

# The Potential Role of Ecotourism in Sustainable Development: A Systematic Review

Fikile XABA<sup>1</sup>, Eytayo Francis ADANLAWO<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*This study aims to establish the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism and showcase how ecotourism can contribute to sustainable development. Result from systematic review revealed that community access to ecotourism opportunities is limited, thereby limiting its contribution to sustainable development. The study concludes that for ecotourism to contribute to sustainable development in local communities, there is a need to reduce social inequality and motivate local community members to contribute to the protection of the local environment and culture. The implications are that ecotourism initiatives can benefit local communities if they are involved in the planning, execution, and control of ecotourism projects.*

**Keywords:** *Community Development, Ecotourism, Economic Growth, Participatory Planning, Sustainable Development, Welfare.*

## Introduction

To address the socio-economic challenges facing local communities, ecotourism directly influences sustainable development through resource management. This is achievable by preserving the community's cultural integrity, ecological processes, and life-supporting systems (Baloch et al., 2023; Mnisi and Ramoroka, 2020). Thus, the development of autonomous and self-sustaining communities depends heavily on sustainable ecotourism (Adom, 2019). The current needs are satisfied through sustainable development, which does not jeopardize the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs. Xu et al. (2023) and Bramwell et al. (2017) also emphasize the connection between ecotourism and sustainable development, arguing that the SDGs offer a broad general framework for the study of sustainable tourism, which includes ecotourism. In particular, goal 8: target 8.9 stipulates that by 2030, policies must be developed and put into place to support sustainable tourism that supports local culture and goods while also creating jobs (UNWTO, 2015). The contribution of ecotourism to socio-economic development and poverty alleviation is further reinforced by Chapter 7 of Agenda 21, which seeks to achieve sustainable human settlements by 2030 (UN-DESA, 2017).

Beckerman (2017) highlights the view that sustainable development implies a state of quality and of something that should be defended and maintained into the future. It logically follows that sustainable development is primarily concerned with the needs of both current and future generations, as well as the natural environment. A more plausible theorisation of sustainable development derives from the classical works of Evelyn (1664), who posited that sustainable development characterises a society in which resources are mobilised and used optimally in order to meet human development needs and priorities while protecting the environment's resources for upcoming generations. Sustainable development seeks to create a society in which resource allocation is guided by principles of equity, stability, and equilibrium. Contemporary understanding of sustainable development suggests that the concept needs to be appreciated within the context of rapid climate change and its impact on both human and ecological systems (Adanlawo, 2017).

At the heart of sustainable development is the need to integrate human, material, and ecological imperatives in a manner that resonates with the United Nations' resolution on poverty alleviation (Keong, 2020; Bengtsson et al., 2018). This resolution projected that during the new millennium, humanity would be faced

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<sup>1</sup> Department Social work University of Zululand, Email: xabaf@unizulu.ac.za, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8642-7600>.

<sup>2</sup> Social Transformation Research Entity, North-West University, South Africa, Email: eytayofadan@gmail.com, Email: 446425555@nwu.ac.za, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5407-5724>.

with unacceptable disparities in the levels of socio-economic development. These disparities and inequalities are the main source of conflict that threatens peaceful relations between and within countries (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023). The potential role of ecotourism in sustainable development has been disregarded because a large portion of the research to date has focused on the connection between ecotourism and environmental sustainability.

To corroborate the role of ecotourism in sustainable development, Xaba et al. (2024) found that ecotourism positively impacted on income generating activities in communities in and around the Durban and thereby contributed to poverty alleviation in KwaZulu-Natal Province. Research conducted by Kunjuraman et al. (2022) found that the effective execution of ecotourism strategies and projects was positively influenced by favourable attitudes and capable political leadership at the local government level. According to Zainal et al. (2024), the primary goal of economic policy in South Africa following apartheid is probably to reduce poverty, and ecotourism is a crucial part of the country's socioeconomic growth.

