

Community-Based Tourism and Social Sustainability: A Scoping Review of Planning Approaches for Equity, Inclusion, and Empowerment



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Abstract Community-based tourism (CBT) is often promoted as a socially sustainable alternative to mass tourism, aiming to empower local communities through participatory planning, equitable benefit-sharing, and inclusive decision-making. However, its effectiveness in delivering equity, inclusion, and empowerment remains unclear. This scoping review examines 25 years (2000–2025) of academic and grey literature on CBT planning approaches addressing social dimensions, using the Arksey and O’Malley framework and drawing from four multidisciplinary databases: Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and ProQuest. Findings reveal inconsistent definitions and indicators of social sustainability, with predominant focus on economic empowerment, often neglecting political and cultural inclusion. Local participation in planning is limited to consultation, lacking decision-making authority, and planning remains largely top–down. Structural issues such as power asymmetries, social exclusion, and governance deficits are underexplored. Intersectional analyses considering gender, ethnicity, or disability’s influence are rare. Community involvement is symbolic than transformative. Regional representation is uneven, with a concentration of studies in specific locales, overlooking small island states and post-conflict settings. This review calls for future research focused on intersectionality, meaningful empowerment, and participatory methods, key to fostering inclusive, equitable, and socially just tourism.

1 Introduction

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has been endorsed widely as a sustainable approach to tourism planning and development especially in marginalised and rural communities. Advocated as a bottom–up and participatory tourism model compared to conventional tourism models, CBT intends to ensure that local communities not

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only benefit from tourism but also most importantly, participate in planning, implementing, and governing tourism actively [1–3]. Developed in line with pillars of sustainability, CBT's ethos focuses on 'social sustainability', which includes equity, inclusion, and empowerment and is often overlooked and under-theorised in economic growth-driven tourism development [4–6]. Social sustainability consideration in CBT not only impact the active participants in tourism decision-making but also those whose voices are augmented and/or marginalised. While economic and environmental impacts of CBT have been widely studied, social impacts and dimensions remain fragmented with inconsistent definitions and evaluations [7, 8]. If social equity, inclusion, and empowerment issues in tourism aren't addressed, it may reinforce structural inequalities, social exclusion, and disempowerment [9, 10]. Recent policy and academic discussions have begun to critically examine how CBT can foster social consequences, especially for marginalised groups like indigenous communities, disabled people, women, and children [2, 11, 12].

Hence this scoping review aims to map out how CBT planning integrates social sustainability, especially equity, inclusion, and empowerment to identify main approaches, research gaps, and future directions for research and practices. It intends to address research questions on how social sustainability (equity, inclusion, empowerment) is defined and operationalised in CBT planning; what strategies or frameworks are used to integrate these concepts into tourism planning; which communities or groups (e.g., women, Indigenous peoples, youth, disabled persons) are the focus of empowerment efforts and identify key barriers and success factors for socially sustainable CBT planning.

2 Methodology

By synthesizing insights from over 74 peer-reviewed academic sources published globally between 2000 and 2025, this review offers a map of the current knowledge landscape. It adopts the framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) for a scoping review. This framework follows five steps: identifying the research questions and relevant studies, selecting qualified studies, charting the data, analyzing, summarizing, and reporting the outcomes [13, 14]. After identifying the research questions, seven relevant keywords (CBT, social sustainability, participatory planning for tourism, social empowerment, marginalised community, social exclusion, and community involvement) were identified which resulted with 120 keyword combinations that was run through the four (Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and ProQuest) databases, resulting in 21,712 articles. After removing duplicates, 167 articles were included in the full-text review. Of these, 74 were identified as most relevant to the research questions and were subsequently analyzed.

3 Findings

The research highlights regional disparities, implementation challenges, and gaps in practice and policies while contributing to a deeper understanding of how socially sustainable CBT can be achieved in diverse socio-political contexts. Geographically, most-represented region is Asia or Global South countries especially Indonesia, Vietnam, China, and Nepal indicating substantial academic and policy interest on CBT. Other regions include Africa, Latin America, and a few in Europe and Middle East. Global North and contexts such as post-conflict places, climate-vulnerable communities, and Island states are underrepresented. Studies tend to link CBT to poverty reduction, livelihoods, women's empowerment, environmental stewardship, governance, and collaboration of stakeholders [9, 11]. Themes on empowerment concentrated on especially marginalised groups and women; social inclusion is emphasised on integrating indigenous communities, youth, and low-income communities to planning tourism and sharing benefits [1, 15]. Equity is discussed more frequently with power dynamics of who benefits most and outcomes of influence from external stakeholders [2, 5]. Diverse community participation models have been used, wherein some offer foundational framework [3, 16], some highlight local leaderships and agencies [17], while others propose hybrid governance structures [18]. Challenges identified include dependency on external funding, lack of capacity, insufficient institutional support, and elite capture [19, 20].

