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# From National to Regional Tourism Development Focus in Kenya: Examining the Challenges and Opportunities

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**ABSTRACT** *Despite Kenya's unique combination of tourist attractions spread throughout the country, the tourism activity in the country has always been almost exclusively centred on two geographical regions: the coastal beaches and a handful of game reserves and national parks. The goal of this study was thus to examine the reasons for the country's skewed tourism development and explore strategies of addressing the skew. The study was primarily based on documentary review of existing empirical and official government reports and other related documents. The study revealed key factors as being responsible for the lopsided development of Kenya's tourism. First and foremost, the country's tourism development policy proved to be a leading obstacle to the development of the country's tourist attractions and regions. Further, the centralised focus of Kenya's tourism planning, governance and marketing was also noted as being responsible for the skewed tourism development in the country. In addition, there was an evident lack of consensus on the demarcation of the different tourist regions in the country by the key tourism development agencies and stakeholders. It was also noted that Kenya lacks a tourism master plan, a roadmap to guide the development of the industry. Other factors included lack of awareness of the different attractions in the country and the passive role of tourism marketers in packaging and promoting the different tourist attractions in the country, only concentrating on the traditionally popular ones. The study thus recommends the adoption of a regional tourism development focus in Kenya that would facilitate the development and positioning of the different tourist attractions and regions as destinations on their own right. Unlike the centralised approach, this model would recognise the varied needs, level of maturity and vision of each region and be supported within the context of the existing national and county framework.*

## Introduction

Development focused at the regional level has dominated the discourse on economic development in recent decades with notions of regions stimulating economic growth

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through a mixture of inter-firm networks, and cultural/political attributes featuring prominently (Amin, 1989; Sayer, 1995; Storper, 1997).

One of the specific aims of regional policies is to reduce inequalities between regions in order to increase a country's economic and social cohesion. As Perroux (1988) argues, the need to pay particular attention to the regional structure of a national economy may result from the fact that (1) regional disparities create social and political problems that need to be addressed in any political society and especially in countries where "regions" and gaps among them correspond to states or provinces, (2) national economies are aggregations of regional economies, which vary in the degree of integration, with some regions in some countries being more integrated with the world economy than with other regions of the same country, and (3) accelerating the growth of a nation as a whole requires a solution to the problems of less developed regions.

### **The Concept of a Tourist Region**

Numerous attempts have been made to define a region. However, as Tosun and Jenkins (1996) observe, despite countless attempts a satisfactory definition has not been formulated. According to Smith (1995), regions can be categorised into three: (1) a-priori regions, in which boundaries have already been created and assigned names, for example a named province or district, (2) homogeneous regions defined by objective sets of internal similarities, and (3) functional regions—areas with a high degree of internal interaction, for example an area with high intra-business transactions. A region may further be viewed as extending beyond national boundaries to incorporate other nations (Milne and Ateljevic, 2001), for example the European Union or the East African Community. Of importance when defining such a region is the selection of relevant characteristics and the specification of the degree of similarity that would cause an area to be included in the region.

While the practice has always been that countries, states, provinces, and other administrative regions are often carved up into tourism regions, not all locations can become tourist destinations. As David and Tozser (2009) note, there are basic criteria that have to be met for a region to become a tourist destination. According to Buhalis (2000), to qualify as a tourist destination, a region should possess the following qualities: (1) tourist attractions, e.g. natural and man-made features, heritage, and Special events, (2) easy access, (3) tourist services, e.g. accommodation and host services, (4) product packages, (5) activities that can be experienced by the tourists during their stay, (6) public utility services, e.g. banks, telecommunications, hospitals.

Smith (1995) identifies a tourism region as a contiguous area that has been explicitly delineated as having relevance for some aspect of tourism planning, development or analysis. Most such tourism regions belong to a larger economic and administrative unit whose role is that of developing the region into a marketable tourism product (Saarinen, 1998). Such regions take the form of a-priori regions, often named after historical or current administrative and geographical regions, or just bearing names created specifically for tourism purposes. Such names are aimed at evoking certain positive qualities of the area and suggest a coherent tourism experience to visitors. In addition to drawing the attention of potential tourists, these tourism regions often provide tourists who are otherwise unfamiliar with an area with a manageable number of attractive options (Saarinen, 1998). Most tourism regions belong to a larger economic and administrative unit which takes on the role of developing the discourse of the tourism region into a marketable product. According to Saarinen (1998), once the discourse of a tourism region has been established, the parent region helps shape further development of the area. Eventually,

if the region becomes successful as a tourism region, a mature stage in the development is reached where the “meaning and history of the destination are continually produced anew” in cycles of decline, reinvention, growth and stability.

