

Community-Based Tourism: Challenges, Strategies, and a Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is an emerging approach to tourism development that emphasizes the active and meaningful participation of local communities in managing tourism resources, with the aim of ensuring sustainable, equitable, and culturally grounded development. This study identifies the key challenges, opportunities, and strategic requirements for CBT through a qualitative approach and documentary analysis. By focusing on essential components such as socio-economic justice, local empowerment, and environmental sustainability, the multidimensional nature of CBT is explored. The findings reveal that centralized governance, infrastructural inadequacies, limited financial capacity, tokenistic participation, inequitable benefit distribution, and weak stakeholder coordination are among the major barriers to CBT development. To address these challenges, strategies such as community education, delegation of authority to local institutions, infrastructure enhancement, justice-oriented policymaking, and improved multi-stakeholder collaboration are proposed. Furthermore, the comparative analysis of successful and unsuccessful CBT experiences in Iran and other countries highlights the necessity of designing frameworks rooted in genuine participation, the mobilization of indigenous capacities, and long-term commitment to sustainability principles. These insights provide practical implications for policy, planning, and management of community-based tourism initiatives.

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism, Sustainable Rural Development, Socio-Economic Justice, Local Community Participation

Introduction

In recent decades, the tourism industry has become one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing sectors of the global economy, earning a strategic position in the sustainable development plans of many countries (Verhun & Bondarchuk, 2022). According to forecasts by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), the number of international tourists is expected to reach approximately 1.8 billion by 2030 (UNWTO, 2020). This rapid growth not only highlights tourism's pivotal role in job creation, income generation, and cultural exchange, but also reveals the need for its strategic and balanced utilization (Naranjo Llopert, 2022). Tourism, as a multidimensional activity, is deeply intertwined with the economic, cultural, social, and environmental aspects of societies (Baig et al., 2024; Marefatnia et al., 2025). With increasing complexities in urban life, social disconnections, and environmental pressures, there is a growing demand for returning to pristine, nature-based, and culturally rich destinations. In this context, rural tourism, an expanding branch of the industry, offers a promising opportunity for reviving local identity, strengthening local communities, and ensuring equitable distribution of economic benefits (Lane, 1994). Rural tourism, with features such as simple lifestyles, cultural richness, close contact with nature, and preservation of traditions, has drawn the attention of researchers and policymakers as a tool for sustainable development (Saad, 2022). It not only contributes to the diversification of the rural economy but also supports demographic and cultural sustainability by creating employment opportunities and curbing excessive migration (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). Although defining rural tourism precisely is challenging due to conceptual differences across countries, it can generally be described as travel to rural areas for experiencing local lifestyles, natural and cultural attractions, and engaging with native communities (OECD, 1994). Activities such as farm visits, participation in festivals, handicrafts, agrotourism, local theater, and ecotourism exemplify rural tourism (Banu, 2024, Tahmasi et al., 2024). The appeal of these activities lies in their deep connection with nostalgia, authenticity, and simplicity qualities that offer relief to tourists in today's fast-paced, industrial world (Phillip et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the development of rural tourism faces several challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, weak local governance, absence of integrated strategies, financial constraints, and deviation from sustainability principles (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). In response, community-based approaches that emphasize active local participation, economic and cultural empowerment, and equitable benefit sharing have been proposed (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). This approach allows local communities to play a proactive role in managing and utilizing tourism resources, turning tourism into a platform for preserving cultural heritage and enhancing quality of life (Hariyadi et al., 2024). The World Tourism Organization has also highlighted rural and community-based tourism in recent years, designating 2020 as the year of Tourism and Rural Development (UNWTO, 2020). Initiatives like "Best Tourism Villages" aim to assess and promote exemplary rural destinations based on criteria such as natural resources, tourism infrastructure, local participation, and sustainability (Komasi et al., 2025). Research shows that aligning tourism policies with the actual capacities of communities is a key success factor. When policies are formulated with attention to social and economic justice, environmental protection, and local engagement, tourism can become a powerful tool for sustainable rural development (Hall & Richards, 2000). Thus, a precise understanding of the dimensions and mechanisms influencing rural tourism development especially from a community-based perspective is of increasing importance. Given the mutual impacts between tourism, local communities, and governance structures, adopting integrated approaches that emphasize planning, education, capacity-building, and stakeholder collaboration is essential. This study aims to investigate the requirements and challenges of CBT development with a focus on justice-oriented, locally participatory, and sustainability-driven approaches in rural areas. Through conceptual analysis and assessment of

local experiences, the research strives to present a strategic framework for rural tourism policy and management that supports balanced and sustainable regional development.

