

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES OF TOUR GUIDES IN MAJOR TOURIST DESTINATIONS OF AMHARA NATIONAL REGIONAL STATE OF ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT

Tour guides play a paramount role in boosting tourism development by providing quality services to tourists and thereby promoting the revisit intention of the tourists at destinations. The quality of tour guides' professional services is an important indicator to successful destination marketing because it influences tourists for the choice of destination, the consumption of products and services, and their decision to stay longer and to return. This study tried to investigate the professional competencies of tour guides in terms of their knowledge, skills, and personal qualities at the four tourist destinations of Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) namely, Gondar, Debark, Bahir Dar, and Lalibela. The study employed a cross-sectional mixed research approach. The target population of this study were international tourists and tourism culture and office experts in 2017/2018. Two-hundred twenty-eight tourists participated in this study. Quantitative data were gathered using Likert scale type questions to assess the level of tourists' perceived tour guides' professional practice and personal qualities. Qualitative data were collected using interview and focus group discussions to explore the major challenges tour guides have been facing in their professional practices. The findings of this study showed that tourists rated tour guides' general knowledge at low level. Similarly, they rated tour guides' intercultural communication skills/English language skills at low level. But they were perceived to have good understanding about destination-related products and services and the required rules and regulations of the attraction sites. The study also indicated that the tour guides had poor personal qualities on measures of sense of humor and understanding of the tourists' feelings and emotions. The result of the qualitative data analysis indicated that the major challenges related to tour guides' professional practice were lack of standard tour guide recruitment, absence of professional training, and poor monitoring and evaluation of performance of tour guides. This study recommended that tour guides have to receive on job-continuous training to promote their professional competence. The culture and tourism offices at each destination should closely follow up the performance of tour guides and take corrective measures when necessary.

Keywords: *Professional competencies, tour guides, tourists, tourist destinations*

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry has become among the major socio-economic sectors and the leading components of international trade in the world (UNWTO, 2014; WTO, 2002). Most governments encourage the tourism sector to generate employment opportunity, foreign exchange, and revenue for the government and for the local communities. It also plays a significant role in terms of conservation and promotion of natural and cultural resources. Tourism has also a catalyzing effect on the development of other sectors. In other words, tourism is a source of market for other economic sectors like trade and agriculture. Hence, tourism can be an important source of wealth for any country. For many countries it has become the primary source of income and wealth (Amogne, 2010; Endalkachew, et al., 2014).

The development of tourism is not uniform throughout the world since the benefits gained from it depend on many ascribing factors. Obviously, regions which have rich tourism resources and which have better development of the tourism sector are more benefited as compared to those which have few attractions and which are less developed in the sector tourism industry (WWTC, 2017). It is well known that Ethiopia has huge natural and man-made tourism resources which have the power to attract a considerable number of both foreign and domestic tourists. The cultural and natural tourist attraction features of Ethiopia include the castles, palaces, ancient churches and monasteries, wildlife, rivers and lakes, suitable climate, various fascinating landscape features, deserts, caves, forests, mineral water and hot springs, archeological sites, historical towns, monuments, traditional cultures and festivals. Ethiopia is the only African country to have registered 9 world heritage sites by UNESCO. Realizing the real importance of the tourism industry, tourism development endeavor in Ethiopia has more than four decades since the first public tourism office was established by the Ethiopian government of Emperor Haile Selassie I in the year 1966. Across the decades, the Ethiopian tourism industry has passed a lot of ups and downs.

Even though Ethiopia is endowed with cultural and natural attractions, these assets were not adequately promoted due to weak and traditional promotion strategy for several reasons. This in turn exposed them to gradual deterioration and hindered their contribution for the socio-cultural and economic developments of the country. Until recently tourism was not given due consideration as an important economic sector that contributes to the development of the country (ANRS BoCTPD, 2016).