According to the findings of Xu et al. (2023), the local government saw ecotourism as a valuable source of wealth and income as well as a tool for development. Thompson (2022) found that local government promoted ecotourism for the benefit of its communities, drawing on the experience of the Philippines. Local ecotourism development programs could be incorporated into provincial or regional plans to guarantee uniformity and consistency in the provision of ecotourism services to visitors and local populations.

Yuan (2020) argues that while the local government may wish to promote ecotourism with great fervour, there are a number of obstacles that frequently make this difficult. Among these difficulties is the incapacity to combine tourism management with other municipal government duties and undertakings. Kumar et al. (2024) discovered that local communities living alongside wildlife faced challenges in accessing financial capital and entrepreneurial skills, which limited the potential of ecotourism practitioners in Africa to fully capitalize on the expanding ecotourism market. Sobhani et al. (2022) found that inadequate participation from the local community and other stakeholders significantly impeded the sustainable growth of ecotourism in rural areas.

The majority of ecotourism activities were predominantly unorganized and shaped by tourism development organizations, with minimal backing from the nearby administration and populace. Gutierrez (2023) found that one of the problems facing indigenous people is being disempowered in ecotourism activities. According to Nkomo and Adanlawo (2024), most local governments lack strategic orientation because they lack advanced skills, which is necessary for effective ecotourism planning. The fact that most municipalities are pushing ecotourism as a way of fostering economic development and expansion presents another difficulty for local government in the ecotourism space. As a result, policies are being pursued that primarily serve the interests of the tourism industry's commercial sector and the economy as a whole, rather than the local communities where ecotourism resources are concentrated.

## Methodology

This study conducted a systematic review of the ecotourism literature in order to understand the potential role of ecotourism to sustainable development. According to Hosany et al. (2022), a systematic review gathers and analyses data from published studies on the subject, then describes, evaluates, and synthesizes interpretations to produce a well-informed conclusion based on solid evidence. Information was gathered from Google Scholar, Scopus, and the Web of Science Core Collection. The resources make it easier to access the best books, journals, and conference proceedings in the social sciences, humanities, arts, and sciences. The study's data set dates back to 2013.

### *Framing Ecotourism*

Both the demand and the supply for ecotourism have increased dramatically (Xaba and Adanlawo, 2024). Consequently, ecotourism is becoming more and more recognized as a specific type of tourism development to achieve sustainable development in destination areas. The increased focus on ecotourism

stems from the notion that governments worldwide can boost economic growth and reduce poverty by supporting ecotourism initiatives (Samal and Dash, 2023). This growing interest in ecotourism has also been attributed to ecotourists' changing attitudes towards the environment, with many of them now looking for authentic natural experiences (Paul and Roy, 2023; Grilli et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, academics from various fields continue to disagree on the topic of ecotourism. Consequently, a number of definitions of ecotourism have been put forth, with varying degrees of convergence identified. For instance, Walter et al. (2020) propose that ecotourism, which aims to promote ecologically and socially sustainable development, is supported by a variety of resources, primarily natural and cultural artifacts, events, and the natural environment. Small-scale operations in largely unaltered habitats, such as highly protected areas, are necessary for ecotourism to occur. Additionally, it entails visiting natural areas, which calls for environmental preservation and enhances the quality of life for the local populace (Adanlawo et al., 2021). According to Boley and Green (2016), ecotourism aims to develop a sustainable, resource-based tourism industry that prioritizes experiencing and learning about nature. As such, ecotourism should be ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented in terms of its control and benefits.