### **Tourism and Regional Development**

Local or regional tourism destinations have been identified as the most important destination type on which to focus developmental initiatives including planning and marketing (Jang and Cai, 2002). The basis of such a regional tourism development strategy is the realisation that each region has its own strengths and weaknesses in terms of its position in the minds of travellers. The strategy recognises the varied needs, level of maturity and vision of each region and need for support within the context of the existing regional administrative units, as is the practice in successful destinations. This is significant as such units already have established structures that would be necessary for the success of tourism development initiatives. However, as Jang and Cai (2002) note, there is need for synergistic partnership between the central government and regional (country) governments in pursuit of sustainable tourism.

Tourism has been used as a strategy to promote regional development in both urban and rural areas (Oppermann, 1992; Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997). For instance, Williams and Shaw (1991) illustrated the potential for tourism to bring development to economically neglected regions of European countries. The authors later noted that the suitability of tourism to play this role stems from its core aspects that (1) tourism is a product which must be consumed at the production point; (2) most forms of tourism are highly temporal; and (3) tourism is an industry subject to restructuring (Williams and Shaw, 1995). Milne and Ateljevic (2001) contend that tourism developments have been constructed to act as growth poles to help stimulate regional development.

In the context of core–periphery, tourism can be a means of obtaining economic development in peripheral regions with rich tourists travelling from the metropolitan centre to the periphery, bringing foreign exchange and creating jobs; thus tourism can act to redistribute wealth from the richer metropolitan areas to the poorer peripheral regions (Pearce, 1989). Porter (1998) suggests that the building of a tourism cluster in developing economies can be a positive force in improving outlying infrastructure and dispersing economic activity.

Further, tourism through its multiplier effect has demonstrated the capacity to promote regional development, create new commercial and industrial enterprises, stimulate demand for locally produced goods and services and provide a market for agricultural products (Kareithi, 2003). More so, the development of the sector leads to the provision of infrastructure which is necessary for the economic development of an area and can give it a distinctive image and identity that will benefit all its economic activities.

The essence of regional tourism development has been recognised in line with the need to achieve sustainable tourism. According to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), sustainable tourism can be a vehicle to empower local communities through the development of new employment opportunities, the enhancement of local economies, preservation of indigenous knowledge and practices, public awareness and education (UNCSD, 1999). While national governments should take a leading role in establishing tourism policy that reflects the overall development goal of the country, including coordinating the tourism marketing campaigns and broad-based product development that play such an important role in shaping tourism demand and behaviour (WTO, 1994; Milne and Ateljevic, 2001), local or regional authorities still have a role to play in developing tourism in their respective areas.

As noted by Tosun and Jenkins (1996), unless there is a mechanism to manage and control tourism development at sub-national level, tourism growth may not be sustainable enough to contribute to national development, although it may continue to contribute to the balance of payments. However, in many countries, local regions through their local authorities have not been closely involved in tourism and have little experience of its planning, development and management (UNEP, 2003). This concern formed the basis for Local Agenda 21 adopted by the 1992 Rio Earth Summit that sought to provide a way for municipalities to ensure that businesses, including tourism, address their constituents' needs and operate in ways that enhance sustainable development.

### **Tourism Development in Kenya**

Kenya is endowed with a unique combination of tourist attractions spread throughout the country comprising tropical beaches, abundant wildlife in natural habitats, scenic beauty, a geographically diverse landscape and diverse cultures from the country's 42 ethnic communities. Despite such a wide range of potential tourist attractions, tourism in Kenya has always been almost exclusively centred on two geographical areas: the south coast beaches and a handful of game reserves and national parks (Omondi *et al.*, 2000; KNBS, 2010) (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

The above scenario was also confirmed by Mutinda and Mayaka (2012) in their study of Nairobi, Kenya. Based on the destination choice sets model (Hill, 2000), Mayaka and Ndivo aimed at assessing the status of 33 Kenyan tourist attractions, and the eight tourist circuits as identified by the Kenya Tourist Board. The study revealed that the most popular tourist circuit is Mombasa and the Coral Coast, with about 50.6% of all the sampled 118 respondents having visited the circuit, 74.7% of these being return visits. The northern tourist circuit was found to be the least popular with only about 8.7% of all respondents having visited the circuit, 30.8% of which were return visits. Mombasa Island was found to be the most popular single destination with 68% of the respondents indicating that they had visited the destination and 82% of respondents indicating that they had made more than one visit to the area (Figure 2).