Theoretical Foundations: Tourism, as an economic and commercial activity, plays a significant role in the production of goods and services and contributes substantially to local employment and income (Thommandru et al., 2023). Over the past two decades, the tourism industry has experienced remarkable growth, surpassing many traditional sectors and becoming one of the world's largest economic domains. Beyond economic benefits, tourism also serves as a complementary source of foreign exchange. Countries like the USA, Japan, and Germany are major tourism origin markets, while France, Spain, and Greece are leading inbound destinations (Cottrell, 2003). As one of the key sectors in the global economy, tourism accounted for 10.4% of global GDP, \$1.6 trillion in exports, and 319 million jobs in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019). With international tourist numbers expected to reach 1.8 billion by 2030, effective tourism policy-making has become more vital than ever. In line with this growth, countries need efficient models for tourism development that not only promote economic growth but also align with cultural and environmental sustainability goals (Hall & Seyfi, 2021). In this regard, strategic tourism planning is essential (Salazar, 2012).

Key Components of Tourism Development: According to Inskeep (1991), tourism development requires comprehensive planning and attention to several core components. First are tourist attractions natural, cultural, and historical which play a major role in drawing visitors. Second is tourism infrastructure, including transportation, accommodation, and healthcare services that facilitate the tourist experience. Third is sustainable tourism management through policies that promote environmental conservation and local community participation. Fourth is effective marketing and advertising, particularly to global markets. These elements collectively drive tourism growth and contribute to sustainable economic and social development.

Goals of Community-Based Tourism (CBT): CBT emphasizes active participation of local communities in tourism resource management and infrastructure enhancement (Prasad, 2024). This approach pursues four key objectives: conservation of natural and cultural resources, social and economic development through fair benefit distribution, community empowerment via participation and ownership, and enhancing the tourist experience (Hivazaki, 2006). CBT can create a strong foundation for sustainable rural development by diversifying local economies, preserving indigenous culture, and supporting the environment.

The Importance of CBT: CBT offers educational, economic, and environmental opportunities, making it an effective tool for strengthening local economies and reducing poverty. However, achieving its goals requires long-term planning and empowering communities to manage tourism resources. Developing sustainable strategies in rural tourism can mitigate the negative impacts of mass tourism and improve quality of life in local communities. Within this framework, CBT provides a practical response to the challenges of unsustainable tourism development (Woyo & Musavengane, 2023; Camilleri, 2021).

Tourism Evaluation and Its Role in Industry Development: Tourism evaluation is a key pillar in managing and improving the tourism industry, playing a vital role in enhancing service quality and strategic decision-making. This process identifies the strengths and weaknesses of destinations and services, enabling optimization of the tourist experience and increased customer satisfaction. Tourism evaluation typically spans several dimensions: service and product performance, tourist satisfaction, marketing effectiveness, employee satisfaction, and return on investment. Quantitative and qualitative surveys are commonly used tools that provide reliable data for analysis. Ultimately, regular and systematic evaluation not only enhances efficiency and satisfaction but also supports the sustainable and balanced development of the tourism sector across economic, social, and environmental dimensions (He et al., 2024; Zulvianti et al., 2023; Khater et al., 2024).

The Role of CBT in Sustainable Development: This study, focusing on CBT, highlights the theoretical foundations of the approach and emphasizes the importance of active participation and empowerment of local communities in the tourism process. Within this framework, the role of local communities shifts from passive consumers to active decision-makers. One of CBT's core goals is to balance economic growth with cultural preservation and environmental protection. This approach provides a foundation for equitable and sustainable development where tourism benefits align with the genuine participation of local residents (Kazemi et al., 2024).

