



TOURISM FOR A BETTER WORLD

Community Based Tourism Innovation: Making Your Project Unique and Sustainable

Innovation is the key to long-term success for any business, and Community Based Tourism Organizations (CBTOs) are no exception. Innovation doesn't mean inventing complex technology; it means finding **new and better ways** to operate, to serve guests, and to distribute benefits. This lesson from the **Kitara Foundation** provides a practical guide on how your CBTO can become an engine of innovation, ensuring relevance and sustainability in the global tourism market.

1. Defining Innovation in the CBTO Context

For a rural CBTO, innovation is centered around three core areas that enhance the traveler's experience and the community's benefit:

A. Product Innovation

- **Creating New Experiences:** Offering activities that travelers can't find anywhere else, often by leveraging underutilized local knowledge.
- **Example:** Instead of just a guided walk, innovate by offering a "**Traditional Healing Plant Foraging and Preparation Workshop**" led by local elders, giving the visitor an immersive, high-value skill-building experience.

B. Process Innovation

- **Improving Efficiency:** Making internal operations (booking, accounting, cleaning) faster, more accurate, and less costly.
- **Example (Equera's Focus):** Moving from manual, paper-based accounting to a **shared digital ledger** (like a Google Sheet) for tracking the **Community Development Fund (CDF)** contributions. This increases transparency and reduces administrative time.

C. Social Innovation

- **Enhancing Community Impact:** Finding new and better ways to ensure the tourism enterprise strengthens social cohesion and addresses local challenges.
- **Example (Kitara Foundation's Focus):** Establishing a formal **Youth Mentorship Program** where tourism income funds scholarships for young members, who in return, must commit to guiding or digital marketing tasks for the CBTO.

2. Product Innovation Strategies: Leveraging Authenticity

Your most powerful innovative tool is your local culture and environment. Innovation here means developing unique products that are hard for conventional tourism to replicate.

A. The "Co-Creation" Approach

Involve non-tourism professionals in developing new products.

- **Farmers/Artisans:** Work with local farmers to create an **Agri-Tourism package** (e.g., "From Field to Feast: Learn traditional zero-waste farming techniques").
- **Elders/Storytellers:** Design a dedicated **"Oral History and Legends Tour,"** paying elders a premium fee to ensure their knowledge is compensated and preserved.

B. Niche Market Specialization

Instead of broad appeal, innovate by targeting specific, high-value niches.

- **Wellness & Retreats:** If your area is peaceful, innovate by offering packages for yoga groups, meditation retreats, or traditional detox programs, which often pay higher prices for exclusivity and quiet.
- **Academic Tourism:** Develop short-term research stays or cultural workshops for university students or professional groups interested in anthropology, botany, or sustainable development.

C. Integrating Technology into the Experience

Use simple tech to deepen the experience, not replace it.

- **Digital Story Maps:** Create simple **QR codes** at key cultural sites or trail points that link to short videos or audio clips of a local telling a related story or explaining a historical event.

- **Virtual Reality (VR) Teasers:** Develop a very short VR video (if budget allows, perhaps with grant funding) that gives potential guests a taste of the community online, driving bookings.

3. Process Innovation: The Digital Transformation Engine

Innovation in process is about increasing efficiency and transparency using accessible digital tools.

A. Booking and Communication Efficiency

- **Integrated Digital Booking (Equera):** Innovate by treating the online booking platform as your central command center. Ensure all communication (pre-arrival briefing, cultural etiquette rules) is automated and sent digitally to the guest the moment they book.
- **Mobile-Based Inventory:** Use a simple shared calendar app (like Google Calendar) accessible on members' phones to manage homestay availability and guide schedules in real-time. This prevents double-bookings, a major source of customer dissatisfaction.

B. Financial Transparency and Accountability

- **Digital Auditing:** Innovate by replacing the paper ledger with a simple, protected shared spreadsheet for recording all revenue, expenses, and CDF allocations. This instantly meets the **Kitara Foundation's** mandate for **financial transparency**.
- **Mobile Money Payouts:** Innovate the payout process by using mobile money (M-Pesa, MTN MoMo) for all dividends and wages. This creates an **instant, traceable, and undeniable record** of payment, strengthening internal trust.

C. Quality Assurance Innovation

- **Digital Checklists:** Use simple survey tools (like Google Forms) on a smartphone to create a **Digital Quality Checklist** for homestays and guides. This standardizes inspections and instantly records data, allowing the CBTO committee to address issues before negative reviews surface.

4. Social Innovation: Sustaining the Community

Social innovation ensures that the benefits of tourism are deeply woven into the community's fabric, guaranteeing long-term support for the CBTO.

A. The "Skill Swap" Model

- **Action:** Instead of just paying salaries, structure a portion of payment for CBTO activities as **"Skill Certificates"** that can be redeemed for internal services. For example, a young

guide earns a certificate that is redeemed for a traditional weaving course taught by an elder.

- **Result:** This keeps wealth circulating internally and **preserves cultural skills** through economic incentives.

B. Decentralized Community Investment

- **Action:** Instead of the management committee deciding all CDF spending, implement a digital voting system (e.g., via SMS or a simple online poll) where every registered community household gets a vote on how a portion of the CDF is spent.
- **Result:** This enhances **inclusivity and ownership**, strengthening the entire community's commitment to the tourism project.

By committing to continuous innovation across product, process, and social impact, your CBTO will not only survive but thrive, becoming a resilient and inspiring model for sustainable rural development.