### *Principles of Ecotourism*

Like any other development strategy, ecotourism is guided by specific principles that ensure consistency in its practice. These principles are relevant to this study as they reveal the manner in which ecotourism initiatives should be carried out in order to benefit all stakeholders, including host communities. Nugraheni et al. (2020) summarise the philosophy and principles of sustainable ecotourism; thus, the environmental, economic, and social facets of tourism development are all covered by sustainability principles. A proper balance between these three dimensions needs to be established in order to ensure its long-term sustainability. The primary principles attributed to ecotourism, according to Thompson et al. (2018), include:

- Reducing the adverse effects on the cultural and natural environments that can endanger the destination,
- Teaching tourists how to protect the environment,
- Stressing the value of conducting business in a way that satisfies local needs and prospers when working together with the local government and community,
- Emphasizing social science research and environmentally focused long-term observation programs to reduce and evaluate the overall impact,
- Optimizing the financial gains for the local or hosting community, which consists of people who reside in or close to these protected areas,
- Working with the local community to conduct research projects that guarantee that the growth of ecotourism does not surpass the region's capacity for social and environmental changes within reasonable bounds, and
- Creating an eco-friendly tourism infrastructure that integrates the natural and cultural environments, minimizes the use of fossil fuels, and protects the local wildlife and flora.

Three important points can be deduced from these principles and are pertinent to the current study. First, ecotourism efforts must be cognisant of the need to balance the needs of local people, tourists, and the natural environment. Second, ecotourism initiatives should be promoted in cooperation with local communities; thus, they are also key stakeholders in these initiatives. Third, there is a need for ecotourism operators to show sensitivity and respect towards local culture and the environment. Precisely, there should

be synergies between ecotourism activities, nature conservation, and community development. The above perspective is supported by Nugraheni et al. (2020), whose study concluded that ecotourism promotes sustainability, local involvement, and natural conservation.

### *Perspectives on Ecotourism*

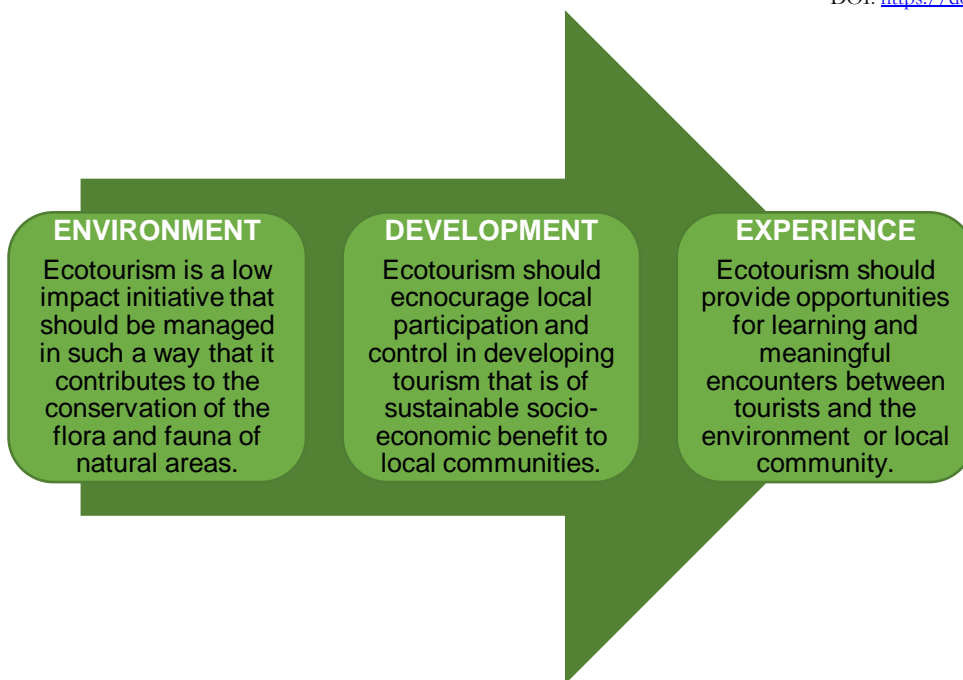
The literature on ecotourism falls into three strands. The ecological perspective, which is the first strand, regards ecotourism as a way to advance environmental sustainability (Hasana, 2022; Fennell, 2021). This perspective holds that the goal of sustainable tourism is to achieve a balance between preserving cultural integrity, safeguarding the environment, advancing social justice and economic benefits, and raising the standard of living for the host community both in the short and long terms (Samal and Dash, 2023). The concept of sustainability is used in ecotourism to enhance the quality of life for locals through the preservation of the environment, maximizing local economic gains, and offering top-notch services to tourists. According to Wolf et al. (2019), ecotourism should adopt the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach to sustainable development to guarantee that businesses incorporate information about the social, environmental, and economic aspects of their operations when making managerial decisions.

