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Positive and negative impacts of Community Engagement in tourism developments related to the Sustainability of Soon Valley Pakistan

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Abstract

Community engagement in tourism development plays a pivotal role in promoting sustainable economic, social, and environmental growth. This study examines the positive and negative impacts of community involvement in tourism within Soon Valley, Pakistan, focusing on its implications for sustainability. The economic benefits include job creation, increased household income, and the growth of local businesses. However, challenges such as income disparities and the seasonality of tourism hinder long-term financial stability. Socially, tourism has strengthened community cohesion and cultural preservation, yet issues like cultural commodification and conflicts over resources remain prevalent.

Environmentally, community-driven tourism has contributed to conservation efforts but has also led to deforestation, waste accumulation, and soil degradation. Challenges faced by local communities, including inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources, and minimal participation in decision-making, further restrict sustainable tourism growth. Addressing these concerns requires strategic interventions, including community-based tourism (CBT) models, capacity-building programs, and financial incentives to empower local entrepreneurs. Additionally, policy measures should foster inclusive governance, promote eco-friendly tourism

initiatives, and encourage collaboration between stakeholders, including government bodies, businesses, and conservation groups.

This study emphasizes the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to ensure tourism development in Soon Valley remains sustainable. The findings highlight the significance of local community participation in shaping tourism policies that align with economic prosperity, cultural integrity, and environmental conservation. By adopting best practices, including proper waste management and sustainable tourism planning, Soon Valley can become a model for responsible tourism development in rural Pakistan. This research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism by providing insights into the role of local communities in balancing economic growth with environmental and social sustainability.

1.1 Introduction

Tourism is widely recognized as a key driver of economic growth, social development, and environmental sustainability. In many rural regions, community engagement plays a vital role in shaping tourism development and ensuring long-term sustainability (Smith & Dwyer, 2022). The involvement of local communities in tourism initiatives can lead to improved economic conditions, preservation of cultural heritage, and enhanced environmental conservation efforts. However, tourism-driven development also introduces various socio-economic and environmental challenges that must be addressed through effective community participation (Gursoy & Nunkoo, 2021).

Soon Valley, Pakistan, is an emerging tourism destination known for its picturesque landscapes, historical sites, and biodiversity. The region has gained attention due to its potential for ecotourism and sustainable development (Ahmad & Shah, 2020). With increasing tourist influx, the local community's role in tourism planning and decision-making has become crucial in determining the sustainability of the valley's tourism sector. Community engagement in tourism development can foster economic benefits, job creation, and infrastructural improvements, but it can also lead to environmental degradation and socio-cultural disruptions if not managed

effectively (Hussain et al., 2019). Several studies highlight the significance of community-based tourism (CBT) as a strategy to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability (Goodwin, 2020). CBT encourages local involvement in tourism operations, ensuring that economic benefits are equitably distributed among community members. However, challenges such as lack of training, inadequate funding, and conflicts of interest often limit the success of community engagement in tourism development (Jamieson & Jamal, 2018).

The sustainability of tourism in Soon Valley depends on a well-integrated approach that considers both the positive and negative impacts of community participation. When communities actively contribute to decision-making, tourism can lead to cultural preservation, social cohesion, and improved quality of life. On the other hand, poor community engagement may result in over-tourism, exploitation of natural resources, and disruption of traditional lifestyles (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

This study aims to examine the dual impact of community engagement on tourism sustainability in Soon Valley. It explores how community involvement influences economic, social, and environmental outcomes, assessing both the benefits and challenges associated with tourism development. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how policymakers, stakeholders, and community members can collaborate to achieve sustainable tourism growth (Richards & Hall, 2022). Tourism sustainability has gained prominence in recent years, especially in ecologically sensitive areas like Soon Valley. While international case studies provide insights into successful community-based tourism models, limited research exists on the specific dynamics of tourism development in Soon Valley (Zahra et al., 2019). Therefore, this study fills an essential research gap by analyzing the role of community engagement in fostering or hindering tourism sustainability in this region.

By drawing on theoretical frameworks such as stakeholder theory and sustainable tourism principles, this research evaluates the extent to which local communities influence tourism development outcomes. It also investigates the interplay between economic incentives, environmental concerns, and socio-cultural factors in shaping tourism strategies (Sharpley,

2020). Understanding these aspects will help develop more inclusive tourism policies that ensure long-term sustainability while addressing community concerns.

