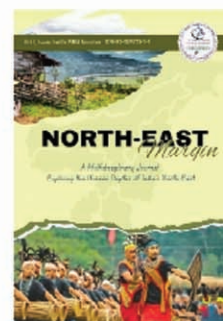


Prospects and Problems of Rural Development through Private Cooperative Entrepreneurship in the Agro-Ecotourism in Jorhat District

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Abstract

This study investigates the potential of private cooperative entrepreneurship in agro-ecotourism for rural development in Jorhat District. Agro-ecotourism presents a multitude of opportunities, including economic diversification by generating additional income streams for farmers and rural communities through farm stays, tours, and the sale of local produce and crafts. It also fosters community empowerment by enabling local participation in the decision-making and management of agro-ecotourism projects, cultivating a sense of ownership and responsibility. Furthermore, it promotes environmentally friendly practices, with cooperatives facilitating the sharing of knowledge and resources for their implementation. By integrating natural surroundings with cultural elements, agro-ecotourism can aid in preserving and promoting local traditions and heritage. Additionally, cooperatives can play a vital role in developing infrastructure and creating market linkages, benefiting both tourism and the local community. However, the study also acknowledges the challenges associated with this approach. Cooperatives often face difficulties in securing initial capital for infrastructure development, marketing, and training. Effective management and governance structures are essential for addressing leadership, planning, and organizational issues within cooperatives. Moreover, cooperative members require training in agro-ecotourism, management, customer service, and sustainable farming practices to ensure the success of ventures. Navigating bureaucratic hurdles and obtaining necessary permissions can also be challenging for cooperatives, hindering their growth. Finally, while promoting sustainability, agro-ecotourism also poses potential risks to the environment and social fabric, necessitating careful management.

Keywords

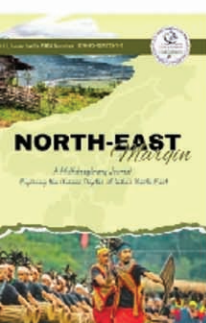
Agro-ecotourism, Rural Development, Cooperative Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Practices

1. Introduction:

Tourism involves people traveling to places outside their usual surroundings for enjoyment, work, or other reasons. It's a big and expanding industry. According to a

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report from the World Travel and Tourism Council in 2017, the tourism industry directly contributes about 3.6 percent and indirectly about 10.2 percent to the world's total economic output.

Agro eco-tourism combines elements of both agricultural tourism and environmental tourism. This type of tourism allows visitors to engage in sustainable farming practices and learn about locally grown foods and the natural resources already present in the area. Agro eco-tourism attracts tourists to farms or ranches where they can learn about local cultures and help increase income for the area.

Agro ecotourism helps local farmers by giving them chances to grow their businesses and make more money. It can create jobs in places where there is often a lot of poverty, improve the way we get food, support traditional farming methods, and help protect natural resources and make the environment more diverse. This type of tourism also offers education to the public, helps save farmland, and lets states create new businesses. There is hope and potential for economic growth in Assam through agro ecotourism, similar to what happened in Kerala. In Kerala, cooperatives have started eco tourism projects in the backwaters, involving the community and using sustainable methods. These cooperatives also offer tours of villages, village stays, and programs about local nature and culture. Agro eco tourism can help improve rural areas and reduce unemployment in Assam, a state with rivers and beautiful scenery. This type of tourism can use these scenic, remote areas to its advantage. Private businesses working together can use shared resources to grow. This will help them become more sustainable and raise the living standards of rural people. This discussion focuses on the opportunities and challenges of private cooperative businesses in this approach.

2. Literature Review

Agro-ecotourism, an intersection of agriculture and tourism, presents a promising avenue for rural development, particularly through private cooperative entrepreneurship. This literature review examines various aspects of agro-ecotourism, including its benefits, challenges, and the role of cooperatives in fostering sustainable rural development.

Agro-ecotourism provides supplementary income for rural households, enhancing economic resilience (Tew & Barbieri, 2012). By engaging in activities such as farm stays, craft sales, and animal rides, cooperatives can diversify income sources, reducing dependence on traditional farming (Carpio et al., 2008). Cooperatives operate on principles of mutual aid, democratic decision-making, and community welfare (Bijman et al., 2012). This structure empowers local communities to take ownership of agro-ecotourism projects, fostering a sense of responsibility and enhancing resource management (Altman, 2015). Agro-ecotourism promotes environmentally sustainable farming practices and biodiversity conservation (Zhang et al., 2009). Cooperatives can facilitate knowledge sharing and resource pooling, encouraging members to adopt sustainable techniques (Malkanthi & Routray, 2011).