The second body of ecotourism can help reduce unemployment and poverty by transferring skills and opening up business opportunities (Nkomo and Adanlawo, 2024; Das and Chatterjee, 2015). According to this perspective, ecotourism is more viable when it complements and coexists with traditional activities rather than taking the place of earlier sources of income. Additionally, it protects the values, way of life, and habitats of the entire rural area. In developed nations, especially, rural tourism has emerged as a viable and acceptable option for travellers (Hall, 2022). The third strand of ecotourism rejected the idea that ecotourism is a magic bullet for sustainable development. This strand claims that ecotourism is a marketing strategy that aims to meet the needs of tourists rather than the needs of local communities.

### *Why Ecotourism?*

In the South African context, ecotourism has the potential to provide environmental, socio-economic, and cultural benefits. Chaka and Adanlawo (2023) state that there is general recognition of ecotourism's beneficial impact on the environment. Operators and advocates of ecotourism contend that by preserving and promoting protected areas, the sector has helped local communities flourish socioeconomically and culturally. Logically, the major building blocks of ecotourism can be framed diagrammatically as follows:

### **Figure 1: Building blocks of ecotourism**



*Source: Adapted from Sharpley and Harrison (2019)*

One of the tourism industry's fastest-growing segments is ecotourism. The need from the general public for more ecologically conscious travel is what drives it. If done right, according to Xu et al. (2023), ecotourism may be able to combine biodiversity preservation with the socioeconomic advancement of the surrounding areas. To maximize these advantages, numerous governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are keen to promote ecotourism in protected areas. It has been suggested that by introducing tourists and locals to nature and conservation, ecotourism enhances appreciation of natural environments and fosters environmental education (Ting and Cheng, 2017).

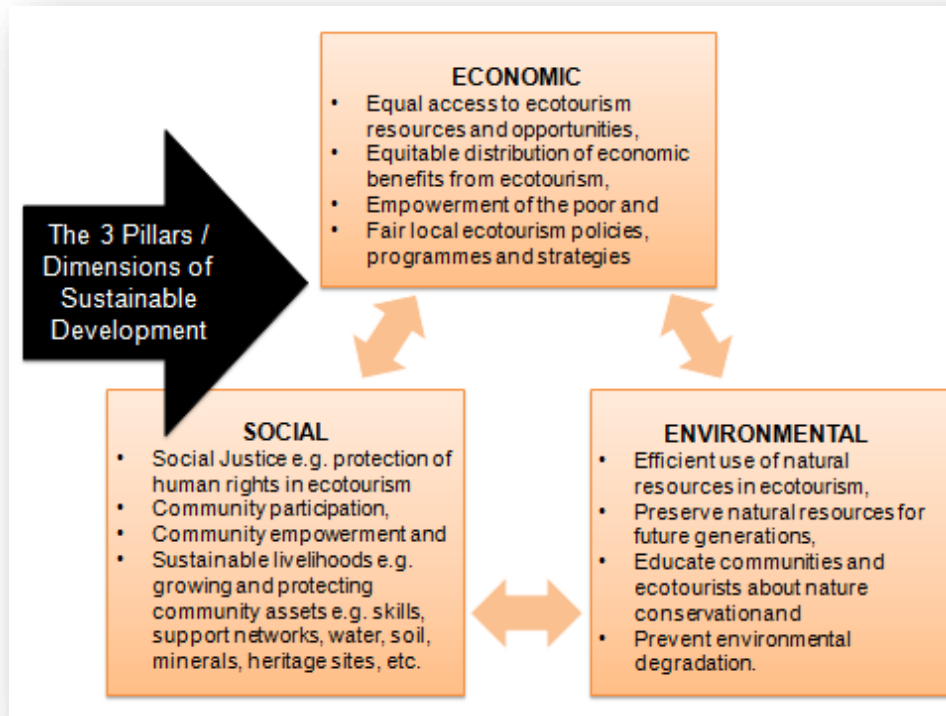
The idea of sustainability is closely related to ecotourism. According to Hasana et al. (2022), sustainability promotes a developmental trajectory that satisfies the needs of the present without jeopardizing the capacity of future generations to satiate their own needs. According to Boley and Green (2016), sustainable ecotourism seeks to strike a balance between protecting the environment, maintaining cultural integrity, establishing social justice, and promoting economic benefits in order to improve the living standards of the host population both in the short and long term. By maximizing local economic benefits, preserving the natural environment, and offering a high standard of living, ecotourism employs the sustainability principle to enhance the quality of life for locals.