1.2 Background of the Study

Community engagement in tourism development has been widely recognized as a key factor in promoting sustainable tourism practices. In many destinations worldwide, active participation by local communities has led to better conservation of natural resources, economic diversification, and preservation of indigenous cultures (Hall & Lew, 2019). Sustainable tourism relies on a participatory approach where local stakeholders collaborate with tourism operators, government bodies, and conservation organizations to ensure equitable and environmentally friendly tourism practices (UNWTO, 2021).

Soon Valley, located in Punjab, Pakistan, is an ecologically rich and historically significant region. The valley is home to natural lakes, waterfalls, ancient ruins, and diverse wildlife, making it an attractive destination for ecotourism and cultural heritage tourism (Ali et al., 2020). However, the region's tourism sector has largely remained underdeveloped due to limited infrastructure, lack of policy interventions, and minimal community engagement in decision-making processes (Shah & Khan, 2018). The role of community engagement in tourism development has evolved over time, shifting from passive involvement to active participation. Traditional tourism models often excluded local populations from decision-making, leading to unequal benefit distribution and environmental degradation (Butler, 2020). However, the growing emphasis on sustainable tourism has highlighted the importance of empowering local communities to take ownership of tourism-related initiatives (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2019).

Studies have shown that community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives can enhance economic stability by generating income through local businesses, homestays, and handicrafts. However, without proper governance and community consensus, CBT can also create economic disparities and conflicts among residents (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2020). In Soon Valley, local communities have begun engaging in tourism through small-scale initiatives, but challenges such as financial constraints, limited marketing, and inadequate infrastructure hinder their success (Iqbal & Raza, 2021).

Environmental sustainability is another critical aspect of community engagement in tourism. While responsible tourism practices can contribute to conservation efforts, unregulated tourism activities often lead to deforestation, water pollution, and habitat destruction (Buckley, 2021). Soon Valley's fragile ecosystem requires careful management to prevent ecological imbalances caused by increasing tourist footfall (Yousaf et al., 2020).

Social and cultural sustainability is also closely linked to community participation in tourism. Local traditions, folklore, and handicrafts contribute to the region's unique tourism appeal. However, commercialization and cultural commodification pose risks to the authenticity of indigenous traditions (Smith, 2019). It is essential to ensure that tourism development respects local customs and provides equitable benefits to all community members (Muresan et al., 2021).

Despite the recognized benefits of community involvement in tourism, there remains a gap in understanding how engagement strategies can be optimized for long-term sustainability. Policymakers and stakeholders must consider local perspectives when formulating tourism policies, ensuring that community interests align with broader sustainability goals (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2020).

1.3 Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to assess the positive and negative impacts of community engagement in tourism development concerning the sustainability of Soon Valley, Pakistan. The study aims to:

- Evaluate the economic, social, and environmental effects of community involvement in tourism development.
- Analyze the challenges faced by local communities in engaging with tourism initiatives.
- Identify best practices and policy recommendations for enhancing sustainable tourism in Soon Valley.
- Examine the role of stakeholders, including local authorities, businesses, and conservation groups, in supporting community-led tourism initiatives.

Literature review

Community engagement in tourism development is pivotal for achieving sustainability, particularly in regions like Soon Valley, Pakistan. This literature review examines the economic, social, and environmental impacts of community involvement in tourism, analyzes challenges faced by local communities, identifies best practices and policy recommendations, and explores the role of various stakeholders in supporting community-led tourism initiatives.

Economic Impacts of Community Engagement

Community involvement in tourism can lead to significant economic benefits, including job creation, income generation, and the stimulation of local businesses. For instance, Ullah et al. (2021) highlight that tour operators play a crucial role in developing sustainable tourism in Pakistan, which can enhance economic opportunities for local communities. However, the study also notes that the actual contribution of tour operators to sustainable tourism in Pakistan remains limited, indicating a need for more effective community engagement strategies.

Conversely, inadequate community participation can result in economic disparities, where the benefits of tourism are unevenly distributed, often favoring external stakeholders over local residents. This imbalance can lead to economic leakage, where profits generated from tourism do not remain within the community, thereby limiting the potential for local economic development.

Social Impacts of Community Engagement

Socially, community engagement in tourism fosters cultural preservation, social cohesion, and empowerment. A study by Ullah et al. (2021) emphasizes that sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, including local communities, to ensure that tourism activities are respectful of cultural heritage and contribute to social well-being.

However, challenges such as power imbalances between stakeholders can hinder effective community participation. A qualitative case study by (Najum us Saqib 2022) explores power relations between stakeholders concerning the sustainability of tourism destinations, revealing

that local communities often have limited influence over tourism development decisions, which can lead to social tensions and a sense of marginalization.