The Amhara National Regional State which is one of the nine regional states of Ethiopia is famous for its cultural and natural attractions which include three of the nine world heritage sites of the country namely, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, the castles of Gondar and the Simien Mountains National Park. Besides, it houses ample tourism resources such as Lake Tana and its historic monasteries, the Blue Nile Falls just to mention a few. The region is truly an area of great tourism potential and that recently there has been a promising growth in terms of economic benefits to those who are either directly or indirectly engaged in, but then, arguably, the sector is still at its infant stage due to various reasons (Sisay, et al., 2019).

Among others, one of the very critical reasons which serve as a bottleneck for tourism development in developing countries like Ethiopia is inability to cope up with the ever increasing expectations and needs of the tourists in the destinations. There is a common consensus among scholars that tourism development would be boosted if destinations could offer quality services sustainably. In this context, tour guides as key representatives of destinations play a significant role on tourist satisfaction and re-visit intention. Tour guides are frontline employees in the tourism industry who play a significant role in terms of effective communication and provision of quality services at destinations. Delivery of quality service to tourists is not only essential to the business success of the company, but it is also significant to the image of the destination (Mehmet & Zafer, 2016). In spite of this, in the study area, empirical research has not been conducted so far in terms of assessing the professional competencies of tour guides from the perspective of international tourists in the major

destinations of Amhara National Regional State namely, Gondar, Simien Mountains National Park, Bahir Dar and Lalibela. Specifically, this research intended to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of tour guides' professional knowledge as perceived by tourists?
2. What is the level of tour guides' professional intercultural communication skills as perceived by tourists?
3. What is the level of tour guides' professional personal qualities as perceived by tourists?
4. What are the major challenges that tour guides encounter in their professional practices?

METHODS

This study aimed to assess the professional competencies of tour guides in the four major tourist destinations in Amhara National Regional State. The Region's Culture and Tourism Bureau has categorized the huge and diversified tourism resources of the region into four major tourist destinations namely, Gondar, Bahir Dar, Lalibela and Debarq. Hence, these tourist destinations were selected purposively as they have currently relatively high flow of tourists and/or tourist potential and hence assumed to have played relatively better contribution to the economic development of the region.

STUDY DESIGN

The study employed across-sectional mixed-research design. The design allows data collection to be done at a single point in time and is most appropriate for sample descriptive interpretations as well as determination of relationships between and among variables. Both quantitative and qualitative data were employed to analyze data to ensure the validity and reliability of the study.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population of interest was any international tourist who visited tourist attraction sites at the destinations in Amhara Region. As the exact numbers of visitors were not known beforehand, a convenience sample was chosen as a non-probability sampling technique. This implies that the respondents were chosen purely on the basis of their availability and willingness to complete the questionnaire.

The sample size of the study was determined using the sample formula of Alsalloum (2014). According to the author, when the number of target population is greater than or equal to 10,000, the formula below could be used. Accordingly, this study used a total of 228 international tourists to collect quantitative data.

$$N = \frac{Z^2 P (1-P)}{D^2} = n \geq \frac{(1.645)^2 (0.30) (0.70)}{(0.05)^2} \geq 227.30 = 228$$

DATA SOURCES

The researchers used both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were gathered from culture and tourism experts and officials, tourists and tour guides. Secondary data were collected from tourist suggestion boxes, articles, magazines and reports. Primary data collection tools such as interview and questionnaire were used to collect relevant and adequate data from tourists, tourism experts and officials.

LITERATURE

The International Association of Tour Managers (IATM) and the European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (EFTGA) (as cited in Mehmet & Zafer, 2016) define tour guide as: a person who guides groups or individual visitors from abroad or from the home country around the monuments, sites and museums of a city or region; to interpret and communicate in the language of the visitor's choice, the cultural and natural heritage and environment.

According to Okello and Grasty (2009), high levels of customer satisfaction have great impacts in increasing the number of repeated visits, influencing word of mouth recommendations and reducing customer complaints which are likely to undermine the organization's reputation. The competitiveness of the marketplace and the increased quality service expectations of customers have made service providers recognize the importance of customer satisfaction for future repeated and referral business (Bowie & Chang, 2005). Tour guides occupy a very special position in this system. In terms of organization, they are an essential part of the supply-side components. Their performance was found to have a

significant direct effect on tourist satisfaction with guiding service and an indirect effect on satisfaction with tour services and with tour experience (Mohammad et al., 2019).

