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Kei Wei Chia, Bertrand Loze

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The challenge of formulating tourism policy in small island developing states (SIDS): evidence from Seychelles

Kei Wei Chia*

Faculty of Social Sciences and Leisure Management,
School of Hospitality, Tourism, and Events,
Taylor's University,
47500 Subang Jaya, Malaysia
ORCID: 0000-0002-6216-2772
Email: ckeiwei@gmail.com
*Corresponding author

Bertrand Loze

Ministry of Transport Seychelles,
Victoria Mahe Island, Seychelles
Email: bertrand.loze@gov.sc

Abstract: Most small island developing states (SIDS) have tourism policies that guide the country's tourism development. However, formulating a policy is far from straightforward as it involves many stages and revisions. Furthermore, policymakers typically confront an array of difficult and complex policy formulation challenges – which have seldom been delineated in previous research. This study was undertaken in Seychelles, located in the Indian Ocean, using a qualitative approach, with intensive in-depth interviews conducted with fifteen tourism elites involved in the policy formulation process. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that poor cooperation, scarcity of information, lack of public consultation, inadequate policy dialogue, and shortage of human resources are major challenges for tourism policy formulation. The findings offer valuable groundwork for policy researchers, particularly in SIDS.

Keywords: challenges; elites; policy formulation; SIDS; small island developing states; thematic analysis.

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Biographical notes: Kei Wei Chia is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Hospitality, Tourism & Events, at Taylor's University, Malaysia. He completed his PhD at Universiti Putra Malaysia. He has authored and co-authored many articles in refereed and professional journals including. He is also the Associate Director of the Centre for Research and Innovation in Tourism (CRiT), Taylor's University. His current research interests are in the areas of island tourism, community-based tourism, medical tourism, rural tourism, tourism management, and sustainable tourism.

Bertrand Loze is currently the Director of Policy and Strategy at the Ministry of Transport, Seychelles. He obtained his Master's degree at the University of Seychelles. He was a geography teacher and policy analyst before joining the Ministry of Transport.

1 Introduction

As tourism development is crucial for the economy of small island developing states (SIDS), many policy formulations are centred on the blue economy, where ocean resources are used for the sustainable development agenda (Akpomera, 2020). The Republic of Seychelles (hereafter Seychelles) has 115 islands scattered across the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), with a population of approximately 100,500 (National Bureau of Statistics Seychelles, 2022). Tourism is the main economic sector, which supports at least 30% of employment and contributes to approximately 72% of the country's GDP (Seychelles Trade Portal, 2024). In Seychelles, the Blue Economy Strategic Policy Framework and Roadmap (2018–2030) was formulated to drive economic, social, and environmental sustainability in the country. In developing countries, tourism policy is generally formulated by the elite and regulators, with little stakeholder participation (Jenkins, 2015). Tourism policymaking and administration in Seychelles have consistently been top-down, wherein the federal government typically holds the final decision-making power. Based on a review of the relevant literature, tourism policymaking studies have not received much research attention in the African region (Cobbinah and Darkwah, 2016). Indeed, most tourism policymaking studies in Africa are mainland-oriented (Almeida-García, 2018), with only a few focusing on small island countries (Dhoomun et al., 2022).

Despite the plethora of work that has underscored the significance of policymaking in tourism literature, the challenges of tourism policy formulation have been left ambiguous and frequently underspecified. In general, tourism policy research is considered insufficient in Seychelles and thus requires further investigation. Similarly, the challenges of policy formulation for ascertaining whether similarities exist in this broad spectrum have been largely overlooked. Furthermore, most of the tourism policies in African countries were designed either to assess the effectiveness of policy or promote the development of marine policy and environmental protection (Almeida-García, 2018). Similarly, most research publications have centred on policy implementation, thus leading to an insufficient understanding of the policy formulation challenges that might be useful for policymakers to avoid and learn from recurrent failures (Bovens and 't Hart, 2016).