#### *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*

Ecotourism is conceptually linked to sustainable development; hence, it is vital to unpack this relationship. Literally, sustainable development refers to maintaining development over a certain period (Adanlawo et al., 2023). Thus, a sustainable society or community is one that continually enhances people's ability to do what they have good reasons to value (Zondi et al., 2023). Srivastava and Deo (2016) describe development as a process of change and growth that improves people's lives in terms of better standards of living, happiness, and freedom. Perhaps a more comprehensive and enduring definition of sustainable development is that proffered by the Brundtland Commission (1987), which views sustainable development as addressing current needs without jeopardizing the capacity of future generations to address their own (Milán-García et al., 2019). Therefore, sustainable ecotourism aims to strike a balance between human development needs and nature conservation to ensure continuity. Sustainable, according to Chaka and Adanlawo (2024) and Geels (2019), is a complex, multi-level phenomenon shaped by the context in which it occurs. Thus, for

ecotourism to be sustainable, it must be based on the three pillars of sustainable development, which are as follows:

**Figure 2: Dimensions Of Sustainable Development Linked to Ecotourism**



As indicated in Figure 2, the economic dimension of ecotourism aims to measure the economic benefits that ecotourism projects generate for local communities; these benefits include income, jobs, and entrepreneurial opportunities. The social dimension determines the extent to which ecotourism projects contribute to the eradication of poverty, the gradual improvement of living standards, and the social cohesion and well-being of the community. The environmental dimension looks at the impacts of ecotourism activities on the natural environment and the surrounding communities. These three dimensions were the general criteria used to evaluate ecotourism's role in sustainable development. This study asserts that well-conceived ecotourism initiatives could be the panacea for the challenges facing poverty-stricken communities. Without concern for the environment, it is impossible to attain sustainable economic development for local communities. The only way forward is to adopt a holistic approach at the initial planning stages of the ecotourism experience (Gumede and Nzama, 2021).

#### *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*

The impetus characterising the implementation of ecotourism has also been fuelled by the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Paris on September 25, 2015. Officially known as “Transforming Our World,” The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes ecotourism as one of the targets to be achieved by 2030. Ecotourism manifests in three of the 17 SDGs, as outlined below (UNWTO, Annual Report, 2014):

- Goal 8, ‘Decent Work and Economic Growth’, target 8.9: Create and implement policies that will encourage sustainable tourism that creates jobs and supports regional goods and culture by 2030;



- Goal 12.b, 'Responsible Consumption and Production', target 12.b: Provide and implement instruments to track the effects of sustainable development on job-generating, locally oriented, and sustainable tourism;
- Goal 14.7, 'Life Below Water', target 14.7: Increase the economic benefits to small island developing states and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, particularly through sustainable tourism, aquaculture, and fisheries management by 2030.

