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Towards sustainable tourism development: Understanding key proponents

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a growing tourism facet in recent years, gaining acceptance among tourism developers and stakeholders; as a tourism development model that is economically viable, socially acceptable, and environmentally friendly. Nonetheless, tourism development faces numerous challenges, including displacement of people, cultural commercialization, organic dilapidation, and economic dependency resulting from social-economic development. As a result, many countries have begun to embrace long-term sustainable tourism development goals, an essential component of achieving Vision 2030. Therefore, this paper propagates the discussions surrounding corroboration approaches, tourism infrastructure, stakeholders' role, and government policies' influence on sustainable tourism development. To support its thesis, the paper develops a conceptual framework to guide tourism practitioners and other stakeholders in understanding and dissecting sustainable tourism models and knowledge. The findings emphasize stakeholders' collaboration framework, the need for adequate and supportive tourism infrastructure, and the foundational basis of public-private initiatives to enhance tourism growth.

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Introduction

In modern tourism practices, the tourism industry as an economic driver has come under increased scrutiny for its ability to improve local communities and destinations' social-cultural, environmental, and economic conditions. Among these are increased tourism-related businesses, a source of government revenue, job openings for the locals, and improved living standards. While the industry has shown great potential, such gains are offset by costs such as negative social-cultural impacts, habitat fragmentation, and environmental degradation. The UNWTO, among other stakeholders, has re-emphasized the importance of controlled tourism growth and development to attain sustainable long-term tourist activities in a destination, which directs towards sustainable tourism developmental frameworks (World Tourism Organization [WTO], 2017).

The industry has experienced gradual growth since the 1950s, emerging as an integral source of direct, indirect, or induced economic and social-cultural development, with its receipts doubling in the 20th century (Velempini & Martin, 2019). The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) recognizes the tourism industry as the world's highest export earner, representing 10.4% of the world's gross domestic product while accounting for nearly 10.6% (in 2019) and 8.9% (in 2020) of employment (WTO, 2020). Subsequently, in Africa, the UNWTO report indicates that tourism experienced a 75% decline in international tourist arrivals, due to the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) effects (UNWTO, 2021). In a country like Ghana, in 2017, the tourism industry was the fourth-highest economic earner after oil, gold, and cocoa, contributing to 7.1% of the GDP (PWC, 2021). The accelerated recognition of tourism as a critical economic contributor is also upheld by South Africa (South African Tourism, 2020), wherein 2019, tourism contributed 2.6% of the country's GDP (\$9.06 billion in tourism receipts), becoming the fourth revenue earner behind the chemical, oil, and automotive industries (World Data, 2021).

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Despite its huge potential, the tourism industry is faced with rising concerns encompassing tourism as an unfettered industry, environmental issues, the viability of balancing and maintaining seasonality-dependent economies, and the commoditization of local communities' culture (MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019). This then calls for the need to balance social, economic, and environmental aspects of tourism development, all engraved in the principle of Sustainable Development Goals. This concept emerged in the 1980s from the Brundtland Commission of 1987, which defined it as "Development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In the tourism field, the UNEP(2005) avert that sustainable tourism accounts fully for today's and future environmental, social, and economic impacts while addressing the needs of the industry, host communities, visitors, and the environment (Mathew & Nimmi, 2021).

Based on the above definitions, sustainable tourism development is achievable if natural resources are optional, collaborative frameworks among key tourism stakeholders are geared towards knowledge sharing, investment in tourism infrastructure and stakeholders' roles are upheld. Collaborations are seen as seeds of goodwill for contemporary sustenance in economic and social developments around tourism destinations (Dayoub et al., 2020). The continuous growth of the tourism industry requires the provision of investments in tourism infrastructure that preserves the surrounding natural environment. On the other end, the roles of key tourism stakeholders surpass their gains, which must facilitate required tourism legislation, preservation of local cultures, and strategic-directional setting. It is therefore paramount to have a clear understanding of the proponents leading to the development of sustainable tourism (Dayoub et al., 2020; Mathew & Nimmi, 2021; Seraphin & Gowreesunkar, 2021). Hence, this paper gives an analogy of four key components catalysing the growth and development of sustainable tourism, compounded by tourism infrastructure, tourism collaborations, the role of stakeholders, and government policies. The paper concluded by developing a sustainable tourism development conceptual framework.