Tour guides are one of the key front-line players in the tourism industry. Through their knowledge and interpretation of a destination’s attractions and culture, and their communication and service skills, they have the ability to transform the tourists’ visit from a tour into an experience. A knowledgeable and skillful tour guide is considered as one of the most important assets of the tourism industry in many regions across the world (Mehmet & Zafer, 2016). According to Cohen (1985), the two main functions of a tour guide in a specific destination are ‘pathfinder’ and ‘mentor’. He further distinguished four specific components of a tour guide’s role within the framework of the above mentioned big functions. These parts are instrumental, social, interactional and communicative. The instrumental component of the tour guide’s role is related with one’s own duty for the safe functioning of tour. Second, the social component is concerned with his or her own responsibility for the unity and moral of the touring party. Third, the interactional component refers to his or her own function as a middleman between his or her own party and the local population, sites, institutions and touristic facilities. In the fourth place, the communicative component relates to the tour guide’s role of inter-cultural interaction or communication related information to

tourists (Cohen, 1985). Others described tour guide’s role as ‘mediator’, ‘middleman’, or ‘culture broker’. These functions suggest that a tour guide acts as a cultural interface between the visitors and the host population and plays a vital role in interpreting the host culture to visitors (Huang, et al., 2010).

A guided tour is a special tourism product that is composed of many components organized and offered together by a tour operator (Bowie & Chang, 2005). The components of a guided tour include pre-arrival services, accommodation, restaurants, transportation services and the tour guide/tour leader (Xu & Chan, 2010). Tourists are accompanied by a tour leader or a tour guide during the on-tour process contrary to the independent travel, which is performed by the traveler himself/herself (Wang, Hsieh & Huan, 2010).

In spite of the complexity of determining tourist satisfaction with guided tours, Wang et al., (2007) report that the success of guided tour guides can be affected by their skill, knowledge and personal quality to collect information about customer satisfaction and the use of this information to improve service delivery (Öter, 2010). The aforementioned roles tell us that a tour guide serves as a bridge between tourists and the host population in disseminating the culture of the local communities to the former.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF TOUR GUIDES’ PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

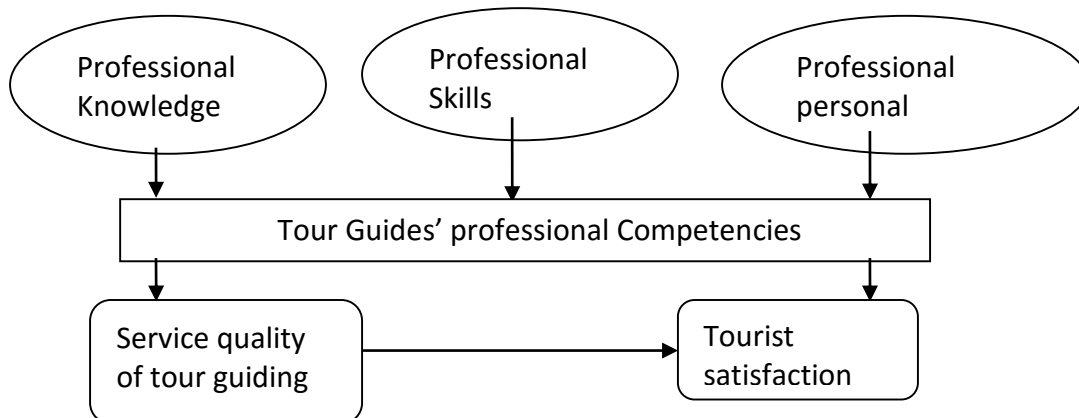


Figure 1: Competence tree of tour guides; based on our survey data, 2017/18

As it is depicted in the above figure, we can understand that as frontline workers and main pillars in the tourism sector, tourist guides could contribute an immense role to boost the industry by delivering professional knowledge, skills and personal qualities in the destinations. Delivering quality service has been regarded as an important indicator of tourist satisfaction in particular the overall success of tourism industry in general.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tour guides' professional knowledge, skills and personal qualities

Tourists travel all over the world and compare and evaluate the skills, knowledge, and personal qualities which constitute professional competencies tour guides from one country to another. Different empirical studies have contended that tour guides as frontline service providers of the sector have to show high standards of professionalism in the destinations by delivering quality services both to increase tourists' satisfaction and development of tourism. Cohen (2002) suggests that tour guides are responsible for tourist satisfaction with their service provisions at destinations.