In the Southern African region, a paradigm shift from traditional tourism to more individualized travel centred on ethical and immersive vacations has been noted in the tourism markets. Ethical principles pertaining to social, cultural, and environmental responsibility in the locations they visit draw tourists. Additionally, the desire of consumers for genuine experiences is driving growth in the various market segments within the ecotourism industry. The African continent has benefited greatly from this change in many ways, primarily due to its unique cultural and geographic diversity. There were more tourists visiting; the number rose from 46 million in 2009 to 5.1 million in 2022 (Xaba and Adanlawo; 2024; Osinubi et al., 2022). Physical infrastructure is urgently needed in the TFCAs to increase market share and capture the potential threefold increase in tourism to the SADC region by 2027, according to the Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan (RIDMP).

In South Africa, the ecotourism industry has expanded significantly since the nation became democratic in 1994. In December 2023, the number of foreign visitors reached 3.5 million (Stats SA, 2024). The White Paper on the Promotion and Development of Tourism in South Africa (1996) states that opportunities for small business owners are brought about by tourism. It fosters intercultural awareness and understanding, cultivates a distinct informal sector, aids in environmental preservation, forges economic connections with light manufacturing, agriculture, and curiosities (art, craft, and souvenirs); forges connections with the services sector; and offers respectable job opportunities.

According to Chaka and Adanlawo (2022), the diversity of the nation's tourism contributes to its appeal. A few of the attributes that contribute to South Africa's growing appeal as a travel destination are its easily accessible wildlife, diverse and striking landscapes, pristine wilderness regions, varied cultures, consistently sunny weather, advanced infrastructure, and an almost limitless array of engaging activities. South Africa is a popular travel destination due to its exceptional conference and exhibition facilities, diverse sporting facilities, well-connected communication and healthcare networks, and well-known international attractions. It also boasts exceptional archaeological sites and battlefields.

The White Paper (1996) further acknowledges that an important part of energizing other economic sectors in South Africa is ecotourism. Shen et al. (2020) claim that because there is a greater market for goods and services like organic farming and farm tourism, the tourism sector helps the agriculture sector. Likewise, the manufacturing sector benefits through the supply of furniture and fittings, construction, linens, pots, and pans. Like many other developing countries, South Africa has adopted tourism policies that advocate the active participation and involvement of local communities in ecotourism initiatives to improve sustainable livelihoods. Studies reveal that numerous historically marginalized communities continue to live in poverty and have restricted access to resources and advantages associated with conservation areas (Mbaiwa and Kolawole, 2013).

#### *Tourism, Poverty, Unemployment, and Sustainable Development*

Research has generally underscored the vital link between tourism, poverty reduction, and sustainable development (Nkomo and Adanlawo, 2023; Musavengane, 2019). In recent years, tourism has experienced sustained growth as a result of the growing global demand for ecotourism. However, tourism is not a value-free or neutral concept, rather, like any other industry, it is prone to politics and vested interests, which have a direct impact on both the allocation and distribution of resources in rural communities (Kia, 2021). Thus, this study argues that sustainable ecotourism practices are likely to improve both sustainable livelihoods

and the preservation of natural capital in rural areas. Therefore, this study suggests that there is a close association between ecotourism policy practice, poverty alleviation, and unemployment.

Poverty continues to baffle policymakers and development practitioners, especially in developing countries such as South Africa. A central problem South Africa is grappling with is how to mobilise and involve the poor in sustainable ecotourism initiatives in order to reduce hunger and economic deprivation without depleting natural resources. Balancing these policy imperatives remains a major challenge for both the national and local governments. In development literature, poverty is defined as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising several factors, such as poor health, a lack of education, poor living standards, a lack of income or consumption, a lack of decent work, and a threat from violence (Bray et al., 2020). Unemployment is defined as the state of being without a job or the number of people without jobs in a particular area (Adanlawo and Chaka, 2024; Demazière, 2014). Ecotourism, according to Xaba et al. (2024) is seen as a viable solution to the problems of unemployment and poverty facing marginalised rural communities, which have little or no access to meaningful economic activities. This has necessitated the need to adopt sustainable ecotourism. But the management of ecotourism encounters challenges that hinder effective performance.

