motivation', 'devotion to work' and 'work ethic'). In their experiences, mainlanders seem to be more motivated than Zanzibaris, which may explain their presence, the superior results they provide and their greater employability. When the interviewees were asked to explain the reasons behind the varying degrees of commitment, the answers began to vary. As several of them pointed out, living on the wages offered by the formal tourism sector alone is extremely difficult, and consequently, low wages neither create attachment nor stimulate commitment. For this reason, too, according to some respondents, Zanzibaris tend to be poorly 'motivated'. Whilst mainlanders will tend to keep their jobs under any circumstances, it is more common for Zanzibaris to leave one job to try to find another, or to spend part of their time on other income-generating activities, both formal and informal. One aspect that was revealed during the interviews is the greater freedom of choice that respondents attribute to Zanzibaris because of their social network and family support. It must be highlighted that the lower level of commitment respondents attributed to Zanzibaris referred solely to men. On the contrary, respondents experience with Zanzibaris women is definitely more positive, at least on that matter.

Another issue that emerged during the interviews is religion, insofar as religious and cultural experience and beliefs can influence employability. In fact, Meyer (2013) attributes the lack of skilled personnel in Zanzibar also to 'the restrictions of Muslim tradition' (p. 786). A similar consideration by SNV, VSO and ZATI (2010) suggests that cultural and religious issues of Muslims participating directly in the tourist industry can 'reduce the desire or suitability for such a career' (p. 10). Respondents' opinions differ on this, however, and the Muslim faith of the Zanzibaris led to disagreements. According to most of the respondents, mainlanders seem to be less influenced by religion and more culturally 'open-minded'. Interestingly enough, some respondents believe that over the years, some Muslim Zanzibaris have made an instrumental use of religion, imposing conditions that are not always compatible with the tourism sector. In their opinion, this misuse has contributed to the creation of a negative image of Muslim workers among both recruiters and employers.

Some categorically stated that many western employers prefer mainlanders because of their non-Muslim beliefs. Nevertheless, employers do not think they are influenced by religious background in

the recruitment process. A few cases where Islam affected the work environment were reported (a chef who refused to cook pork, a waitress who was not willing to wash glasses that had been used for alcohol or to wear trousers), but these were isolated examples. Almost paradoxically, among the respondents who affirmed that religion was not relevant in staff recruitment, most referred to their employees in religious terms, using the terms 'Christians' and 'Muslims' instead of 'mainlanders' and 'Zanzibaris'. While Muslims are estimated to account for 35% of the whole Tanzanian population (against 30% of Christians), labelling the relationship between locals and immigrants as being based on religion can be very misleading.

According to several interviewees, besides training and education and economic and religious issues, both the presence of migrants and the relatively low employment among Zanzibaris are also connected with other factors. For instance, some employers state that they have hired people with whom they had previously worked elsewhere (on the island, on the mainland or in Kenya). This practice is apparently quite common, especially with reference to positions requiring higher qualifications. In these cases, there is no on-site recruitment.

Other respondents reported another unique practice that occurs especially in large hotels: recruitment often lies in the hands of mainlanders – because Zanzibaris rarely hold important positions – and they tend to hire other mainlanders. According to these respondents, Kenyan entrepreneurs, who are beginning to play a very significant role in Zanzibar's tourism development, are employing a similar dynamic. Those who own and manage large-scale accommodation properties tend to prefer Kenyan staff, as also reported in Meyer's research (2013).

In addition, cases of corruption are far from rare: some respondents told of Tanzanian managers and recruiters who demand some kind of personal profit in return for a job. One interviewee had no hesitation in defining it as 'a real mafia'. The issue of corruption is an endemic problem that pervades both the Zanzibari and Union socio-political contexts (LHRC & ZLSC, 2014).

Conclusion

The literature on tourism development in Zanzibar tends to connect both migrants presence and the relatively low employment levels among locals mostly to different levels of training and education. The research confirms that both these features play an important role in recruitment, and that mainlanders seem to be advantaged, because they are more highly-trained and better educated on average. The current learning landscape does not meet the standard required to access the tourism sector.

Despite previous research indicating Islam as influencing employment in tourism (Meyer, 2013; SNV, VSO & ZATI, 2010), in the employers' experience, neither Islam nor Muslim traditions seem to affect the work environment. Furthermore, Zanzibaris of Muslim faith – men and women – appear not to be uncomfortable working for and with Westerners and therefore being exposed to habits that are not always in line with the prescriptions of Islam. According to some interlocutors, if religion plays a role in Zanzibar tourism industry at all, it is due more to Western anti-Islamic prejudices than it is to Muslims refraining from working in the sector.

Probably the most striking outcome of this research that has not previously been covered by previous surveys is the differences recorded within the recruitment process. Employers reported cases where mainlanders or foreigners act as recruiters, consequently reshaping the competition because their preferences are based on 'belonging' rather than personal skills, vocational experience or education. This aspect should, however, be the concern of both local authorities – which should give Zanzibaris the

opportunity to aspire to skilled positions through adequate education and vocational trainings – and employers, who should pay more attention to local employee participation. Similarly, the problem of the weak motivation attributed to locals will not be resolved unless the quality of jobs improves significantly, and the authorities are committed to focusing on low wages, security and economic conditions in general.

This study offers a number of interesting elements for analysis, although it cannot fully satisfy the demand for further research, both quantitative and qualitative. The apparently poor statistical data on employment in the tourism industry is undeniably a critical issue, which concerns Zanzibar as well as other developing and developed countries. Future quantitative research may contribute towards filling this gap, even though the local authorities must improve their capacity to collect data on the labour force; improved knowledge of tourism employment is essential for planning any kind of possible intervention. Future research should also provide more detail on the attitudes of non-Western investors or managers as employers. As highlighted by Meyer (2013), and as this research confirms, the role of Kenyans, for instance, has grown and, is definitely worthy of more attention.

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