

A Systematic Review of Sustainable Tourism Practice in Developing Countries: Models, Challenges, And Community Involvement in Post-Conflict Areas

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Abstract

This systematic review investigates sustainable tourism practice in developing countries, with particular emphasis on low-income and post-conflict areas like Bamyán, Afghanistan. The review synthesizes literature to explore the viability of sustainability models, determine common challenges, and evaluate the role of community engagement in tourism development. The review, however, identifies policy implementation gaps, infrastructure, and local stakeholder participation, providing an insight into the ability of sustainable tourism to be used as a socio-economic recovery and culture preservation tool.

Keywords:

Sustainable tourism, developing nations, post-conflict nations, community participation, models of sustainability, Bamyán, Afghanistan

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is universally acknowledged as among the fastest-growing industries in the world, generating meaningful jobs, foreign exchange revenues, infrastructure, and cultural exchange. For the developing world, tourism offers a critical chance to stimulate economic development and alleviate poverty. Yet, through poor planning and irresponsible management, it can also lead to adverse externalities such as environmental pollution, cultural commercialization, and social disequity. Consequently, the terminology of sustainable tourism has received wider attention with a focus on reconciling economic gains with environmental protection and social equity.

In low-income and post-conflict environments, tourism plays an even more multifaceted role. It has the capability to act as a peacebuilding, social reintegration, and community empowerment catalyst. However, such areas also experience particular challenges such as weak governance structures, poor infrastructure, security issues, and low access to international markets. Rebuilding a tourism industry in such vulnerable environments requires context-sensitive, participatory, and long-term planning. An increasing number of studies emphasize local participation to secure local ownership, cultural responsiveness, and fair benefit distribution in tourism development.

This paper conducts a systematic review of sustainable tourism approaches to developing countries, with specific focus on low-income and post-conflict areas. It strives to synthesize the lessons learned from various models of sustainability—ranging from community-based tourism, ecotourism, and pro-poor tourism—and assess the circumstances upon which they thrive or fail. The review also examines key impediments such as political instability, scarce investment, and environmental fragility. Particular focus is accorded to Bamyan, Afghanistan, an area that represents the potential and nuance of sustainable tourism in post-conflict settings. Drawing on a broad collection of peer-reviewed literature and policy guidance, this research aims to recognize both conceptual and practical avenues for leveraging tourism as a sustainable developmental resource. The results seek to advise academics, policymakers, and practitioners on how to scale up worldwide models of sustainability to vulnerable local contexts, while also noting areas of research with potential worthy of further investigation.

2. Methodology

This systematic review adheres to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol. Search strategy was across academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Search terms were "sustainable tourism," "developing countries," "post-conflict tourism," "community-based tourism," and "Bamyan Afghanistan."

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed articles between 2000 and 2024
- Studies on sustainable tourism models, community participation, or challenges in low-income/post-conflict areas
- Articles in English, shortlist after relevance and duplication screening.

3. Sustainability Models in Developing Contexts

Sustainable models in tourism focus on the triple bottom line: economic, environmental, and social sustainability. In post-conflict and developing settings, the following models were most often cited:

3.1. Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

CBT empowers local communities by involving them in tourism planning and operation (Asker et al., 2010). The model is highly suited to post-conflict regions as it provides both income and identity reclamation.

3.2. Ecotourism

Focusing on environmental protection and education, ecotourism is typically applied to biodiverse but economically poor areas (Weaver, 2001).

3.3. Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT)

This model aims to benefit poor people directly through employment, enterprise development, and capacity-building (Ashley et al., 2001).

3.4. UNWTO's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Framework

Most tourism policies in developing countries are in alignment with the SDGs, particularly Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

4. Challenges in Implementing Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism in post-conflict and developing countries has numerous challenges that extend beyond political instability and basic infrastructure. These challenges are usually interconnected and should be resolved comprehensively to facilitate the development of tourism that is economically sustainable, socially equitable, and environmentally friendly. Adopting sustainable tourism in developing countries, especially in post-conflict states, is complicated by:

4.1. Infrastructure Shortfalls

Poor roads, power supply, sanitation, and internet connectivity greatly hamper tourism development in Bamyan (UNDP, 2021).