This study provides empirical insights into the challenges arising in formulating tourism policy. Such challenges must be carefully handled to ease the policy-formulating process. To the best of our knowledge, no policy study has yet explored the challenges of tourism policymaking in Seychelles. Thus, this research aims to understand the challenges of formulating tourism policy in Seychelles and offer clarity about conceptualisations of challenges in the policy context through a thematic analysis.

2 Tourism policy and formulation

Policies are designed to guide decision-making and regulate the behaviour of various players operating within the travel and hospitality industry (Aguinis et al., 2023). Policy formulation is important because it involves identifying problems, guiding, and transforming a set of pre-decisions into final policy decisions (Hansson-Forman et al., 2021). It is perceived as the encoding process and requires full commitment and participation from stakeholders to ensure its success (Dai and Taube, 2021). It is critical to recognise that policy formulation varies widely by country due to differences in governance and political ideas (Müller, 2016). The interplay between policy formulation and implementation is a crucial aspect of policymaking because it is a continuous process (Hill and Varone, 2021). Compared with other nations, SIDS faces several public service complexities that further hinder the already difficult policy process (Everest-Phillips, 2014). Formulating policy at the initial stage is easy, but it becomes challenging during implementation, largely due to the objective set not meeting the target outcomes, resulting in wasting time and resources (Krutwaysho and Bramwell, 2010). Dai and Taube (2021) argued that policy formulation should not merely be based on political decisions but include mutual dialogue and cooperation from stakeholders. However, stakeholders' engagement and expertise frequently lead to conflicting views and interests that delay the policymaking process (Walker et al., 2021). Addressing stakeholders' interests and views often results in challenges, thus, stakeholders' involvement is important to avoiding policy conflict and achieving policy objectives (Hassan et al., 2020).

Political successes and failures have become a focal point for political scientists as they determine whether a political goal is achievable (Mackie, 2016). A successful policy implementation lies in the effective policy formulation and acceptance of the final outcome. Likewise, policymakers need to appreciate and understand the value of decision-making to prevent policy failure. However, assessing policy success is no easy feat as it is influenced by the intention of policymakers (Begley et al., 2019). McConnell et al. (2020) described a three-step procedure to assist researchers in evaluating any policy initiative by drawing on a more comprehensive understanding of the types and levels of success from stakeholders' perspectives. A policy can be successful if three dimensions are met (see Begley et al., 2019) and the target goals are met with no criticism received (McConnell, 2010). Furthermore, reaching stakeholders' consensus in policymaking requires stakeholder involvement and collaborative management in realising policy decisions (Andriotis et al., 2018). Moreover, policy formulation requires long-term collaboration with a range of stakeholders (Hudson et al., 2019).

Some studies have advocated the importance of understanding why policies fail, as well as learning from such failures (Howlett, 2012). Previous research has blamed policy failure on inadequate budget allocations and staffing issues, insufficient stakeholder participation, stakeholders' conflict, lack of collaboration, unclear policy objectives, lack of support from local authorities, lack of monitoring, and policy mistakes (Chia and Muiz, 2021; Liasidou, 2015). While the inclusion of policy actors in policy formulation is crucial, inadequate actor involvement limits the success of policy formulation in its initial phase (Ampaire et al., 2017). Although transparency and stakeholder engagement are viewed as important in policy governance (Bogale, 2023; Drakeford et al., 2020), governments can be reluctant to admit policy failures (Hall, 2013). Stakeholder engagement is crucial during policy formulation and implementation. In some SIDS,

public involvement has been found to be insufficient and the way in which policy is formulated and implemented is generally not inclusive (Scobie, 2016). Therefore, effective communication plays an important role throughout the policy development process (Monsanto et al., 2023). Policy incongruency indicates that contradictions occur at different levels and should be avoided (Schutter et al., 2021). Schleyer et al. (2015) highlighted vertical and four horizontal policy integration, and the inclusive participation of stakeholders as three challenges for mainstreaming policies.