### **Reasons for the Skewed Nature of Regional Tourism Development in Kenya**

Various factors may explain this regional disparity. In addition to the many challenges that have hindered the country's ability to fully optimise the full potential of all touristic attractions.

First and foremost, Kenya's tourism development policy has been characterised by inconsistency, poor coordination, lack of a vision and overall development strategy, and poor implementation (Kareithi, 2003). Nothing testifies to this better than the evident lack of consensus on the demarcation of the different tourist regions in the country by the key tourism development stakeholders, notably: the Kenya Tourist Board (KTB) (in charge of industry marketing), the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife (in charge of policy), and the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) (in charge of national statistics). Each of these institutions recognises a different classification of the country's tourist attractions. For instance, the Priority Tourism Region Development Master Plans (developed by the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife (MOTW) in partnership with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) classifies the country into eight tourism regions, thus: Central, Western, Coastal Masailand, Turkana, Northern, Tana Basin and, Eastern (JICA/MOTW, 1995). The KTB recognises seven designated major tourist circuits as

**Table 1.** Kenya hotel bed nights by zone, 2000-2009 (in thousands). *Source:* Economic Survey (KNBS, 2006, 2010)

Zone	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Total 2000-2009	%
Coastal- Beach hotels	2,065.2	1,438.2	2,171.8	1,269.6	1,883.5	2,273.7	3,228.8	3,768.1	1,643.7	3,011.4	22,754.0	51.5
Others hotels	85.8	136.1	108.2	36.5	29.4	43.5	108.6	153.5	118.1	152.5	972.2	2.2
Coastal Hinterland	76.3	56.6	44.9	60.9	52.9	75.1	83.7	210.5	93.9	210.9	904.8	2.0
<b>All Coast Hotels</b>	<b>2,227.3</b>	<b>1,630.9</b>	<b>2,324.9</b>	<b>1,306.1</b>	<b>1,965.8</b>	<b>2,392.3</b>	<b>3,421.1</b>	<b>4,132.1</b>	<b>1,855.7</b>	<b>3,374.8</b>	<b>24,631.0</b>	<b>55.8</b>
Nairobi- High class hotels	836.1	568.6	589.8	572.7	793.7	870.9	946.8	1,028.4	716.2	1,164.1	8,087.3	18.3
Nairobi- Other hotels	167.2	124.9	65.7	124.0	194.5	180.5	257.2	302.7	224.5	498.1	2,139.3	4.8
<b>All Nairobi</b>	<b>1,003.3</b>	<b>693.5</b>	<b>655.5</b>	<b>696.7</b>	<b>988.2</b>	<b>1,051.4</b>	<b>1,204.0</b>	<b>1,331.1</b>	<b>940.7</b>	<b>1,662.2</b>	<b>10,226.6</b>	<b>23.2</b>
Central	145.7	74.5	80.7	143.8	247.8	265.1	300.3	388.9	255.1	347.5	2,249.4	5.1
Masailand	141.5	138.3	135.2	130.4	272.3	361.9	460.9	519.9	231.8	312.8	2,705.0	6.1
Nyanza Basin	87.3	94.4	103.7	127.9	167.7	196.7	284.4	246.6	185.4	213.2	1,707.3	3.9
Western	72.4	91.3	95.9	97.2	100.8	128.0	167.7	234.4	224.6	319.0	1,531.3	3.5
Northern	10.3	41.2	40.9	42.9	48.8	81.2	83.7	86.3	5.7	13.3	454.3	1.0
<b>Total- Occupied</b>	<b>3,687.8</b>	<b>3,354.9</b>	<b>3,436.8</b>	<b>2,605.9</b>	<b>3,791.5</b>	<b>4,476.6</b>	<b>5,922.1</b>	<b>6,939.4</b>	<b>3,699.0</b>	<b>6,242.8</b>	<b>44,156.8</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Total- Available</b>	<b>9,382.3</b>	<b>8,327.8</b>	<b>8,182.7</b>	<b>7,765.7</b>	<b>10,030.7</b>	<b>10,845.6</b>	<b>13,003.5</b>	<b>14,233.6</b>	<b>142,336.6</b>	<b>17,125.3</b>		