Theoretical foundation

From the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development, development goes beyond the economic phenomenon where countries enjoy a passive GDP while balancing its impact for today and the future (Gebrehiwot & Gebre, 2015). This definition contentiously opens a debate on how exhaustible tourism resources can be prudently exploited today while being preserved for future generations. Sustainable development theoretical interpretations emphasize economic and environmental frameworks while shying from social dimensions. Pearce and Warford (1993) support this economic lens by suggesting that economic perspectives on sustainable development would be far worse for future generations than current generations. Harrison et al. (2015) critiqued that view by introducing a broader perspective on sustainable development that includes social, environmental, and social-cultural aspects. The same notion is enhanced by the World Bank's (2019) development report, whose findings concluded that countries should adopt quality development that periodically reconciles poverty alleviation. Each roadmap for sustainable development has interrelated disciplines and techniques for consideration in their implementation cycle. In linking to the tourism industry, the sustainable development theory guides benefits accrued from development policies (Connelly and Sam, 2018), collaboration aspects for various stakeholders, and the ultimate roles played by key stakeholders for future considerations (Hussain et al., 2015). For this reason, the theory creates a foundation for understanding how sustainable tourism development can be viewed in terms of its impacts, defined by tourism collaborations, infrastructural frameworks, and critical stakeholder roles.

Tourism stakeholders

Both national and local governments form a critical part of tourism stakeholders (Woo et al., 2018). For example, an empirical review by Chili and Xulu (2015) revealed that the local government's role within tourism development planning is to ensure the plight of the poor is upheld at all costs. This can be managed either directly (formulation of regulations and providing security and stability) or indirectly (providing support to the private sectors and investors and encouraging the proper use and appreciation of heritage sites and culture) (Atun et al., 2019). This supports Saito and Ruhanen's (2017) study that argues that all government levels bear the responsibility, not just of an interventionist, but a more profound influence on destination management and tourism development cycles. In another study, Amerta (2017) examines the role of tourism stakeholders in developing a village tourism initiative in India. This qualitative study's results reveal that local government majorly provides the strategic direction for the local stakeholders, whose roles are limited to 'watch dog' activities, emphasizing destination preservation and consultations in the early stages of decision-making. In Northern Ghana, Amoako et al. (2021) examined the role of stakeholders in heritage sites' sustainability issues. Their study followed a qualitative scope. Semi-structured questionnaires were administered among 12 purposively selected respondents. NVIVO software analysis results revealed that both the local community and the government's roles formed an integral part in promoting sustainable destinations. Additionally, the study identified sustainability challenges; a high level of illiteracy, low funding, and a lack of tourism education for youth. While this case study emphasized the importance of local government and community in tourism sustainability, the triangulation of data collection and analysis techniques is lacking, as well as the broader role of tourism stakeholders.

From the literature, local communities' and governments' roles are critical in influencing tourism sustainability. Linking to their unique contributions to sustainable tourism growth and development, empirical studies are not clear on specific stakeholders' influence on the outcomes based on their initiative (Musavengane et al., 2019). This then presents an avenue to explore how exactly

these tourism stakeholders' initiatives and functions contribute to sustainable tourism, in a different scope, where both local government and the aboriginal hosts play critical roles in the sustainable tourism development agenda (Korstanje & George, 2020).

Tourism infrastructure

Basically, according to Munaf et al. (2019), infrastructure can be divided into "economic infrastructure or physical infrastructure used both in the production process and used by the community, such as electricity, telecommunications, transportation, irrigation, clean water and sanitation, and waste disposal, and social infrastructures, such as health and education". Therefore, the lack of adequate infrastructure can be detrimental to tourism growth; in the local or international context.