### *Challenges Affecting Ecotourism*

The ability of eco-tourism businesses to significantly contribute to sustainable development is hindered by several factors. Among the main obstacles are a lack of finance and resources, a slow rate of local community integration into the tourism industry, and inadequate tourism awareness, education, and training. Other challenges mentioned by Neger (2022) include insufficient environmental protection, bad services, deficient infrastructure, especially in rural areas, and a deficiency of inclusive, functional national, provincial, and local development frameworks. These challenges undermine tourism's potential to support sustainable development, particularly in rural areas.

The fact that the expansion of the tourism sector has not been properly planned for or anticipated, especially in developing nations, is another issue that affects ecotourism. Due to this difficulty, ecotourism is ill-organized, which has led to the deterioration, exhaustion, and, in certain situations, complete destruction of vital natural resources that sustain the economy (Neger, 2022). According to Dragomir (2018), various socio-economic and cultural factors at each level of the tourism system affect the implementation of sustainable tourism. The contribution of ecotourism to sustainable development has also been weakened by economic leakages (Chen et al., 2020). These include outflows of capital from ecotourism, as most of the investments in the industry are owned by foreign investors rather than the supposed local beneficiaries. In nearly all the inclusive ecotourism package tours, 80% of the generated revenue flows to airlines, hotels, and related multinational businesses rather than small local businesses and workers (Abakorma, 2017). Regionally, the growth of ecotourism in Africa has remained firm, partly because of the diversity and abundance of attractive wildlife species. (Backman and Munanura, 2015).

Xaba and Adanlawo (2024) add that ecotourists are often seasonal, resulting in unreliable income. Within the same context, rural residents who live in or close to wildlife conservation areas incur large costs. via crop damage, livestock slaying, and fatalities among humans. Chilli and Mabaso (2016) identify challenges such as a lack of support and a shortage of basic business formation skills. Other problems affecting ecotourism include increased commercialisation of ecotourism activities, resulting in local communities running the risk of losing their assets through “ecological imperialism.”

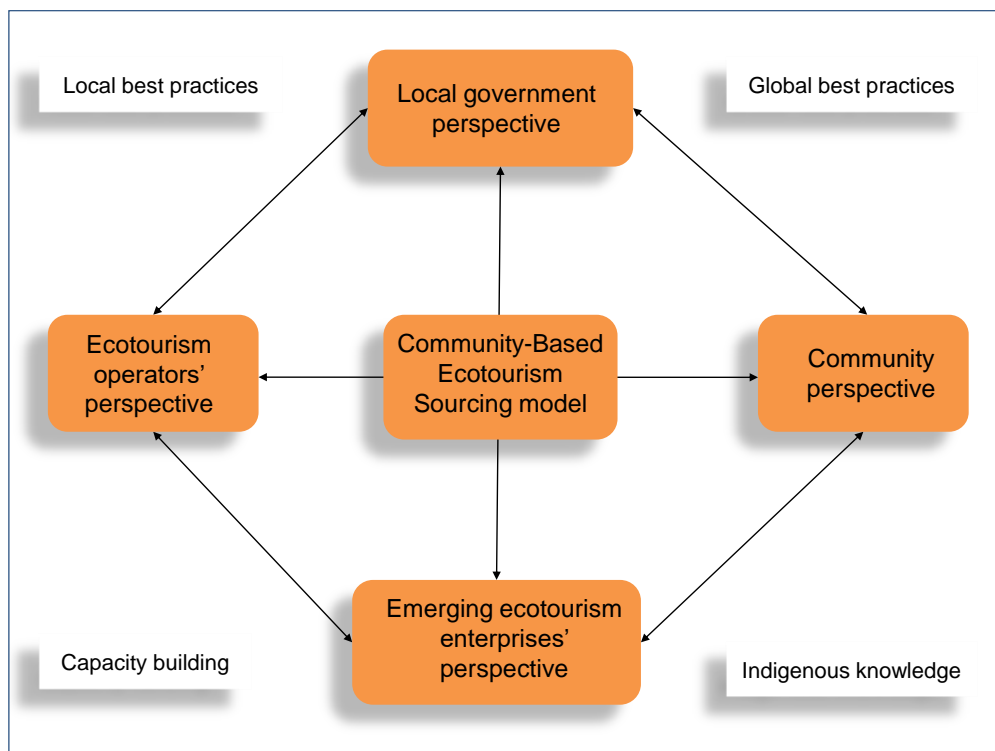
Despite these concerns, overwhelming evidence in the literature suggests a strong case for ecotourism projects in poverty-stricken communities that have limited access to the economic opportunities enjoyed by their counterparts in urban areas. Such opportunities include employment, skills development, and business information. In this line of argument, Hall (2022) supports that local communities were generally positive towards expanding ecotourism activities since they would provide more working opportunities for them. For ecotourism to contribute to sustainable development in local communities, there is a need to reduce social inequality and motivate the local community members to contribute to the protection of the local environment and culture.