4.2. Political Instability and Security Issues

Unpredictable political environments discourage tourists and investors. For instance, the unstable security environment in Afghanistan continues to be a chief hindrance.

4.3. Shortage of Skilled Labor

Poor education and few tourism training initiatives limit the level of service delivery and local involvement.

4.4. Financing and Investment Shortfalls

Public and private investment in tourism infrastructure is minimal because of perceived low return and high risk.

4.5. Misrepresentation and Cultural Sensitivity

Misrepresenting or misunderstanding local cultures will cause them to be commodified and lose their authenticity.

5. Post-Conflict Tourism and Community Involvement

Involvement of local communities is the backbone of sustainable tourism, especially in post-conflict environments where local economy and social fabric tend to be weak. Post-conflict tourism development that neglects active community involvement has the potential of worsening inequalities, increasing mistrust, and building dependency instead of empowerment. Engaging local people in tourism planning and management is essential for sustainable development:

5.1. Conservation of Culture Community involvement guarantees that tourism activities respect and support local heritage and traditions.

5.2. Economic Benefits When local people are stakeholders, they benefit economically through employment, local entrepreneurship, and capacity-building.

5.3. Peacebuilding and Social Harmony In areas of conflict, tourism can act as a mechanism for reconciliation through shared objectives and inter-community cooperation (Causevic & Lynch, 2011).

5.4. Bamyan, Afghanistan Case Bamyan is a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage area.

The area has potential for CBT and heritage tourism that is not yet realized because of persistent political and economic issues.

5.5. Participatory Planning and Governance

Community participation in tourism planning in post-conflict areas is important to ensure that local perspectives inform the tourism agenda.

Participatory governance supports openness and fosters trust among authorities, tourism stakeholders, and the community. According to Timothy (2002), involved communities are more likely to embrace tourism activities and serve as guardians of their natural and cultural heritage.

5.6. Ownership and Entrepreneurship

Empowering communities through local ownership of tourism business is a pragmatic response to establishing resilience and economic self-help. This entails marketing micro-enterprises like guesthouses, local handicraft shops, and guiding tour businesses. In Rwanda, for example, community cooperatives along the Volcanoes National Park have been instrumental in

conserving wildlife while earning income for erstwhile conflict-affected communities (Spenceley & Snyman, 2017).

5.7. Education and Capacity Building

Community-based tourism in post-conflict environments tends to require targeted educational programs and skill-building initiatives. These help local populations understand tourism dynamics, service quality, environmental conservation, and cultural diplomacy. Tailored training can also address trauma, conflict sensitivity, and peace education, equipping locals to act as ambassadors for reconciliation through tourism (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015).

5.8. Conflict Sensitivity and Cultural Sensitivity

Tourism programs must be designed with an acute sensitivity to past complaints and social cleavages. Utilities such as Do No Harm frameworks and conflict-sensitive tourism planning (Moscardo, 2008) help assure that tourism does not revive tensions or exclude specific groups. Rather, tourism can facilitate inter-group cooperation by developing common objectives and inclusive forums for cultural expression.

5.9. Reintegration and Healing through Tourism

Tourism can contribute towards post-conflict healing by making room for storytelling, memorialization, and cross-cultural exchange. Heritage sites, war memorials, and community museums provide spaces for collective memory and identity reconstruction. In Cambodia, for instance, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum preserves history as well as employs local guides, artists, and teachers (Winter, 2007).

5.10. Challenges in Community Involvement

Despite its promise, effective community involvement encounters many obstacles:

- **Elite Capture:** Tourism advantages are, in a few instances, captured by influential local elites, excluding the larger group.
- **Lack of Institutional Support:** Poor governance and absence of transparent policy guidelines hampers community involvement.
- **Security Risks:** In cases of persistent instability, communities might hesitate to engage with tourism due to security risks.
- **Cultural Barriers:** In a few conventional societies, gender roles or ethnic differences could limit equal participation.

6. Conclusion

Sustainable tourism for developing and post-conflict areas has huge potential to assist in peacebuilding, economic renaissance, cultural heritage conservation, and sustainability. Yet, as the present systematic review points out, application of theory to practice remains complicated

and unbalanced owing to multi-faceted issues like poor infrastructure, weak institutional capacity, security issues, and marginalized community participation.