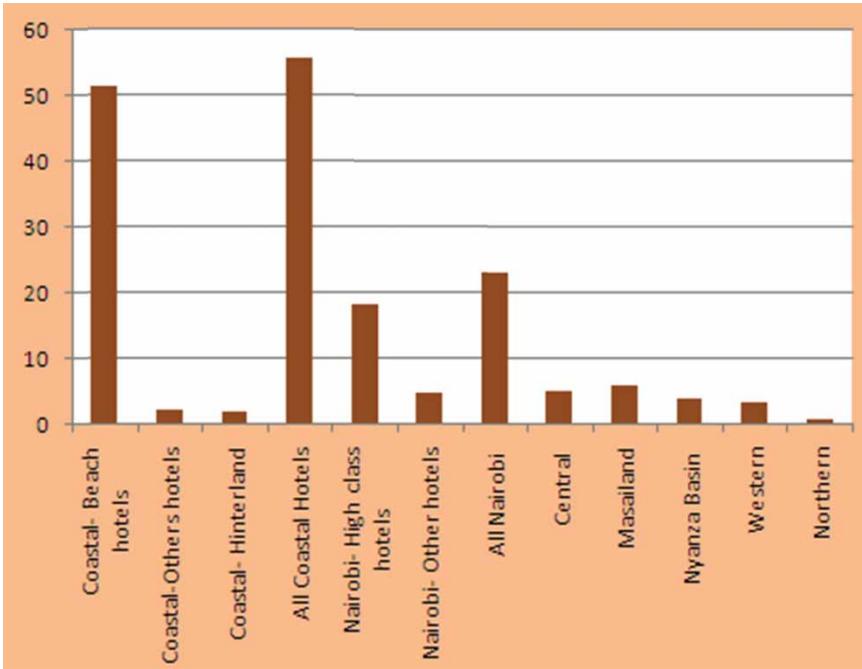


Figure 1. Kenya hotel bed nights, regional distribution (2000–2009) (%).

Source: Mutinda and Mayaka, 2012.

well as seven other minor circuits, these are: South-Eastern, South-Western, Western, Northern and North-Rift, Mid-Northern, and Mombasa and the Coral Coast (KTB, 2004). The CBS on the other hand recognises seven tourist zones: Coastal, Central, Nairobi, Nyanza Basin, Masailand, Western, and Northern zones (KNBS, 2010). Such disconnection would hamper any effective tourism developmental initiatives both at national and regional levels.

Secondly, despite a long-standing history of being a leading destination in Africa, Kenya to date lacks a tourism master plan, a roadmap to guide the development of the

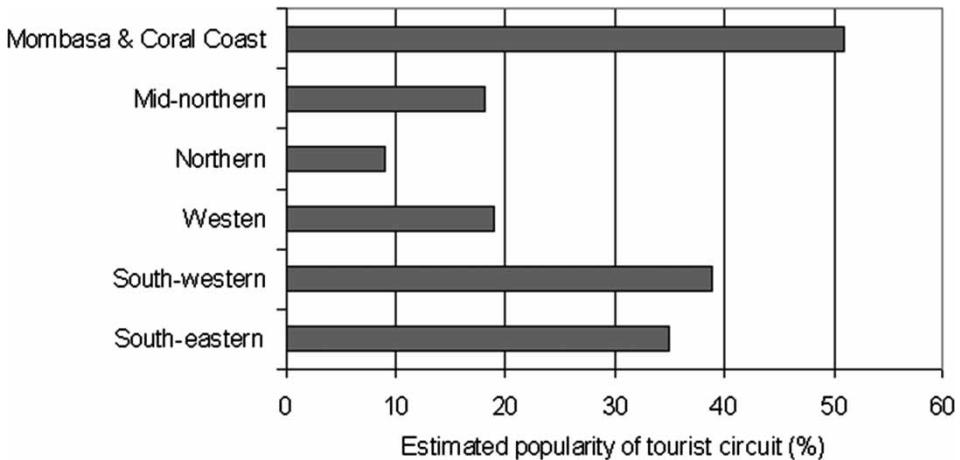


Figure 2. Popularity of Kenya's tourist circuits.