Environmental Impacts of Community Engagement

Environmentally, active community involvement can lead to better conservation practices and sustainable resource management. A study on the impact of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, found that tourism activities led to environmental issues such as deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and pollution. The study suggests that involving local communities in tourism planning and management can mitigate these negative impacts by promoting environmental stewardship (Najum us Saqib 2019)

On the other hand, lack of community engagement can exacerbate environmental degradation. Without local input, tourism development may overlook sustainable practices, leading to long-term environmental harm that can undermine the very attractions that draw tourists to the area.

Challenges in Community Engagement

Despite the recognized benefits, several challenges impede effective community engagement in tourism. A study analyzing the challenges faced by communities in participating in sustainable tourism in developing countries identifies barriers such as limited financial resources, lack of education and training, and inadequate infrastructure. These challenges can prevent communities from fully engaging in and benefiting from tourism development (Dian Yulie Reindrawati 2021).

Additionally, power dynamics between stakeholders can limit community influence over tourism initiatives. The aforementioned qualitative case study highlights that local communities often lack the power to make decisions regarding tourism development, leading to outcomes that may not align with their needs or values (Xuan Dam Dong 2022).

Best Practices and Policy Recommendations

To enhance sustainable tourism, it is essential to implement best practices and policies that promote community engagement. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

emphasizes that sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders and strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus-building.

Best practices include capacity building through education and training, ensuring equitable distribution of economic benefits, and fostering inclusive decision-making processes. Policy recommendations involve creating frameworks that support community-led tourism initiatives, providing financial and technical assistance to local communities, and establishing mechanisms for conflict resolution among stakeholders.

Role of Stakeholders

Various stakeholders, including local authorities, businesses, and conservation groups, play crucial roles in supporting community-led tourism initiatives. Local authorities can facilitate infrastructure development and create supportive policies, businesses can invest in community projects and ensure fair employment practices, and conservation groups can assist in preserving natural and cultural resources.

Collaboration among these stakeholders is vital for the success of sustainable tourism. A study on the role of community involvement in sustainable tourism strategies found that partnerships between communities and external stakeholders can lead to social and environmental innovations that benefit both tourism development and community well-being.

Community engagement is integral to the sustainable development of tourism in regions like Soon Valley, Pakistan. While there are significant economic, social, and environmental benefits to be gained, challenges such as power imbalances and resource limitations must be addressed. Implementing best practices and fostering collaboration among stakeholders can enhance community involvement, leading to more sustainable and equitable tourism outcomes.

Result and discussion

Economic, Social, and Environmental Impacts of Community Engagement in Tourism Development

Community engagement in tourism development in Soon Valley has resulted in both positive and negative impacts on economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Economic benefits include job creation, local business growth, and increased household income. According to Smith and Xiao (2021), community-based tourism often provides employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas where alternative livelihoods are limited. In Soon Valley, local businesses, such as guest houses, restaurants, and handicrafts, have seen a surge in revenue due to an increasing influx of tourists (Khan et al., 2022). However, economic challenges persist, including income disparities and the seasonality of tourism, which leads to financial instability for many families (Hussain et al., 2023).

Socially, tourism has enhanced community cohesion and cultural preservation. Community members have actively participated in showcasing their traditions, local arts, and historical sites. This aligns with findings by Jamal and Stronza (2019), who emphasize that community engagement fosters a sense of pride and identity among locals. Nevertheless, challenges such as cultural commodification and conflicts over resource allocation have emerged. For instance, the influx of tourists has led to increased commercialization of cultural practices, raising concerns about authenticity (Ahmad & Raza, 2020). The environmental impact of community-led tourism in Soon Valley has been both constructive and detrimental. Conservation initiatives, such as eco-tourism projects and wildlife protection programs, have contributed to the preservation of natural habitats (Rahman et al., 2021). However, increased tourism activities have also led to environmental degradation, including deforestation, waste accumulation, and soil erosion. A study by Zafar et al. (2023) highlights that unregulated tourism in rural regions often results in the depletion of natural resources, stressing the need for sustainable management strategies.

Challenges Faced by Local Communities in Engaging with Tourism Initiatives

Local communities in Soon Valley face numerous challenges in their engagement with tourism initiatives. A significant issue is the lack of financial resources and investment in infrastructure, which limits the development of sustainable tourism projects. As highlighted by Alam and Qureshi (2022), inadequate roads, limited access to clean water, and poor sanitation facilities

hinder tourism growth in rural areas. Additionally, the lack of proper training and education for community members in hospitality and tourism management restricts their ability to maximize the economic benefits of tourism (Iqbal & Hussain, 2023).