A core finding of this review is the importance of aligning sustainable tourism models—such as community-based tourism, ecotourism, and pro-poor tourism—with the socio-political and economic realities of post-conflict contexts. While international frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global blueprint, localized and adaptive approaches that reflect the needs and aspirations of affected communities are essential for success. The Bamyan, Afghanistan, example highlights the specific opportunities and vulnerabilities of applying sustainable tourism in vulnerable environments, where natural and cultural resources are richly available yet remain unexploited because of security, governance, and economic limitations.

The community engagement role was the decisive factor for long-term sustainability. Participatory input into decision-making, tourism enterprise ownership, and involvement in planning processes boost both local empowerment and the genuineness of the tourism experience. Moreover, building community resilience through education, entrepreneurship, and cross-cultural engagement can not only support economic development but also peacebuilding and social cohesion in post-conflict areas.

However, the review is also indicative of important gaps in the research. Most studies are clustered in popular post-conflict destinations, whereas areas such as Central and South Asia—rich in tourism potential and complexities of recovery—continue to be underrepresented in the scholarly literature. Additional context-specific empirical research, longitudinal analyses, and cross-regional comparative research are required to further deepen the international understanding of what constitutes effective sustainable tourism in fragile contexts.

7. Recommendations

On the basis of this review, the following recommendations are put forward for policymakers, development agencies, and tourism stakeholders operating in post-conflict and low income environments:

1. Strengthen Policy and Institutional Frameworks

- Formulate national and regional tourism plans incorporating sustainability principles and ensuring local inclusion.
- Establish cross-sector partnership between tourism, education, culture, environment, and security sectors.

2. Invest in Infrastructure and Connectivity

- Enhance physical infrastructure (e.g., roads, sanitation, digital access) while guaranteeing that developments are environmentally friendly and culturally responsive.
- Enhance accessibility of remote areas by promoting safe, reliable transport and communication systems.

3. Strengthen Local Capacity and Skills Development

- Deliver bespoke training in hospitality, heritage management, foreign languages, and business skills.

- Develop community-owned education programs with conflict sensitivity and intercultural communication.

4. Encourage Community Ownership and Entrepreneurship

- Facilitate micro-financing and cooperative approaches to enable local residents to establish tourism-related business ventures.
- Enable inclusive governance arrangements that promote equitable benefit-sharing and elite capture avoidance.

5. Ensure Security and Build Trust

- Prioritize the security of both tourists and resident populations through collective efforts between local governments and security forces.

Build trust by incorporating community leaders, civil society, and customary institutions into tourism planning and operations.

6. Culturally and Conflict-Sensitive Tourism

- Prevent commodification of culture by marketing genuine experiences and showing respect for community values.

Integrate tourism into comprehensive peacebuilding efforts through cultural exchange activities, human rights and war memory tourism, and post-war reconciliation activities.

7. Enhance Marketing and International Visibility

- To support destination branding campaigns encouraging sustainable and ethical tourism.
- To cooperate with international NGOs, travel sites, and diaspora communities to raise awareness of new destinations such as Bamyan.

8. Facilitate Research and Knowledge Exchange

- To encourage South-South learning through knowledge exchange between communities and practitioners in various post-conflict environments.
- To support longitudinal research and participatory studies to develop strong data on the impact and dynamics of tourism.

By responding to these recommendations through a locally-led, multi-stakeholder approach, sustainable tourism can be a vehicle for transformative change in post-conflict recovery and development. It provides a platform not only for economic rejuvenation, but for the reconstruction of identities, for intercultural dialogue, and the building of a more peaceful and prosperous future in places such as Bamyan and others like it.

Sustainable tourism within developing and post-conflict countries possesses considerable potential for supporting inclusive economic development, cultural protection, and sustainability.

But to achieve this promise, there needs to be:

- Harmonized policy frameworks that suit local contexts
- Increased security and infrastructure development
- Local community capacity development
- Incentives for investors and entrepreneurs

More empirical research is necessary, particularly from less-represented parts of the world such as Central and South Asia, in order to formulate context-specific models for sustainable tourism.

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