The Importance of Integrating Sustainability Principles into Tourism: One of the key findings of this research is the emphasis on the necessity of integrating sustainability principles into tourism planning and management. Sustainable tourism must be designed to minimize negative environmental impacts while creating economic and employment opportunities for local communities and simultaneously preserving cultural identity and indigenous values. The study reveals that community-based approaches, by enhancing participation and ensuring equitable benefit distribution, can provide new pathways for advancing socio-economic justice in sustainable tourism (Baloch et al, 2023; Rahman, S. S., & Baddam, 2021).

Socio-Economic Justice in Tourism: The findings also contribute to the discourse on socio-economic justice in the tourism industry. A major challenge in many tourist destinations is the unequal distribution of economic benefits among investors, governments, and local communities. This study stresses the need for frameworks that prioritize local communities' interests and ensure fair distribution of tourism revenues. Ultimately, it is argued that Community-Based Tourism (CBT) can be an effective tool for sustainable development, socio-economic justice, and the empowerment of local communities. To achieve these goals, policies and management frameworks must be designed to guarantee active local participation and the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources. (Brune, 2022; GIAMPICCOLI et al, 2024; Scheyvens and van der Watt, 2021).

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, aiming to identify the challenges and solutions for community-based tourism development by analyzing its social, economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions. The research method is grounded in documentary studies and content analysis of secondary sources, including scientific articles, official reports by international organizations (such as UNWTO and OECD), specialized books, and prior studies on rural and community-based tourism. To deepen the analytical aspect, comparative case studies of successful, semi-successful, and unsuccessful examples at national and international levels have been utilized. These case analyses aim to extract key patterns and examine factors influencing the success or failure of community-based tourism projects. The analytical framework of this research is formed by combining conceptual analysis, empirical evaluation, and credible sources.

Finding Analysis

Several fundamental challenges hinder the active participation of local communities and full utilization of tourism potential in community-based tourism development. One of the most significant is cultural barriers; local communities often lack sufficient awareness of tourism benefits or hold skeptical attitudes toward its consequences. This results in mistrust and reduced effective participation in tourism projects. Additionally, centralized management structures, where decisions are predominantly made by government institutions, diminish the role of local communities in resource management and weaken their sense of ownership (Rezvani et al.,

2024). Another critical issue is the lack of infrastructure and poor planning. Many villages lack basic facilities such as proper roads, sanitation services, accommodations, and communication infrastructure, which limits tourism development (hosseinpour et al., 2025; hosseinpour And tahmasi., 2025).

Financial constraints are also a serious barrier, as most local communities cannot afford the initial investment in tourism projects and often lack effective financial support. Moreover, there is the issue of unequal benefit distribution. Tourism profits are often captured by elites or intermediaries, leaving ordinary community members with little share, leading to demotivation, dissatisfaction, and resistance to continued tourism activities. Lastly, the lack of coordination among stakeholders is another major challenge. Diverging objectives among governments, the private sector, local communities, and tourists result in disorganization, overlapping roles, and reduced effectiveness of community-based tourism initiatives. To address these challenges, effective solutions have been proposed, classified into three main categories: social empowerment, financial and policy support, and infrastructure and communication enhancement. Firstly, social empowerment is seen as a prerequisite for sustainable community-based tourism development. Raising residents' awareness about tourism opportunities and benefits can reduce negative perceptions and strengthen their sense of ownership. Facilitating active community participation in decision-making processes not only improves the quality of decisions but also enhances responsibility and satisfaction. Secondly, financial and policy support plays a crucial role in operationalizing tourism projects. Many villages cannot execute even small-scale projects due to a lack of initial capital or access to bank loans. Providing low-interest loans or specific financial incentives for local entrepreneurs, along with designing policies to attract local investors, can accelerate development. Moreover, delegating authority to local councils and village administrations in policymaking and implementation can strengthen real community participation and improve local tourism governance. Lastly, enhancing infrastructure and effective communication is vital to tourism success in rural areas. Developing roads, eco-lodges, sanitation services, and communication infrastructure is essential for attracting tourists. Additionally, using local and national media to promote tourist destinations and their cultural and natural features can significantly draw visitor attention. Creating effective communication channels among stakeholders can also increase coordination and synergy in planning and implementation, helping avoid duplication and conflicts of interest and resulting in more coherent outcomes. One of the key findings of this study is the need to develop justice-oriented frameworks in community-based tourism. According to this perspective, sustainable development is only achievable when tourism benefits are distributed fairly among all segments of the local community. This approach integrates local participation, socio-economic justice, and the preservation of cultural and natural resources and emphasizes designing models based on local capacities and real community needs. In summary, effective community participation in decision-making, ownership, and utilization of tourism resources can create a foundation for balanced, equitable, and sustainable development.