Academics and practitioners in the fields of public policy have also focused on understanding how to respond to specific patterns of interaction between actors to achieve a particular outcome (Eppel and Rhodes, 2018). Policy studies literature encompasses numerous theories that tourism policymakers and others can use to describe the challenges of public policy formulation (Macintosh and Wilkinson, 2016). Morçöl (2013) asserted that complexity theory offers concepts and processes for comprehending the macro/micro issues that lie at the core of the formulation of public policy. In the context of policy, the complex adaptive system comprises a considerable number of individuals operating within institutions, each adhering to specific guidelines or principles that compel them to engage in interactions and negotiations with one another (Stevenson et al., 2009). Several theoretical frameworks for public policy were developed to address the policy challenges and provide suggestions to policy science literature (Manazir, 2023), particularly in the SIDS context (Robinson et al., 2022).

3 Research methods and data collection

We employed a qualitative approach to answer the research aim. The primary purpose of conducting an elite interview is to further the comprehension of the subject's theoretical standpoint by encompassing their perceptions, beliefs, and ideologies (Li, 2022). Meanwhile, the backgrounds of elites can also provide abundant and high-quality data (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). In this study, only policy-making members involved in the tourism policy process were purposively sampled, based on their experience and knowledge about policymaking. An official email was sent to the potential respondents in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tourism to invite them to participate in the interviews, along with an attached brief five synopsis of the interview questions and an ethical approval letter from the university. However, due to certain commitments, some potential interviewees rejected the invitation. The snowball technique was then adopted since it has proved useful for identifying additional potential respondents in elite interviews.

The interviews were supplemented by an interview protocol that comprised a set of topics and specific questions. Fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were held between May and June 2020 at the ministry office and a cafeteria. All of the interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 40–120 min depending on the interviewee's interest and knowledge of tourism policies. This study adheres to the ethical considerations suggested by several researchers (Amore and Hall, 2022). Interviewees were briefed about the purpose of the study and the research process. They were informed that the study was voluntary and that they could terminate the interview at any time or skip any questions. Saturation was reached when responses became repetitive, and additional data did not introduce substantially new insights or perspectives. With consent from the interviewees, all the interviews were recorded and

transcribed. Finally, we assured the confidentiality of the interviewees and assigned pseudonym codes to protect their anonymity.

4 Analysis

We opted to employ a thematic analysis because of its theoretical freedom and flexibility, as well as its ability to offer a variety of analytical choices. The analysis of the interview transcripts began immediately after the transcription process. We followed the six steps of thematic analysis procedures suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The memos taken during the interviews were also used to map and draw ideas and the relationships between them. Several steps were taken to safeguard the trustworthiness of this study. To ensure credibility, we first consciously and carefully chose the informants based on their policymaking experience and expertise. Second, triangulation (e.g., data and analysis) was also used to overcome possible issues of credibility (Natow, 2020). Third, member checking was performed to build credibility by sending the transcripts to the interviewees to validate the accuracy and representativeness of the data. Finally, conformability was somewhat strengthened by establishing an audit trail, and ensuring that all study components were documented and reported (Hadi and José Closs, 2016). To further ensure the study's credibility, the authors first consciously and carefully chose the informants based on their experience and expertise in policymaking.

5 Findings

In total, fifteen interviews were held. The participants' background information is presented in Table 1. Eleven interviewees were females while only four were males. Moreover, most of the respondents had between 1–31 years of experience within tourism. In total, five themes emerged from the data. The following sections describe the themes as divulged by the interviewees.

5.1 Poor cooperation

The majority of the interviewees highlighted poor cooperation as the biggest challenge in formulating a tourism policy. Two interviewees (EL12, EL13) stated that cooperation between the government and other stakeholders tends to be minimal. Meanwhile, there is poor inter- and intra-governmental cooperation and coordination since each department has different goals and objectives. One interviewee (EL4) explained: *“When we look at cooperation from different agencies, there’s a problem! They provide little help because they see tourism policies as not equally important as theirs”*. Similarly, some interviewees (EL4, EL14) supported this statement and agreed that inter-ministry cooperation is important to making policy formulation successful. The interviews also revealed evidence of distrust between the government and stakeholders. For example, one interviewee (EL10) explained: *“Stakeholders feel that we are using the information against them or find their fault, although the confidential statement has been secured by the government”*. Time is another constraint that limits cooperation in collecting information from the stakeholders. Stakeholders are often busy with their own businesses

and reject government invitations. One interviewee (EL5) commented, “*They don’t even have time to fill in the survey forms or even sit down for an interview*”.