Anyone who has taken a group tour knows just how important the guide is to the success or failure of the trip. A good tourist guide can elevate and enhance good experiences, and create cherished memories that will last a lifetime. A bad tourist guide can do the opposite, leaving guests feeling neglected and unimportant.

According to Heung (2010), being informal ambassador of the destinations, tourist guides are expected to have positive personal qualities like being honest, reserved, dignified and trustworthy. They also need to have general knowledge about tours that they are leading. Moreover, tourist guides should be versed in essential professional skills including the ability to communicate and present facts in the visitor's language, the capacity to lead and

organize groups, the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully, and the ability to tell stories.

In this framework, the level of tour guides' professional competencies in terms of knowledge, skills and personal qualities at the major destinations was evaluated based on the questionnaire provided to the sample tourists. In doing so, the tourists who visited the major destinations rated their views towards the professional competencies of the tour guides.

Tourists' views on tour guides' knowledge

What is great about the "local guide" quality is that in addition to the planned activities and routes, they can bring their own knowledge, experience and personal anecdotes to the tour. This can make a tour feel particularly special for guests who are looking for authentic experiences. Regardless of their place of birth and upbringing, the best tour guides have demonstrated deep knowledge of the history, geography, culture and traditions of tourist destinations. They can point out landmarks, tell stories about the characters who call the area home, identify wildlife, and explain dishes and wines. That depth of knowledge makes guests feel like they are getting their money's worth on a tour.

This section tried to evaluate the knowledge of tour guides from three dimensions namely, knowledge about the attraction sites, knowledge of rules and regulations, and general knowledge on tourism.

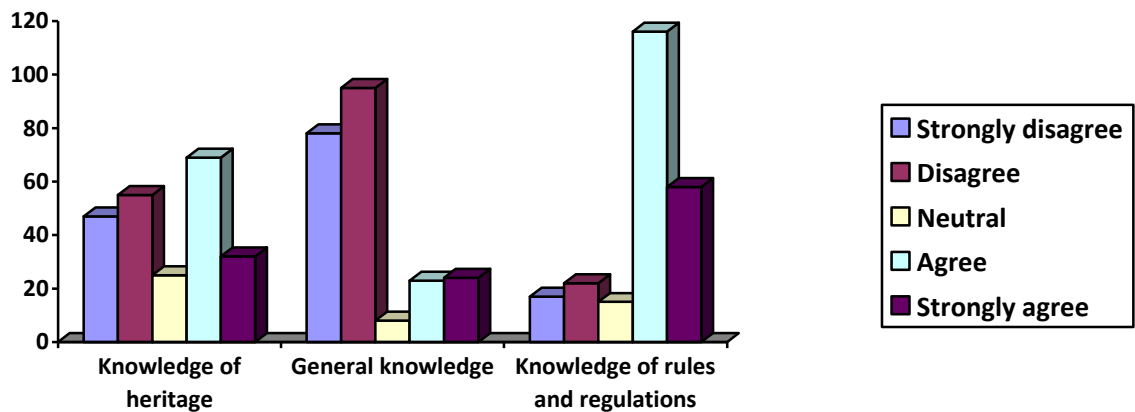


Figure 2: Tourists' views on the level of tour guides' professional knowledge, based on our survey data, 2017/18