Table 1
Challenges and Solutions

Challenge	Problem Description	Proposed Solution
Cultural Barriers	Lack of awareness, mistrust, and absence of belonging	Education, awareness campaigns, local meetings
Centralized Management	Government dominance, exclusion of local communities	Delegation of authority, participatory institutions
Infrastructure Deficiency	Lack of roads, welfare services, health, and internet	Government and private investment, comprehensive planning
Financial Weakness	Lack of access to funds and loans	Creation of local funds, government financial support
Unequal Benefit Distribution	Benefits held by elites and investors	Mechanisms for fair distribution, inclusive participation
Stakeholder Lack of coordination	Conflicting objectives and missions	Memorandums of understanding, joint task forces
Weak Media Presence	Insufficient information, unfocused advertising	Media partnerships, destination branding
Ignoring Local Priorities	Lack of awareness of community needs	Public consultation, participatory project design

Conceptual Analysis of Community-Based Tourism Development

A deep understanding of the multiple dimensions of community-based tourism development requires a systemic view of the interrelations among challenges and opportunities. In this framework, active local participation and fair benefit distribution play a central role in the development process. Challenges such as cultural barriers, centralized structures, poor infrastructure, and financial constraints, while appearing distinct, are in practice interconnected and collectively weaken effective participation. Hence, a multi-layered and integrated approach becomes essential meaning that addressing any one of these issues requires synergistic responses across other domains. For example, raising community awareness about tourism will not lead to real and effective participation without proper infrastructure or local executive authority. The model and framework presented in Figure 1, by placing “Participation and Fair Distribution” at the core, illustrate that only by balancing soft components (such as culture and governance) and hard components (such as financial resources and infrastructure) can broader goals like social justice, sustainability, and community empowerment be achieved. This approach provides a foundation for shifting from top-down policies toward participatory, community-driven models that address local needs and specific regional challenges.

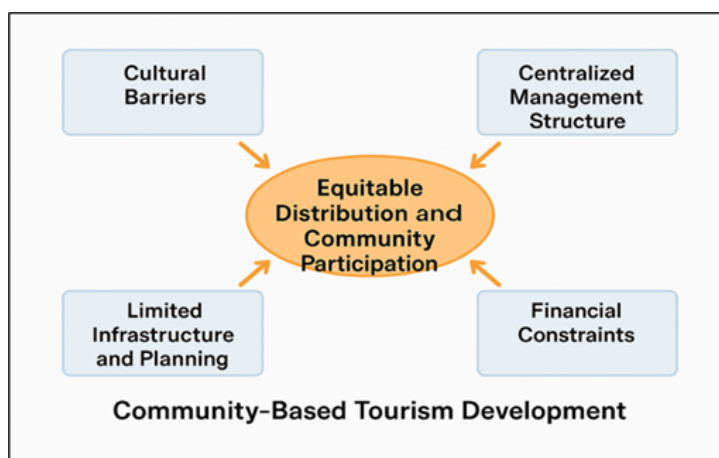


Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework for Community-Based Tourism Development

Comparative Case Studies of Successful and Unsuccessful Community-Based Tourism

Studying real-world examples in the domain of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) plays a significant role in understanding the operational aspects, opportunities, and challenges of this approach. A review of various countries and regions demonstrates that the success of CBT is highly dependent on the design, implementation, and extent of actual community involvement.