Table 1 The characteristics of the interviewees

<i>No</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Designation</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Year of experience</i>
1	EL1	Former Minister of Tourism	Male	30 years
2	EL2	Principal Secretary for Civil Aviation, Ports and Marine	Male	15 years
3	EL3	Principal Secretary of Tourism Department	Female	6 years
4	EL4	Director for Risk Management	Female	31 years
5	EL5	Director for Policy Research, Evaluation and Monitoring	Female	5 years
6	EL6	Director for Standards and Monitoring	Male	30 years
7	EL7	Director for Product Development	Female	14 years
8	EL8	Director for International Cooperation and Communication	Female	6 years
9	EL9	Director for Policy, Research, Evaluation and Monitoring	Female	5 years
10	EL10	Senior Policy Analyst	Female	2 years
11	EL11	Policy Analyst	Female	1 year
12	EL12	Policy Analyst	Female	1 year
13	EL13	Senior Quality and Standards Officer	Female	11 years
14	EL14	Senior Standards and Monitoring Officer	Female	5 years
15	EL15	Senior Standards and Monitoring Officer	Male	5 years

5.2 *Scarcity of information*

Information is deemed an important source for effective policy formulation, but sometimes it may not be obtainable. Interestingly, the majority of the interviewees cited scarcity of information (i.e., statistics) as another challenge in the tourism department (EL10, EL8). Two respondents explained that the information from stakeholders is crucial. For example:

“We need to have enough information from related stakeholders. We can’t draft a policy without information and data!” EL7

“Information normally comes from the stakeholders, particularly from the private sector. So, if private sectors do not provide the information, then we would not be able to formulate effective policies.” EL14

Some of the interviewees expanded on why the information was not obtainable. For instance, one interviewee (EL4) explained that “*stakeholders have no information to provide, although numerous requests were sent to them*”. Some interviewees reiterated that the information provided was not relevant, resulting in delaying the policy formulation process. Indeed, one said:

“We tend to get irrelevant information, not only from the tourism sector, but also from other government departments.” EL13

One interviewee (EL12) reported that the lack of information could partly be attributed to a “*lack of cooperation from the stakeholders*”. Thus, many efforts are taken to acquire the information. For example, one interviewee (EL4) said, “*We have to beg for some agencies to provide information or to participate in formulating policies*”. Another (EL13) stated that the process of collecting information is highly time-consuming, as “*some stakeholders beat around the bush before providing the requested information*”.

Scarcity of information also appears in some inter-government agencies, which was raised as a concern by a few interviewees. One said:

“It is difficult for us to get statistics from the trade department. We call them, write to them, even visit them, but no information is provided to us. This will certainly delay the process of policy formulation.” EL7

5.3 Lack of public consultation

The findings suggest that consultation and input from the private sector are useful because “*it helps to draft and implement tourism policy effectively*” (EL8). However, the lack of public consultation between the government and the stakeholders poses another challenge. This was illustrated by one interviewee:

“Lack of consultation is a challenge, and this presents major drawbacks to the implementation of the policy later.” EL13

A few interviewees shared their frustration with the department’s policy planning process because stakeholders are not invited, resulting in the omission of significant input. The details of the statements are as follows:

“In many countries, including Seychelles, tourism policies are developed by the tourism department, which rarely consults with other bodies or communities.” EL7

“I believe that every policy must touch every affected party and stakeholders should be invited to voice their recommendations. We must accept the difficulty of getting them involved and that is why some policies are not formulated or implemented effectively.” EL1

As a result of not being invited to the policy formulation, tourism policies are challenged by stakeholders. One interviewee reiterated:

“Lack of consultation leads to poorly-designed tourism policies, and this is frequently challenged by the stakeholders.” EL2

5.4 Inadequate policy dialogue

The majority of the interviewees admitted that their department did not communicate with the stakeholders when formulating policies. One interviewee noted that inadequate policy dialogue is a concern that is regularly debated in cabinet meetings. He explained:

“In Seychelles, many people complained that we are not engaging them. They even complain directly to the minister and even to the president.” EL2

Another interviewee commented that there is no platform for policy staff to propose their ideas to higher-level decision-makers. She commented:

“Unfortunately, we don’t have a proper forum to allow every staff in the department to exchange their ideas or experiences.” EL13

Some interviewees suggested that more policy dialogue should be implemented before the policy formulation stage to ensure success. Indeed, one respondent affirmed:

“There should be more policy dialogue. We do not need to have frequent group meetings; it can be done through surveys. Dialogues are important to improving future policy implication.” EL4

This statement was supported by another two interviewees (EL5 & EL11), in that “more policy dialogues are necessary to produce better and sound policies so that the policy can be properly implemented.”

5.5 Shortage of human resources

Shortage of human resources was another concern consistently identified by the interviewees. Some (EL12, EL6, EL3, EL9) revealed that the lack of staff has delayed the policy formulation process. Some interviewees added:

“We have inadequate staff to carry out in-depth research and analysis. This will have impacts on the development of a tourism policy.” EL4

“We do not have enough staff in the policy section in the tourism department. We had only one working staff member, which delayed the policy formulation process.” EL13

Interviewees asserted that the lack of policy staff has caused a problem for a country that depends on tourism. For example, one respondent said:

“Currently, there are only two staff in the policy section, and this is severely insufficient for a tourism department or a country that depends on tourism.” EL4

As a result of a lack of staff in the policy department, some important tourism policies were delayed. This was highlighted by one interviewee:

“The shortage of staff is the key reason why we have yet to formulate a successful sustainable tourism policy, some tourism policy formulation is being delayed!” EL6

6 Discussion

Policies direct actions for accomplishing policy goals (Mwendera et al., 2019). Nevertheless, despite having strong, evidence-based policies, several challenges persist during policy formulation. Therefore, it is important to understand these challenges and plan measures for addressing them. Consistent with prior research, this study also reported the problems of intergovernmental policy formulation (Birkland and Waterman, 2016). As the interviewees highlighted, the responsibilities of different administrations and ministries, as well as the roles between different government departments, need to be clarified. Some researchers have reported that interdepartmental policy collaboration and coordination were poor in their countries (Yao et al., 2023). Thus, stronger interdepartmental collaboration and coordination must be synergised. The interaction between the government and other stakeholders has been characterised as a collaborative

process (Binderkrantz and Christiansen, 2015). However, lack of stakeholder involvement during policy formulation often raises several issues within the policy system. In Seychelles, the interviewees cited poor cooperation between the government and stakeholders as the greatest challenge to policy formation. This could well be due to the difficulty in securing stakeholder support. The formulation of tourism policies is also hindered by inadequately informed policy development when the opinions of the public, who are also the main contributors to policy formulation, are not considered. Previous studies have suggested that involving public participation in the policy formulation process is significant for producing better policies and realising effective decision-making (Teder and Kaimre, 2018). Indeed, involving stakeholders in the policymaking process increases effectiveness, improves decisions, and leads to legitimate, democratic, and realistic results (Christensen and Hesstvedt, 2019). The interviewees also admitted that there are limited platforms where policymakers can engage with the public. Indeed, they described the stakeholder involvement at the policy formulation stage is often minimal. In Seychelles, there is a lack of stakeholders' participation in the decision-making process due to an absence of clear rules, roles, and responsibilities for stakeholders (Cockerell and Jones, 2021).

Public consultation allows the policymakers to listen to stakeholders' views during the policy formulation stage (Choi and Wong, 2023). Surprisingly, the interviews revealed that locals and industry players were often not invited to discuss policy development. This could well be due to Seychelles' top-down, government-led practice (Cockerell and Jones, 2021). The results of the study were *consistent with previous ones* (Yami et al., 2019), where very few public consultations are held at the local level. The results also echoed Adam et al.'s (2020) finding that there is no (or limited) public consultation with representatives from the relevant stakeholders in the policy development stage. To achieve favourable policy outcomes, intensive consultation with interested stakeholders is required at all levels (Prutsch et al., 2018).