## Discussions and Conclusion

Drawing on the reviewed literature, this study investigated the contribution of ecotourism to the sustainable development. The study by Salman et al. (2020) makes clear how important ecotourism is to the growth of sustainable tourism. The author came to the conclusion that because ecotourism fosters a positive perception of the destination, it is a great tool for the development of sustainable tourism. The study proposes the adoption of the Community-Based Sourcing Model to help build sustainable livelihoods through direct involvement in, and ownership of ecotourism initiatives by local communities. The envisaged Community-Based Ecotourism Sourcing Model comprises the following aspects:

**Figure 3: The Community-Based Ecotourism Sourcing Model**



As depicted in Figure 3, the envisaged sourcing model puts local communities (beneficiaries) at the centre of ecotourism activities. The reviewed literature revealed that community access to ecotourism opportunities is limited. This model mitigates this discrepancy as it fosters close collaboration between the key role players in ecotourism, including local municipalities; communities; emerging (Black-owned) ecotourism ventures, and tourism operators. This integrated approach to the ecotourism practice could assist in reducing inequality and the fragmentation of ecotourism activities.

Figure 3 further suggests that ecotourism activities may yield the desired outcomes if they are informed and guided by local and global best practices. More importantly, such efforts should also be underpinned by capacity-building efforts to strengthen the skills and competencies of local communities in ecotourism. To ensure congruence, indigenous knowledge and technologies also ought to be incorporated into ecotourism activities. The key strength of this model is encapsulated in its ability to shift attention away from cause-and-effects accounts of ecotourism in rural areas (Backman and Munanura, 2016; Dodds et al., 2018) to a more pragmatic approach that makes ecotourism a shared responsibility for all key stakeholders.

The study contributes to policy reform by promoting the involvement of the impoverished in the development, planning, and management of tourism-related activities that are relevant to them. In addition to fostering long-lasting relationships between local communities, ecotourism operators, and local agencies,

this may help reduce the obstacles that keep underprivileged rural communities from taking part in decision-making processes related to ecotourism.

Local communities should actively act as a middleman between new and established ecotourism businesses as part of the LED strategy. According to Xaba et al. (2024), interventions like joint business indaba or summits and workshops where owners of established ecotourism companies can share knowledge and expertise with small ecotourism ventures can strengthen relationships between emerging and established ecotourism enterprises. Ecotourism businesses should think about reevaluating and coordinating their ecotourism messaging to guarantee widespread coverage if they want to see a significant contribution from ecotourism to sustainable development. Outreach initiatives, local IDP procedures, and community-based small business fairs could all support these kinds of initiatives.

Lastly, as part of the government's local economic development (LED) strategy, the study's recommendations may help program officials, project managers, and policy makers conceptualize and carry out ecotourism projects in a way that benefits the local economy and communities. The implications for the current study are that ecotourism initiatives can benefit local communities if they are involved in the planning, execution and control of ecotourism projects. In other words, participatory planning processes may help offset some of the challenges contributing to poverty alleviation and an improvement in living standards.

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