International Experiences

Among successful examples is Bhutan, which has developed tourism based on the “Gross National Happiness” philosophy and the “High Value – Low Impact” model. In one of its mountain villages, full community participation throughout the planning stages and economic engagement has led to the preservation of local culture, increased household income, and reduced migration. However, heavy reliance on government support and restricted access for mass tourists pose long-term sustainability challenges. Conversely, the experience of Indonesia’s Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park is a failed example. Although the project began with support from international organizations including UNWTO, the lack of genuine community participation in decision-making led to control by foreign companies. This resulted in local dissatisfaction, protests over negative impacts, and feelings of exclusion. Analysis shows that superficial participation, misuse of the CBT brand, and unequal benefit distribution were major weaknesses in this experience.

Domestic Experiences (Iran)

At the national level, the village of Kandovan is recognized as a successful example of community-based tourism (CBT). The direct involvement of households in services such as eco-lodges, tour guiding, and handicraft sales, along with the sustainable use of the village’s rock-cut architecture, has led to increased employment and income particularly for women and youth. However, the lack of specialized training in tourist management and the threat of erosion to the historic fabric of the village are considered weaknesses of this model. In contrast, the experience of Alamut village in Qazvin serves as a semi-successful case. Despite its natural and historical attractions, local community involvement in the tourism value chain has been limited, with the major benefits being reaped by external actors. The absence of tourism education,

empowered local institutions, and effective communication between the government and the community are key barriers to successful development in this region. Finally, the community-based tourism project in the village of Souza (Qeshm) is regarded as an unsuccessful experience, highlighting structural weaknesses in both design and implementation. This project, developed through the intervention of the Free Zone Organization and some NGOs without meaningful community participation, faced public dissatisfaction and was terminated prematurely due to its top-down approach, bureaucracy, and lack of trust-building. One of the major criticisms of this project was the transformation of local resources into tourist attractions without yielding tangible benefits for the local community. A comparison of these experiences reveals that genuine community participation, balanced governmental support, education and capacity-building, and equitable distribution of benefits are fundamental pillars for the success of CBT projects. In the absence of these factors, even projects backed by major institutions may end in failure.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that community-based tourism (CBT) can serve as an effective tool for achieving sustainable development, provided that principles of genuine participation, equity in benefit-sharing, and systematic and targeted use of local capacities are placed at the core of policy-making and planning. In contexts where many tourism projects especially in rural areas have failed or progressed with token participation, this analysis shows that neglecting local communities, weak stakeholder coordination, and unequal resource distribution are the main causes of these failures. Conversely, the CBT approach, through the integration of three key dimensions environmental sustainability, socio-economic justice, and preservation of local cultures can provide a foundation for poverty reduction, empowerment of local groups, enhancement of social capital, and cultural cohesion. The conceptual model proposed in this study emphasizes the simultaneous interaction among cultural, managerial, infrastructural, and financial dimensions, and underscores that development can only lead to long-term sustainability through a multi-layered, community-oriented, and participatory approach. Based on the study's findings and drawing on the analysis of challenges, domestic and international case studies, and a conceptual review of the research literature, the following recommendations are presented as practical strategies for improving the implementation quality of CBT projects:

- Empowering local communities
Raising awareness, providing training in management and tourism skills, and enhancing cultural and economic literacy at the local level are crucial foundations for the success of CBT. This process should be carried out through local institutions, universities, and civil society organizations to reinforce internal sustainability.
- Developing justice-oriented frameworks
Designing policies that ensure transparent, fair, and participatory distribution of benefits is essential to prevent the monopolization of resources by specific groups.
- Strengthening rural infrastructure
Tourism cannot be sustainable without infrastructure. Investment in accommodation, healthcare, transportation, internet access, and welfare facilities enhances the tourist experience and increases return on investment.
- Developing participatory local institutions
Establishing councils, cooperatives, or tourism entities centered on the local community increases bargaining power with higher-level authorities and strengthens local governance.

- Enhancing stakeholder coordination
Creating platforms for dialogue, collaboration, and synergy among the government, private sector, local communities, and NGOs is essential to prevent conflicts of interest, duplication of efforts, and resource waste.
- Establishing continuous evaluation and monitoring systems
Utilizing localized indicators to assess project effectiveness, stakeholder satisfaction, and social, economic, and environmental impacts plays a crucial role in performance improvement and can contribute to greater transparency and accountability.

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