As it can be depicted in the above bar chart, from the total sample tourist respondents (N=228), the highest number of the respondents, i.e., 111(49%) of them, reported the tour guides had enough knowledge about the attractions (cultural, historical, natural and others). Nevertheless, significant number of the respondents, i.e., 92 (41%) of the tourists, responded that the tour guides did not have enough knowledge about the attractions. The remaining sample respondents, i.e., 25 (11%) of them, remained neutral and hence they neither agreed nor disagreed with knowledge of the attraction sites that the tour guides have at the destinations. The tourists were also asked to rate their level of agreement as to whether or not the tour guides they had interactions with have general knowledge about different socio-economic and political issues about their own country as well as general knowledge about the world in genera. Hence, significant number of them, i.e., 173 (75.9%) of the tourists, disagreed with the statement while small number of them, i.e., 47 (20.6%) of them, expressed their agreement. As to whether or not the tour guides working at major destinations have enough knowledge about the rules and regulations about the attraction sites, the highest number of the sample tourists, i.e., 174 (75.6%) of them, agreed that the guides are well awareness of the different rules and regulations of the attraction sites.

Professional skills of tour guides

Many research results revealed that acquiring or demonstrating effective verbal and nonverbal intercultural communication skills, and organization and social networking skills lead to higher levels of tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty and more positive word-of-mouth mentions. The existing research works also suggest that possessing these professional skills contribute to destination image, marketing and branding. These skills also enhance tour guides' overall self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation. Hence, in their day-to-day interactions, to meet the expectations of tourists from different cultural, ethnic, social and religious backgrounds, tour guides should have professional (intercultural communication) skills.

Based on five measurement variables, the level of tour guides' professional skills was evaluated as follows:

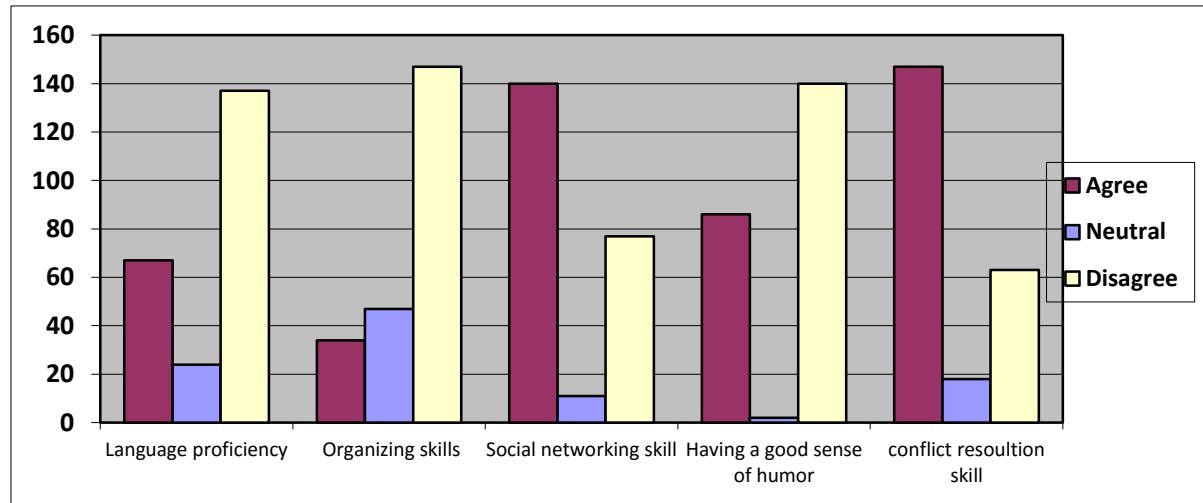


Figure 2: Tourists' views on the professional skills of tour guides, based on our survey data, 2017/18

Sample respondents were asked to rate the level of professional skills of tour guides working at the destinations. Hence, as it can be shown in the above chart, the majority of the tourists, i.e., 137(60%) of them, responded the tour guides had no good English language skills while almost half of them, i.e., 67(29.5%) of them, agreed with the statement: tour guides have good English language skills. But small number of them, i.e., 24(10.5%) of the tourists, neither agreed nor disagreed with the tour guides' English language skills. The second question in the same category was measure as to whether or not the tour guides have tour organization skills. Similarly, the highest number of the respondents, i.e., 147(64.5%) of them, disagreed with the tour organization skills of tour guides while 34(14.9%) of them replied the tour guides have good tour organization skills. The next question provided to tourists to rate their views was on the social networking skills of tour guides. In connection to this, significant number of respondents, i.e., 140(61.4%) of them, agreed with the statement: the tour guides have good social networking skills. However, 77 (33.8%) of them disagreed with the statement. A tour guide with a good sense of humor is expected to increase the enjoyment of the tour and temper any tensions that may arise. Hence, the highest number of the respondents, i.e., 140 (61.4%) of them, responded that the tour guides have no good sense of humor. while a little more than half of the respondents, i.e., 86 (37.7%) of them, indicated that they have a good sense of humor. The last question raised in this category for tourists was "Do tour guides have skills to resolve conflicts that arose or may arise during tour?" The highest number of respondents, i.e., 147