Empirically, Munaf et al. (2019) investigated the influence of infrastructural developments on environmental and tourism development within Painan Beach in Indonesia. The study employed a causal survey method to sample 180 beach stakeholders purposively. The path analysis results revealed that tourism infrastructural developments had a direct and significant effect on the environment and tourism development. The limitation accounted for by this study culminates from its case study nature, which cannot be generalized within the local context. Hosseini and Hosseini (2021) assessed tourism among third-world states, mirrored in an infrastructure context, using two-staged efficient slack measures. The case study proxied data from 24 countries in 2013, 2015, and 2017. Data envelopment analysis indicated that unfavourable tourism industry performance results from undeveloped infrastructure and poor strategies to establish and improve tourism infrastructure, implicating dissatisfaction among regular tourists. Mandic et al. (2018) examined a case study on the implications of recreational facilities and tourism infrastructure on Croatian tourism development. The study administered 312 semi-structured questionnaires among tourism board members. The mixed-method research design was adopted. Results from Kruskal-Wallis and post hoc test and regression analysis revealed that recreational facilities and tourism infrastructure show vital contributions to the tourism development process. These studies were an amalgamation of empirical analysis and case-study scenarios, hence limiting the generalizability and applicability of the results in developing countries.

Scholars have not reached an agreement on what tourism infrastructures should constitute. From the empirical studies, economic infrastructure has received massive attention while shying away from crucial environmental, transport, and social infrastructural dimensions (Das & Naskar, 2018; Dinu, 2018). This requires meticulous planning and policy formulations anchored on quantitative and qualitative infrastructure statistics. Despite the infrastructural development inadequacies within a touristic destination, there is a need to identify and implement suitable tourism infrastructural policies that would enhance sustainable tourism relevance and continuity (World Bank, 2020). Therefore, further studies should identify essential infrastructural frameworks that strengthen sustainable tourism development.

Tourism collaborations

Boitumelo (2021) examined the dimensions of collaboration to promote sustainable tourism development among businesses in Lesotho. Boitumelo's study followed a qualitative approach with an interpretivist paradigm. Data collection adopted structured questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to collect data from 14 organizations. Constant comparative analysis results revealed a lack of solid collaborations for tourism developments. Despite the findings, this study's scope was limited to subjective analysis, giving an avenue to combine both subjective and objective analyses. Park and Kohler (2019) examined a case study on travel2change for collaborative initiatives on sustainable tourism in Hawaii, using a strategic bridging model. In-depth discussions were used to collect data from 13 travel2change partners. Cloud-based analysis findings indicated action initiatives for stakeholders to synthesize resources for sustainable tourism. This study's qualitative and case-study nature requires a more resilient analysis model, encompassing a mixed-method paradigm, to cover a broader study scope. Chimirri (2020) investigated a case study on collaborative configurations for tourism development in Greenland. The study was exploratory and proxied interviews for data collection among 36 institutions. The workshop discussions reconceptualized the collaborative models in tourism development, identifying joint configurations for consideration in shaping new future studies on the sustainability of tourism. Although the study identifies new collaboration insights, the case study approach implicated the generalizability of the study results.

Pieces of literature have shown that tourism collaboration frameworks are embracing participatory-process orientations while limiting an understanding of the inherent ideas concerning alternative collaborative models in the planning and implementation of collaborations with empirical applications. The literature has also identified that scholars prefer high-end diplomatic collaborative approaches, policy-making, marketing alliances, and research and development, spearheaded by international corporates while forgetting the contributions of local-level collaborative initiatives.