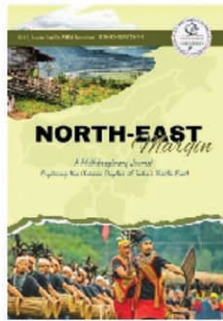
Integrating cultural heritage with tourism, agro-ecotourism helps preserve local traditions, crafts, and customs (McGehee & Kim, 2004). Cooperatives can organize events and tours showcasing the region's cultural uniqueness, thus aiding in cultural conservation (Hjalager, 1996). The development of infrastructure, such as roads and communication facilities, is crucial for the success of agro-ecotourism (Honey, 2008). Cooperative efforts can significantly improve local infrastructure, benefiting both tourism and the resident community (Gannon, 1994). Cooperatives provide market access and networking opportunities for rural products and services (Murray, 2006). This can enhance the benefits of agro-ecotourism, driving local economic growth (Phillip et al., 2010).

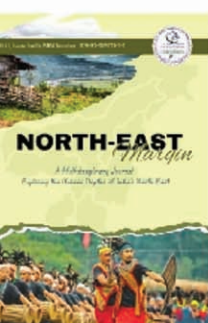
Securing initial funding for infrastructure and promotion is a significant challenge for cooperatives (Berge, 2008). Financial constraints often hinder the development and scaling of agro-ecotourism projects (Tregear et al., 2007). Effective management and governance are critical for the success of cooperative agro-ecotourism (Nilsson, 2001). Issues related to leadership, strategic planning, and organizational structure can impede progress (Valentinov, 2007). The success of agro-ecotourism heavily depends on the skills and expertise of cooperative members (Woods, 2009). Lack of training in agro-ecotourism, customer service, and sustainable practices can be a major barrier (Saxena et al., 2007). Navigating bureaucratic processes to obtain necessary permissions and comply with regulations can be challenging for cooperatives (Wiskerke, 2009). Supportive government policies are essential for fostering agro-ecotourism (Zahra & McGehee, 2013). While agro-ecotourism aims to promote sustainability, poor management can lead to adverse environmental and social impacts (Weaver & Lawton, 2007). Ensuring proper management practices is crucial to mitigating these risks (Yunis, 2003).

Agro-ecotourism, through private cooperative entrepreneurship, holds significant potential for rural development in Jorhat District. Despite challenges such as financial constraints, management issues, and regulatory barriers, the benefits of economic diversification, community empowerment, sustainable practices, cultural preservation, and infrastructural development are substantial. By fostering collaboration among stakeholders, a thriving agro-ecotourism sector can be developed, leading to sustainable and inclusive growth in rural areas.

3. Prospects of Rural Development through Private Cooperative Entrepreneurship in Agro Ecotourism:

- i. **Economic Diversification and Stability:** Agro eco tourism offers extra money for farmers and people living in the countryside. It boosts income from things like staying on farms, visiting farms, riding animals, milking cows, making and selling local crafts, and attending village fairs. Cooperatives can help their members gather a lot of money and try different ways to make a living. This way, they can depend less on regular farming and have more steady work throughout the year.
- ii. **Community Empowerment:** The cooperative operates based on principles like helping each other, making decisions democratically, and sharing ownership, working



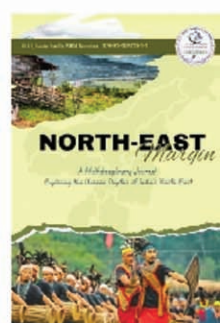


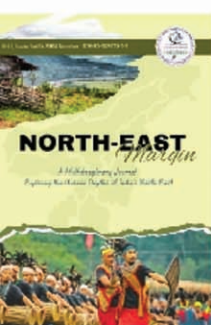
- together with other cooperatives, and caring about the community. This structure allows entrepreneurs to support rural communities, enabling local people to participate in planning and managing eco-friendly tourism projects related to agriculture. This involvement helps them feel a sense of ownership and responsibility, which is important for protecting natural resources and ensuring long-term sustainability.
- iii. **Sustainable Practices:** Agro ecotourism encourages environmentally-friendly farming techniques and supports local farmers. It also aids in protecting natural scenery and preserving biodiversity. This type of tourism promotes sustainable farming methods, and cooperatives can help by sharing knowledge and resources to adopt these practices.
 - iv. **Cultural Preservation:** Agro ecotourism can help protect the culture of a local community by combining different aspects like historical sites, traditional customs, crafts, language, music, and art with natural surroundings. This way, cooperatives can set up events and farm visits that showcase local traditions and crafts, helping to keep and spread the unique cultural identity of the area.
 - v. **Infrastructural Development:** Building infrastructure and promoting agro ecotourism go hand in hand. Quality facilities such as roads, places to stay, and ways to communicate can draw in tourists. By working together, groups can enhance local infrastructure, which helps both the tourism industry and the local community.
 - vi. **Market Access and Networking:** Private cooperatives can offer market facilities and connections to help sell the products and services of local communities. This will increase the benefits of agro ecotourism and boost the local economy.
- ### 3. Problems and Challenges
- i. **Lack of Capital and fund:** A major issue with agro ecotourism is that the cooperatives don't have enough money. At first, they might need a lot of funds to spend on things like building infrastructure, promoting their business, and training their staff. The cooperatives usually have a hard time getting the money they need.
 - ii. **Management and Governance:** The success of cooperative agro ecotourism largely relies on government support and good management. A well-organized management and governance system can address issues such as leadership, strategic planning, and organizational challenges within the cooperatives.
 - iii. **Skill Development and Training:** The success of agro ecotourism largely relies on the skills and knowledge of the cooperative members. These members need to be well-trained and capable of managing the business. Often, members lack the necessary expertise in areas like agro ecotourism, management, customer service, and sustainable farming practices.
 - iv. **Regulatory and Policy Barriers:** Government policies and rules can either support or hinder the development of agro ecotourism. However, in many instances, it's challenging to navigate through bureaucratic hurdles to obtain necessary permissions and adhere to government regulations, especially for cooperatives.