(64.5%) of them, agreed the tour guides have good conflict resolution skills while 63 (27.6%) of them disagreed with the statement that tour guides have good resolution skills. It was only the remaining smaller number of respondents, i.e., 18 (7.9%) of them, who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Moreover, results from the analysis of interview data collected from tourism officials and experts revealed that the tour guides are self-made rather than trained and/or educated. Almost all the tour guides are also monolingual in terms of speaking international/foreign languages such as German, Spanish, Italy and French. Next to their native language (Amharic), they speak only one international language, English language while they should be able to speak at least two international languages and hence become bilingual or multilingual. This in turn would be a constraint for effective intercultural communication since most of the tourists entering into the destination are mainly from Germany, Spain, and Italy. Of course, lack of English language skills is one of the most critical problems of tour guides which hinder them from giving quality services in the four tourist destinations of the region.

The FGD results also confirmed that in the major destinations, neither are the guides' associations well-coordinated nor are the members well aware of their roles in promoting the development of tourism. What matter most for them is to receive guiding fee; they do not care as to whether tourists visit villages or buy gift articles or not. Most of the time they even bargain with the sellers

and take the highest share from the sell of souvenirs. The other major problem in the destinations is conflict of interest among illegal tour guides, hotel owners and boat renters. The root cause for the problem is that they do not have the knowledge or the interest to work jointly under commission basis. They sometime have fallen in conflicting situations with tourist guides that come out side of the region and local guides of other destinations within the region. The problem seems to arise mainly because the inability of the culture and tourism office to develop rules and regulations and establishing good working systems concerning the spatial coverage one tour guide would be permitted to guide the tourists.

Personal qualities of the tour guides

Being one of the objectives of this study, the tour guides' professional behavior was examined and the results of the study are presented as follows:

Table 1: Tourists' views on the professional personal qualities of tour guides

Personal quality measurement of tour guides	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
The tour guides have good appearance	42 (18.5 %)	51 (22%)	24 (10.5%)	69 (30%)	42 (18.5%)
The tour guides are polite/respectful in their interaction	34 (15%)	61 (26.7%)	11 (4.8%)	65 (28.5%)	57 (25%)
The tour guides understand your feelings & emotions	103 (45%)	55 (24.1%)	14 (6.1%)	42 (18.5%)	14 (6.1%)
The tour guides are trustworthy	21 (9.2%)	13 (5.7%)	5 (2.2%)	113 (49.5%)	76 (33.3%)
The tour guides have passion to their work	42 (18.5%)	53 (23.2%)	7 (3%)	77 (33.7%)	49 (21.5%)

Source: Own survey data, 2017

For the health function of the tourism activity, personal qualities which are engrained in the minds of the tour guides play a paramount role. The way the tour guides behave in their interaction with the tourists can have a consequential effect on tourists' satisfaction and their revisit intention.

Consequently, as it could be understood from the above table, the highest number of respondents, i.e., 111 (48.5%) of the tourists, agreed that most of the guides are well-dressed and have good appearance while the second

Different researchers acknowledged that anyone who has taken a group tour knows how important the tour guide is to the success or failure of the trip. The general behavior of a guide, while on tour, in vehicles, in restaurants, dealing with tourists, is very important. Different tourists have different cultures, norms, values, beliefs and attitudes. For example, western tourists have specific ideas of how guides should behave. They give high value for being on time, being quick and well-organized. The ability to handle their social norms and expectations is a key to being an effective tour guide. Hence, a good guide can elevate and enhance experience, create cherished memories that will last a lifetime, and make guests want to return. A bad guide can do the opposite, leaving guests feeling neglected and unimportant (Mehmet & Zafar, 2016).