Interviewees also indicated that there is a lack of stakeholder involvement in the policy dialogue. Policy frequently changes, meaning that continuous communication dialogue is vital for allowing space for discussion and interpretations (Stevenson et al., 2009). However, the government's ability to establish dialogue is also hindered by a lack of human capital to organise and guide cooperation (Batley and McLoughlin, 2010). Involving stakeholders in policy dialogue can help with understanding public needs, shaping consensus on existing goals and overall policy directions, and improving policy design and implementation (Fusheini and Marnoch, 2020). Thus, a productive dialogue should be in place to facilitate effective policymaking.

The findings confirmed that a lack of data and information hinders the guiding of public policies. As information is vital in the policy formation process, its lack seriously impedes policy formulation. The interviewees agreed that the adequacy and accuracy of information are significant in shaping a sound and effective policy. Some interviewees stated that the amount of information given by the private sector appeared to be minimal and they have also questioned the information's accuracy. In the absence of available data, policymakers find it challenging to draft sound tourism policies. For example, in health policy in Africa, policymakers had a lack of information on the burden and severity of mental illness, resulting in the burden of mental health issues being unknown (Bird et al., 2011).

The interviewees agreed that limited staff numbers can delay policy formulation. SIDS typically have 'brain drain' issues with specialists migrating abroad for work or

higher paying jobs (Timilsina and Shah, 2016). Therefore, it is very difficult to hire staff who are knowledgeable of the policy. The interviewees explained that the technical capacity, such as staff shortages, is further aggravated by staff qualification. This is in line with Cochrane et al. (2017), who cited limited technical capacity as a challenge in policy research. Failing to address human resource issues may result in policy failure, and reduce the effective growth and development of tourism policies (Robinson, 2019). Similar to previous studies (Mwendera et al., 2019; Romate and Rajkumar, 2022), the findings also indicated that the policy department's lack of staff is a huge challenge to the formulation of tourism policies in the country.

7 Research implications, limitations and suggestions for future research

Numerous theoretical and practical implications of this research should be highlighted. From a theoretical perspective, this research allows for a better understanding of the challenges of successful tourism policy formulation in Seychelles. It also extends the knowledge of unsuccessful planning that has been hitherto neglected in the policy literature. Understanding the challenges allows policymakers to make informed decisions to develop strategies and solutions. Similarly, the findings could be shared by similar countries to craft effective policy-making strategies. The findings also provide important practical and policy implications. First, the results show that it is crucial to understand the challenges faced by policymakers in formulating policy. We applied a qualitative approach given the lack of previous knowledge of the subject matter. Furthermore, the key themes found can support scholars in keeping abreast of the main research topics and widening the horizon of policy research. Similarly, it can be concluded that the challenges encountered during tourism policy formulation require further attention. For instance, policymakers should invite stakeholders to participate in the policymaking process and hire more knowledgeable staff. This study supports previous research in the assertion that the policy development process needs to realign to safeguard more inclusiveness, which involves stakeholders at all levels (Cochrane et al., 2017). Makinde (2005) suggested avoiding the top-down approach to developing policies by including the opinions of the public so that they have a sense of ownership and feel compelled to participate in the policy development process. Meanwhile, there should be an effective communication channel (e.g., mass media communication) to better integrate communication. We would also suggest that interdepartmental cooperation is required to attain policy consistency across departments.

Our study has some limitations. First, this study adopted purposive sampling due to its being an exploratory study with no intention to generalise findings. Thus, the findings may be limited to the policy-making population only. This study confined itself to the public policymakers in the tourism department, which may share homogeneity perspectives and biases. However, there is a need to extend focus and research to other policy-making ministries. In addition, future studies could consider extending the focus to policy advocacy groups (i.e., non-governmental or community-based organisations) to increase generalisability, since they play a key role in the policy-making process. Future research could also focus on examining the challenges of the policy formulation process in other SIDS destinations to enhance the generalisability of the results. Thus, further validation of this study is necessary to examine whether its results apply to other regions.

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