- v. **Environment and Social Impact:** While agro ecotourism supports sustainable methods, it also carries some risks of harming the environment. The success of this approach relies heavily on the management abilities of the cooperatives involved. Poor management can lead to environmental risks and social problems.

4. Challenges

1. **Lack of Capital and Funding:** One of the primary challenges for agro-ecotourism cooperatives is securing sufficient capital to invest in infrastructure, marketing, and training. Initial costs can be prohibitive, and many cooperatives struggle to access loans and grants.
2. **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Poor infrastructure, such as inadequate roads, lack of proper accommodation, and insufficient communication facilities, hampers the growth of agro-ecotourism. This makes it difficult to attract and retain tourists.
3. **Limited Marketing and Promotion:** Effective marketing is crucial for attracting tourists. Many cooperatives lack the expertise and resources to promote their agro-ecotourism initiatives effectively, leading to low visibility and tourist inflow.
4. **Insufficient Training and Skills:** The success of agro-ecotourism relies heavily on the skills and knowledge of cooperative members. Many members lack training in areas such as customer service, sustainable farming practices, and business management, which affects service quality and operational efficiency.
5. **Regulatory and Policy Barriers:** Navigating through complex and often bureaucratic regulatory frameworks can be challenging for cooperatives. Obtaining necessary permits and complying with government regulations is time-consuming and can be a significant hurdle.
6. **Environmental and Social Impact:** While agro-ecotourism aims to promote sustainability, it can also pose environmental risks if not managed properly. Over-tourism can lead to environmental degradation and social disruption, necessitating careful management.
7. **Seasonality of Tourism:** Tourism often fluctuates with seasons, leading to periods of high activity followed by off-peak times. This seasonality can result in inconsistent income for cooperatives and their members, making financial planning challenging.
8. **Limited Market Access:** Cooperatives often struggle to access larger markets to sell their products and services. Without proper market access, the economic benefits of agro-ecotourism are limited, affecting profitability.
9. **Community Resistance and Participation:** Not all community members may be willing to participate in agro-ecotourism projects. Resistance can stem from a lack of understanding of the benefits, fear of change, or concerns about the impact on traditional lifestyles.
10. **Competition and Market Saturation:** As more regions recognize the potential of agro-ecotourism, the market can become saturated. Increased competition from other areas offering similar experiences can make it difficult for individual cooperatives to attract tourists.





5. Policy Suggestions

1. Financial Support: Provide accessible funding and incentives for agro-ecotourism cooperatives.
2. Infrastructure Development: Invest in developing and maintaining infrastructure in rural areas.
3. Marketing and Promotion: Assist cooperatives in developing effective marketing strategies and promotional materials.
4. Training and Capacity Building: Implement comprehensive training programs for cooperative members.
5. Streamlined Regulations and Sustainability: Simplify regulatory procedures and promote sustainable tourism practices.

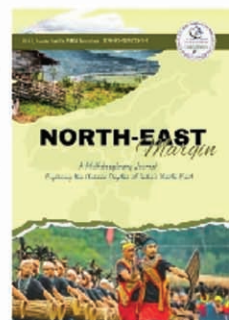
6. Conclusion

Agro-ecotourism, driven by private cooperative entrepreneurship, presents a viable path for rural development in Jorhat District. This approach offers numerous benefits, including economic diversification, community empowerment, sustainable practices, cultural preservation, infrastructural development, and improved market access. However, the sector faces significant challenges such as inadequate capital, infrastructure deficits, marketing limitations, skill shortages, regulatory barriers, environmental risks, seasonality, market access issues, community resistance, and competition. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving financial support, infrastructure investment, marketing assistance, training programs, streamlined regulations, sustainable practices, market access facilitation, and community engagement. By implementing these policy suggestions, the potential of agro-ecotourism can be fully realized, leading to sustainable and inclusive growth in rural areas. With the right support and collaboration among stakeholders, agro-ecotourism can become a cornerstone of rural development in Jorhat District, enhancing the livelihoods of local communities and preserving the region's natural and cultural heritage.

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North-East Margin

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