Government policies

Dangi and Petrick (2021) investigated a case study in Texas on how all-inclusive-sustainable tourism can be enhanced through policy governance. The study used purposive snowball sampling and semi-structured interviews among 40 business owners and government officials. Qualitative and Structural analysis findings revealed the existence of mutual collaborations among stakeholders in critical stages of tourism policy formulations. The findings resonate with the Kenyan revised tourism policy, which capitalizes on an inclusive development process for tourism recovery (MTW, 2020). It then calls for an in-depth examination of how government policies can incorporate all stakeholders in tourism development decision-making. Sosial et al. (2020) examined the influence of government policies on the sustainability of the Indonesian tourism industry. Field surveys and accidental interviews were used to collect data.

Data were analyzed using sociometric approaches. The overall findings revealed a conflicting conclusion that government policies catalyze social-cultural conflicts. Therefore, this study recommends government policies that must seek a balance to cater to society's social-economic aspects.

Connelly and Sam's (2018) exploratory study sought to understand how Guyana's government policies would enhance tourism development by 2025. Document analysis concluded that institutional strengthening and community empowerment could not be realized if tourism development ignored government policies. The findings correlate with Mnguni et al.'s (2020) study in South Africa. After reviewing the literature, the study found that government policy interventions at local levels govern the coordination of sustainable tourism initiatives and strategies. Despite the two studies pinpointing the value of policies in strengthening sustainable tourism development, a localized context analysis to understand whether the same view can be upheld is needed.

From the above review of related literature materials, stakeholders' activities significantly impact tourism destinations' success or failure, determining sustainable competitive advantage among tourism destinations (Amoako et al., 2021). The extant literature has failed to outline the stakeholders' exact impact on sustainable tourism outcomes. Additionally, most previous studies have utilized qualitative approaches, while some focused on national governments' roles in tourism development. To address these methodological, empirical, and knowledge gaps, a mixed-method analysis, encompassing a broad study scope with more tourism stakeholders' range is needed.

Second, extant literature has shown that tourism collaboration frameworks embrace participatory-process orientations and high-end diplomatic approaches spearheaded by corporates and international donors while forgetting the ultimate contributions of local collaborative approaches. However, sustainable tourism collaborations require strenuous organizational actors in alternative collaborative directions, with a common agenda, to curb barriers set by inadequate funding, illiteracy by locals, and misleading regulations in the sustainable tourism process (Park & Kohler, 2019). This gap should be addressed by adopting the 'practical perspective' of collaboration, which embraces Chimirri's (2020) integration of discourses; coordination, positioning, networking, and cooperation, which does not limit its analytical scope to the behavioural aspect of collaborative practice.

Thirdly, from the literature, government interventions are essential in pursuing a coordinated and holistic approach to governing visitors' and hosts' behaviour and bridging the gap between private businesses and the community (Kuntai, 2020). The literature also suggests that policy aspects such as responsiveness and collaborative community participation were under-represented (Prakoso et al., 2020), hence the need to investigate how these proponents might affect the development of sustainable tourism development initiatives. Lastly, the stakeholders' roles in sustainable tourism development have been a critical influence on tourism sustainability within local and international tourism studies (Musavengane et al., 2020). Linking to their unique contributions to sustainable tourism growth, empirical studies are not clear on specific stakeholders' influence on the outcomes based on their initiative, for both local government and the aboriginal hosts play vital roles to promote sustainable tourism.

Conceptual Framework based on the proponents of determinants of growth and development

Based on the above literature and discussions, the study proposes a conceptual framework based on the proponents of determinants of growth and development, comprising the role of tourism stakeholders, tourism infrastructure, and tourism collaborations adapted and refined from (Ghoochani et al., 2020; McComb et al., 2017). The proponents cover issues such as local community awareness, stakeholder support and management, development of tourism infrastructure, social, and environmental/ecological infrastructures, and cooperation and networking models to enhance sustainable tourism. On the other hand, sustainable tourism development is envisioned based on the sociocultural, environmental, and economic values of a destination (Ince et al., 2020). Subsequently, government policies such as benefit-sharing models (tourism revenue), financial and regulatory support for enterprises, diversity and inclusiveness, and change management, are shown to moderate the relationship between the determinants and sustainable tourism development (see Figure 1).

