

Promoting Agritourism Through Online Agricultural Education Programs

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Introduction/Need for the Innovation

Agritourism, a form of authentic rural tourism, involves the attraction of visitors to farms for recreation and sustainable agricultural education (Ammirato et al., 2020; Ifandi & Rahma, 2020; Chenge et al., 2023; Hassan et al., 2023; Son et al., 2023). The agritourism sector encompasses several activities relating to the management of agricultural enterprises, ecosystem preservation, and leisure management (Son et al., 2023) targeting visitors who seek seasonal relief from the busy urban setting (Widener, 2022). Agricultural educators reflect on innovative avenues to disseminate agricultural information calling for a positive shift towards agritourism webinars and online marketing that responds to dynamism in consumer needs (Mao et al., 2022; Rich et al., 2011). Additionally, Agritourism webinars and online marketing tools are cost-effective, conveniently accessible, encourage immediate information sharing, and connect diverse audiences by sharing agricultural information either synchronously or asynchronously.

In Uganda, our study area, agritourism is a recently recognized enterprise by the Uganda Tourism Board (UTB). The board acknowledges that until the global COVID-19 pandemic that halted traditional outdoor recreation tourism and international travel, little attention had been placed on agricultural tourism as a lucrative source of income in Uganda (UTB, 2020). Similarly, due to the March 2020 nationwide lockdown in Uganda, there was a general increase in interest by urban dwellers migrating to rural areas and investing in subsistence agriculture to cope with business closure, increase in processed food prices, decline in cross-border trade, and loss of office jobs in the metropolitans (Fowler, 2020; Olupot et al., 2021). In 2019, Bris Agro-Safaris was launched as an agritourism enterprise to facilitate the participation of marginalized populations like youth, women, and people with disabilities in agribusiness.

How it works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

Bris Agro-Safaris (BAS) employs a diverse range of initiatives, including monthly webinars, agricultural education excursions, investment advice, and partnerships with rural farms to offer internship placements to university agriculture students. BAS employs targeted online marketing campaigns to promote its monthly agribusiness webinars, leveraging social media platforms such as a dedicated WhatsApp group and its official Facebook page. The selection of webinar themes is guided by both current trends and monthly national and international public holiday celebrations (events), ensuring the content remains relevant and engaging. To gauge participants' interest in specific discussion topics, BAS utilizes the WhatsApp polls feature. Based on the identified areas of interest, the BAS team invites field experts, including model farmers and extension workers to present on these subjects during the scheduled webinars.

Proceeding with the webinars, BAS organizes quarterly farm visits aligned with prior webinars for participants to experience the practical aspects. During one of the four monthly webinars, BAS invites farmers and/or their employees to share practical experiences, providing valuable knowledge on how to navigate the challenges of running enterprises. BAS schedules both the webinars and farm trips on weekends ensuring optimal convenience and participation of members in formal employment. The WhatsApp page was created to allow participants to ask questions and receive answers from fellow farmers and agricultural experts on the platform. Also, farmers seek out contracting BAS to run their farm enterprises on their behalf where they pay a fee to the BAS team to draft a farm business plan.

Results to Date/Implications

A total of 226 members have participated in BAS programs since its inception in 2019, among whom 193 are active in the WhatsApp group including 59 former agriculture graduates. Members (108) came from non-agricultural backgrounds, 63 of whom attended at least one webinar, and 45 participated in farm visits. BAS has had 16 guest speakers, including five Ugandan farmers, a DR Congolese, four agriculture graduates, two agricultural educators, and four practitioners from partnering organizations. Four farmers have contracted BAS to assist in managing their farming enterprises. In addition to Ugandans, three from the DR Congo and four from Kenya, have also attended the webinars. Through BAS, 18 student interns have been paired with partnering dairy and goat farms to complete their required college experiential learning.

BAS has organized 35 webinars including four in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic, 12 in 2020 and 2021 during the pandemic, and 19 in 2022 and 2023 after the pandemic. In 2019, the webinars covered introductory topics such as What is agritourism? What is the agribusiness value chain? however, these topics generated limited interest, with an average attendance of eight members per session and an average of seven for farm visits. Using group feedback, BAS modified the approach by organizing webinars centered around national and international public holidays to raise awareness about the connections between agriculture and social events which increased the average attendance to 19 members in 2020. Improved attendance was attributed to the inclusion of, particularly farmers and using online fliers and a shift to agricultural investment topics, such as poultry farming and kitchen gardening, increased engagement in the webinars.

In 2021, seven webinars focused on business planning, climate change, and dairy production with an average attendance of 43 participants. In 2022, topics centered on chicken farming, goat farming, disability-inclusive agriculture, women empowerment through agriculture, and dairy farming. Goat farming was attended most with an average of 56 members. In 2023, BAS organized three quarterly farm visits, two small-scale goat farms, and one breeder farm. A total of 33 individuals participated in the goat farming trips. In 2023, BAS also introduced beekeeping and duck farming attended by 27 and 18 members respectively.

Future Plans/Advice to Others.

There is a rising interest in urban farming within the Kampala metropolitan area. BAS plans to organize agricultural education excursions for small-scale urban farming enterprises. Access to information from urban farming centers would provide attendees with the opportunity to venture, for instance, into kitchen gardening, for individuals with limited access to land. In our advice, agritourism enthusiasts can fully invest in encouraging youth participation in agribusiness by investing in webinars as informative and persuasive advertisement tools to increase awareness about the opportunities available in agribusiness value chain and the quintessential role played by agriculture education in community development and fostering inclusive involvement.

Costs/Resources Needed

Organizing a webinar costs approximately \$30 to pay for online video conferencing services, flier design, and Facebook advertisement. Costs for trips to farms vary depending on the distance traveled, training fees charged by the farm per attendee, and estimated cost of meals purchased at the farm. Social capital is critical, having connections to model farmers and experts in the field of interest as identified by the participating members. Time and personal dedication are needed.

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