Another challenge is the limited participation of local stakeholders in decision-making processes. Studies suggest that for community engagement to be effective, local voices must be integrated into tourism planning and policy-making (Taylor, 2020). In Soon Valley, power dynamics often favor external investors and government authorities, marginalizing local perspectives (Shahid et al., 2022). Furthermore, environmental concerns such as over-tourism and inadequate waste disposal mechanisms have led to degradation, creating conflicts between conservationists and tourism developers (Rana et al., 2021).

Best Practices and Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Tourism in Soon Valley

To enhance sustainable tourism in Soon Valley, several best practices and policy recommendations can be considered. One key approach is the development of community-based tourism (CBT) models, where locals play a central role in managing and benefiting from tourism activities. Research by Gössling and Hall (2019) indicates that successful CBT initiatives provide long-term economic stability while ensuring environmental conservation and cultural integrity.

Capacity-building programs should be introduced to equip local residents with the necessary skills in tourism management, customer service, and environmental conservation. According to Williams and Ponsford (2021), education and training are critical components in fostering a sustainable tourism industry. Additionally, introducing financial incentives such as microfinance schemes can help local entrepreneurs invest in tourism-related ventures (Aslam et al., 2023). Policy interventions should focus on creating an inclusive governance framework that involves all stakeholders, including local authorities, businesses, and conservation groups. Collaborative partnerships between government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities can enhance transparency and sustainability in tourism development (Mason,

2020). Moreover, establishing eco-friendly tourism policies, such as waste management initiatives and strict environmental regulations, is essential to mitigate the negative ecological impacts of tourism in Soon Valley (Javed & Karim, 2022).

Role of Stakeholders in Supporting Community-Led Tourism Initiatives

Stakeholders, including local authorities, businesses, conservation groups, and community organizations, play a crucial role in the sustainability of community-led tourism. Government authorities should implement policies that prioritize community participation and provide infrastructural support. As noted by Zhang et al. (2022), policy frameworks that integrate community stakeholders lead to more resilient and inclusive tourism models.

Private sector involvement is equally significant, as businesses can contribute by investing in sustainable tourism practices and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Studies suggest that partnerships between tourism enterprises and local communities enhance economic opportunities and environmental conservation efforts (Harvey et al., 2021). Furthermore, conservation organizations must work closely with local communities to ensure that tourism development aligns with ecological preservation goals (Khan & Rehman, 2023). While community engagement in tourism development in Soon Valley presents numerous benefits, challenges such as financial constraints, environmental degradation, and governance issues must be addressed. Implementing best practices and policy recommendations, along with active stakeholder participation, can significantly contribute to the sustainability of tourism in the region.

Conclusion

The engagement of local communities in tourism development in Soon Valley has generated both benefits and challenges, affecting economic, social, and environmental sustainability. The economic impact has been largely positive, with increased employment opportunities and the growth of local businesses. However, disparities in income distribution and financial instability due to the seasonal nature of tourism highlight the need for long-term economic planning and

investment in sustainable tourism infrastructure. Ensuring financial inclusivity and supporting local entrepreneurs can help address these economic challenges.

From a social perspective, tourism has played a vital role in preserving local culture, traditions, and heritage. Community members actively participate in tourism-related activities, fostering a sense of pride and ownership. However, concerns regarding cultural commodification and conflicts over resources must be managed through policies that balance commercialization with cultural integrity. Encouraging responsible tourism practices and educating both tourists and locals on cultural sustainability can help mitigate these issues.

The environmental impact of community-led tourism in Soon Valley presents a complex scenario. While conservation initiatives have contributed to protecting the natural ecosystem, increased tourism activities have resulted in environmental degradation. Problems such as deforestation, improper waste management, and soil erosion call for stringent environmental policies and community-led conservation efforts. Sustainable tourism models, including eco-tourism initiatives, should be implemented to ensure the long-term preservation of Soon Valley's natural resources.

To overcome these challenges, this study recommends a holistic approach involving multiple stakeholders, including government authorities, private businesses, conservation organizations, and local communities. Implementing community-based tourism models, providing education and training in hospitality and environmental conservation, and improving governance structures can enhance the sustainability of tourism in Soon Valley. Moreover, promoting financial incentives such as microfinance schemes can empower local entrepreneurs and contribute to economic resilience.

In conclusion, community engagement is a double-edged sword in tourism development. While it offers significant opportunities for economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation, it also presents challenges that require strategic intervention. By implementing best practices and policy recommendations, Soon Valley can harness the full potential of community-led tourism while ensuring long-term sustainability. Collaborative efforts among stakeholders

and responsible tourism planning will be essential in transforming Soon Valley into a leading example of sustainable rural tourism in Pakistan.

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