Source: Mutinda and Mayaka, 2012.

**Table 2.** Kenya: Number of classified hotels, by class and ownership, by region. *Source:* UNCTAD, 2008. Numbers in brackets represent the number of beds

Region	Number of hotels by class					Total
	1-star	2-star	3-star	4-star	5-star	
Nairobi	5 (435)	12 (1,506)	21 (3,084)	2 (230)	10 (3,823)	50 (9,078)
Nyeri	-	1 (182)	2 (190)	2 (198)	-	5 (570)
Kilifi	1 (168)	2 (90)	-	1 (600)	1 (600)	5 (1,458)
Kwale	-	6 (831)	3 (3,132)	2 (620)	-	11 (4,583)
Lamu	-	2 (92)	-	-	-	2 (92)
Mombasa	2 (182)	13 (2,143)	7 (1,621)	4 (348)	1 (716)	27 (5,010)
Tavela	-	1 (104)	-	-	-	1 (104)
Embu	1 (85)	-	-	-	-	1 (85)
Machakos	1 (118)	-	-	-	-	1 (118)
Meru	2 (114)	-	1 (125)	-	-	3 (239)
Kisii	1 (80)	-	-	-	-	1 (80)
Kisumu	2 (160)	1 (140)	-	-	-	3 (300)
Malindi	1 (280)	15 (2,427)	5 (1,380)	1 (278)	1 (154)	23 (4,519)
Baringo	-	-	1 (96)	1	-	2 (266)
Kajiado	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kericho	1 (130)	1 (77)	-	-	-	2 (207)
Laikipia	-	1 (133)	-	-	-	1 (133)
Nakuru Elburgon	and 1 (120)	6 (335)	3 (274)	-	-	10 (729)
Narok	-	-	1 (155)	-	1 (168)	2 (323)
Samburu	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kitale	1 (24)	-	-	-	-	1 (24)
Eldoret	1 (82)	1 (210)	-	-	-	2 (292)
Webuye	1 (50)	-	-	-	-	1 (50)
Kakamega	-	2 (159)	-	-	-	2 (159)
Nanyuki	-	-	2 (165)	-	1 (230)	3 (395)
Thika	-	1 (64)	-	-	-	1 (64)
Voi	-	2 (88)	1 (104)	-	-	3 (192)
Naivasha	-	2 (151)	3 (164)	-	-	5 (315)
Total	21 (2,028)	70 (8,732)	50 (10,490)	12 (2,444)	15 (5,691)	168 (29,385)

industry. The very first concrete attempt by the Kenya government to guide the development of the tourism sector was the formulation of a Sessional Paper on the development of tourism in Kenya (GoK, 1969). This policy paper defined the growth targets that it hoped to achieve in the years ahead as well as outline the areas where the Government would participate jointly with the private investors in developing the tourist industry. The only other notable attempt was the Priority Tourism Region Development Master Plans jointly developed by the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA/MOTW, 1995) that attempted to delineate the country into specific tourist regions and provide development direction for each region. However, the extent to which this master plan was implemented remains questionable, with the KTB later choosing to craft other circuits instead.

In addition, Kenya still experiences limited tourism infrastructure, especially bed capacity with about 84% of all hotel beds in the country concentrated in two regions, Nairobi and the coral coast including Mombasa, Kilifi, Kwale and Malindi (see Table 2).

Further, despite the efforts to create, develop and market the different tourist circuits in Kenya, the centralised nature of Kenya's tourism planning and governance has continued

to be a serious handicap to a focused and sustained regional tourism development. However, thanks to the country's new constitution that shifts development focus from a centralised view to a decentralised, it is hoped that this will also be reflected in the development of the tourism industry.

### **Kenya's Tourism Marketing in Focus**

Kenya's tourism developing and marketing initiatives have tended throughout to visualise the country as a single destination, an approach attributable to the country's over-reliance on the international tourist market (Dieke, 1994). This orientation has led to the failure to recognise the different tourist regions within the country as destinations in their own right despite their diversity in terms of culture, natural resources and historical heritage.