highest, i.e., 93 (40.5 %) of the tourists, disagreed with the statement. The other important variable considered was to evaluate tour guides' politeness in their interaction with the tourists or not. As a result, the highest number of tourists, i.e., 122 (53.5%) of them, agreed the tour guides are polite, whereas 95 (41.7 %) of the tourists disagreed with the statement. The third variable raised under this theme was to assess tour guides' understanding of the feelings and emotions of the tourists. As a result, the majority of the tourists, i.e., 158 (69.1%) of them, responded that the tour guides they met in the destinations

were not able to understand their feelings and emotions. However, relatively smaller number of respondents, i.e., 56 (24.6%) of them, agreed with the statement. Besides, the highest number of respondents, i.e., 189 (82.8%) of the tourists, agreed with the statement “The tour guides are trustworthy.”, whereas 34 (14.9%) of them disagreed with the statement. The other question raised for the tourists was “Do the tour guides have passion to their work?”. Consequently, the majority of them, i.e., 126 (55.2%) of them, responded that the tour guides have passion to their work while 95 (41.7%) of them disagreed with the statement.

CHALLENGES TO PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES OF TOUR GUIDES

From the document review and FGD results, this research has identified numerous challenges. Among the major challenges, the followings are some of the challenges which have adverse impacts on tour guides’ professional competencies:

- Poor criteria of tour guide recruitment: As a result of the decentralization, tourism administrations at a woreda level have more responsibilities on selection, training, examination, registration, licensing, and spot inspection of tour guides within their jurisdictions. In the study areas, culture and tourism offices have the mandate to undertake all the tourism activities in the region. But this study found out that the culture and tourism offices not competent enough to employ the recruitment criteria that could help them to admit tour guides to the profession. The office considered only interest, unemployment and any professional background as the criteria to admit the tour guides at the destinations. Adequacy of knowledge, skills, attitude and behavior has not been given a special place to recruit tour guides. This in return can have an unsympathetic effect on tourist satisfaction in particular and tourism development in general.
- Absence of short and long-term trainings: Provision of continuous training on professional skills, and knowledge for tour guides has not been given attention by the concerned stakeholders.
- Absence of continuous monitoring and evaluation on the performance of tour guides.

- Poor quality assurance mechanisms.
- Conflict of interest among tour guides.
- Hassling tourists for personal benefit.

CONCLUSIONS

Many literatures have confirmed that tour guides shoulder very critical responsibilities, in terms of enhancing tourists’ satisfaction and their revisit intention. The study found out that the highest number of tour guides in the study areas were aware of the rules and regulations of the attraction sites. It also identified that almost half of the tour guides had knowledge about the local history and culture, and can present accurate information about attraction. However, significant number of tour guides (41%) had involved in the profession without having enough knowledge about their profession. This is mainly due to lack of tour guide quality assurance and regulatory mechanisms and standards. The findings also indicated that tour guides lack general knowledge about different past and contemporary socio-economic and political aspects of the country and the world as a whole. The study also found out that the highest numbers of tour guides are not proficient in English language. Neither do they speak other international languages. But they had better social networking and conflict resolution skills. Concerning personal quality of tour guides, many of the tourist respondents revealed that tour guides are respectful, polite, trustworthy, and passionate to their work, but they were reserved in terms of expressing tour guides’ understanding of their feelings/emotions.

For all these aforementioned problems related with tour guides, the study identified the following factors which contribute to the professional incompetencies of tour guides, which are directly linked to the tour guides themselves and/or the concerned bodies particularly culture and tourism bureau:

- Competences are not considered in certifying tour guides.
- Absence of strong controlling and monitoring performance of tour guides.
- Lack of strong licensing and certification procedures.
- Lack of continuous professional support to the tour guides.
- Lack of good concern for the profession from tourism officials.

- Unhealthy competition among tour guides.
- Lack of interest by tour guides to upgrade themselves.

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