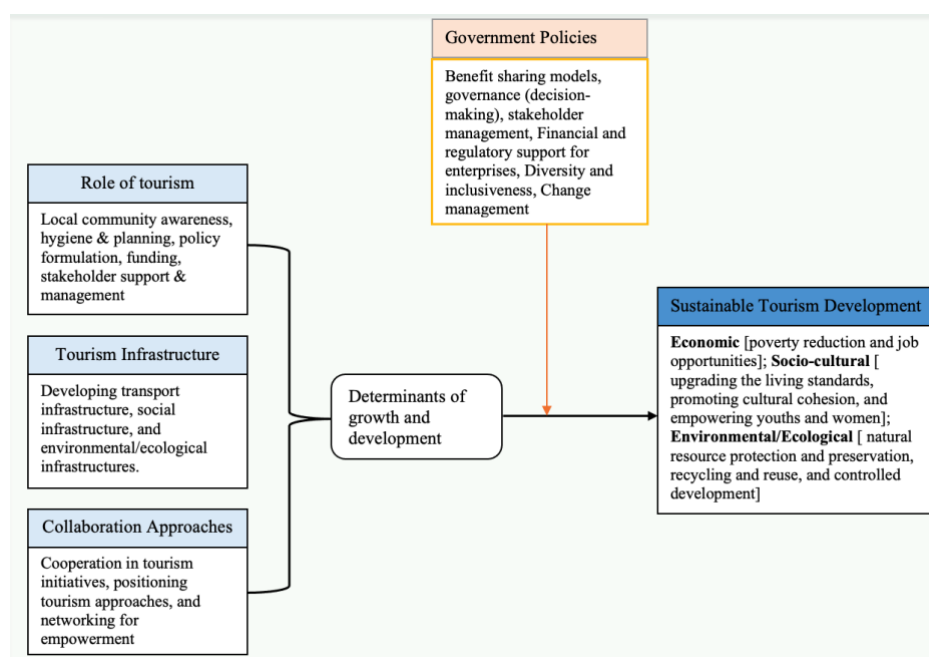


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework of Sustainable Tourism Development; *Source:* Authors' Compilation

Conclusion

The constructivist thinking on sustainable tourism development based on sustainable development theory is not only a road map for tourism practitioners but also forms a basis for the determination of various proponents that constitute the overall growth of tourism. Based on this idea sustainable tourism development then becomes an amalgamation of the whole tourism cycle chain; the stakeholders, infrastructure, collaborations, as well as the governance and support from the governing bodies. At the same time, it aligns with the objectives of various tourism policies and development goals like the overall Vision 2030, for many states. Therefore, tourism educators, tourists, and the industry, in general, should develop milestones based on the developed conceptual model, to determine breakthroughs in the achievement of a triangulated tourism development in all facets, and integrate tourism development objectives within various economic sectors.

Conclusively, given the interdependence and dynamism of tourism, conceptually adopting a holistic framework that determines tourism growth and development while adhering to the sustainability course is difficult. On this note, most studies on the subject are one-sided or progressively biased. However, recent studies have examined the development and history of sustainable tourism by analyzing the sustainability process (Weidenfeld, 2018), with growing interest in sustainable consumption and industry perceptions (Bergquist, 2017), without a deep analysis of combined key inputs like infrastructure, stakeholders, government policies, and collaborations frameworks.

Regarding further recommendations, this study was settled on a conceptual foundation, giving tourism research an in-depth insight into how to tackle the sustainable tourism development debate. Future studies should utilize the developed model to conduct actual studies and disseminate findings for comparison and critique the model. The limitation of one theory, sustainable development theory, in this study, does not in any way discriminate against other development and change theories. Therefore, researchers are welcome to use other theories which resonate with the ideologies of sustainable development, guided by formulated objectives.

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