Lack of awareness has also been cited as a drawback to the popularity of the different attractions in the country. Mutinda and Mayaka (2012) in the aforementioned work found that 33% of the destinations were not known by the Kenyan domestic market. In a further 27% of the destinations, though generally known, respondents indicated that they needed more information in order to decide on visiting. It is important to note that destination awareness influences the tourists' purchase decision only if it forms part of the customer's awareness set and therefore determines the preference for a destination (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989; Um and Crompton, 1990). This therefore implies that such destinations falling within the unawareness set would naturally not be considered as potential vacation destinations to visit.

Regrettably, tourism marketers have not played an active role in promoting the different tourist destinations in the country only, concentrating on the traditionally popular ones (Omondi *et al.*, 2000; Mutinda and Mayaka, 2012) While this is understandable from the business perspective, the role of tourism marketers in creating destination awareness and choice cannot be gainsaid. As Buhalis (2000) reasons, destination marketers have a crucial role in communicating with the target markets at each stage of a destination development cycle, thus: to raise visitors' awareness at the initial stage, to inform them in the growth stage, to persuade them during the mature and saturation stage, and to retain visitors and introduce new markets in the declining stages.

### **Towards Regional Tourism Development in Kenya**

As earlier noted, the fact that Kenya is endowed with a unique combination of tourist attractions spread throughout the country's different regions cannot be gainsaid. It must, however, be stated that not all these products and regions are adequately developed to the level that can appeal to the tourist market. This therefore calls for a deliberate initiative on the part of Kenyan destination marketers and policymakers to integrate a regional tourism development model in addressing the apparent disparity in regional tourism development.

In many developing countries, Kenya included, most of the tourism development is a product of central planning (Tosun and Jenkins, 1998). A shift to a regional planning approach would therefore require a level of decentralisation of power. To this end many successful cases exist from which lessons can be learnt for the Kenyan case (notable among such include Australia and the UK where tourism planning is sub-national).

In Kenya's case the new constitution now shifts development focus from national level to the counties. This thus provides an opportunity for the implementation of regional tourism development strategies. The Priority Tourism Region Development Master Plans provides a good starting point for regional tourism development. To achieve this, efforts should be undertaken to address the above noted challenges that have been responsible for the skewed nature of the country's tourism development.

The success of this undertaking should involve establishment of regional destination management and marketing organisations (DMOs) to spearhead tourism development and marketing initiatives in the region in coordination with the national tourism organisations (NTOs) such as KTB, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), Bomas of Kenya (BoK), the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), and the Kenya Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC), among others.

While the NTOs will address tourism development and marketing at the national level, the regional DMOs will focus on their individual regions to develop their own distinctive competitiveness. In this case, the regional DMOs would provide leadership and a focus for industry coordination and planning of marketing efforts to gain synergies, consistent marketing messages to consumers, and partnerships to facilitate joint marketing campaigns, as advised by Middleton and Clarke (2001).

On the other hand the NTOs, especially the marketing-oriented KTB, will have a wider role to play in support of the regional DMOs both in the source markets and in support of the tourism industry. According to Middleton and Clarke (2001), such roles include (1) providing market intelligence and research data, (2) running web-based advertising, (3) organising trade shows, (4) hosting familiarisation trips for foreign travel agents, travel writers and tour operators, (5) providing online travel trade manuals as reference guides, (6) participating in joint marketing, (7) running a destination management systems (DMS) to provide direct access to consumers and bookings, and (8) running destination quality schemes to raise standards and engender a wider concern for tourist well-being.

Further, in developing a specific region, the national government can attempt to attract tourism development by offering businesses a number of different subsidies. These subsidies can include, but are not limited to tax abatement, infrastructure and site assistance, low interest loans, labour-force training, regulatory relief, sale-lease back and technical assistance (Blair, 1995).

It is also important to stress here that tourism development at the regional level must be viewed as a transaction process, incorporating both exogenous forces and the endogenous powers of local residents and entrepreneurs (Chang *et al.*, 1996). In addition, for the development of competitive tourist products, destination communities and regions should also rely on networks and alliances between businesses and between the private and public sectors (Milne and Ateljevic, 2001). In this light therefore, the future competitiveness of regional destinations, and the development performance of tourism, will not simply depend on a destination's natural and cultural resource base, its ability to harness new technologies, or its depth of human capital (Fukuyama, 1995).

### Note on Contributors

**Rayviscic Ndivo** is a tourism PhD candidate and a lecturer in Tourism management department of Kenyatta University, Nairobi. He is a member of the Inter Governmental Authority on Development (I GAD) committee of experts on the development of the IGAD Region master plan.

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