Most studies are from a qualitative (especially case study designs) methodological perspectives adopting methods like interviews and observations; some have quantitatively measured empowerment and participation [21]; and few conducted comparative studies. Practical implications in many of the studies include long-term partnerships, multi-stakeholder participation, inclusive policies, and capacity building as critical success factors, while recent research emphasise on climate leadership, youth resilience, and digitalisation due to the growing nature of CBT [22–24]. Key gaps in literature observed include limited operationalisation of social sustainability [3, 8, 25] limited focus on marginalised groups beyond gender in CBT research with most discussion treating marginalised as beneficiaries rather than co-planners [11, 15, 26, 27] and there is limited research on intersectionality (e.g., being both Indigenous and female) creating a skewed understanding of inclusion [9, 12, 15, 27–29], lack of political or cultural empowerment, and overemphasis on economic empowerment; limited long-term analysis of if social benefits are sustained or how empowerment evolves [16, 17, 23]; limited focus of CBT in urban or peri-urban contexts [8, 30, 31]; limited evidence of how policies advocate CBT translate to CBT practices and what governance structures hinder CBT practices [8, 19, 32].

4 Discussions

With regards to social sustainable CBT, aspects of equity, inclusion, and empowerment are vital and aim to ensure not only benefits are shared justly but also for communities to be involved in decision-making, especially marginalised groups [33]. Social sustainability in Community-Based Tourism (CBT) refers to the process of ensuring the equitable and fair distribution of tourism benefits, while promoting inclusive participation in tourism planning and governance. It involves fostering the inclusion of marginalised groups, empowering communities through capacity building, strengthening social cohesion, and safeguarding cultural heritage [29]. Operationalizing social sustainability in CBT happens through mechanisms to empower community participation, initiatives for capacity building, and strategies. Empowerment was evaluated through qualitative indicators in most research using the analytical hierarchy process [21] through measurable indicators such as rates of participation, equitable benefit sharing, and decision-making influence(s) [34].

Based on the reviewed findings, many frameworks have been used to embed inclusion, equity, and empowerment within CBT such as participatory planning framework, empowerment models, institutional nesting, and tourism poverty alleviation through empowerment. Participatory frameworks encourage more inclusive engagement of stakeholders using workshops, community meetings, and cooperative decision-making [16, 18]. Empowerment models focus on developing leadership capacity and community agency to sustainably manage tourism resources [21, 35]. Institutional nesting aligns different levels of institutions to support CBT and sustainable tourism governance and outcomes [18]. Poverty alleviation and empowerment via tourism aims at empowerment through encouragement of local participation especially ethnic minorities or impoverished villages in tourism development [35]. Groups that CBT typically focuses on include residents (i.e., ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged households), women (this may include single mothers, divorcees, or widows in some cultures and other disadvantaged women), indigenous communities (ensuring the protection of cultural heritage while ensuring economic participation), youth, and vulnerable groups [16, 21, 35, 36].

Social sustainability in CBT may be observed through key success factors such as effective community participation that is inclusive, transparent with mechanisms for regular engagement [18]; Capacity building of residents in managing and leadership in tourism [21]; have supportive institutional framework in place to align institutional support and policies across different levels [18]; be given economic incentives and fair share of benefits through clear distribution of benefits to sustain and motivate participation [35]. Yet, social sustainability in CBT is not without challenges. Challenges or barriers include top-down governance that lacks genuine community involvement in tourism-related decisions [18]; in many places, there is limited capacity such as skills, knowledge, or resources to participate [21]; conflicting interests and priorities among stakeholders that causes tensions [16]; and cultural or social barriers based on ethnic divisions or gender norms that might limit participation [35].

5 Conclusion and Research Agenda for Future Research

Social sustainability is multifaceted and is built on aspects of equity, inclusion, and empowerment in the context of CBT. To operationalise social sustainability in CBT effectively, tourism planning must prioritise participatory approaches that have mechanisms that involve marginalised groups, particularly local communities, women, and other underrepresented vulnerable groups. Challenges in governance, capacity gaps, and social exclusion needs to be addressed through investments on continuous learning, inclusive planning process, supportive institutional frameworks, and educating communities. Identifying success factors is important to serve as performance benchmarks. It is also vital to have ongoing research while learning from evaluated practices to be able to strengthen CBT and ensure that benefits are delivered to communities that it plans to serve. Based on the findings and discussions, the following table of research agenda and objectives is proposed (Table 1).

Table 1 Future research agenda for advancing social sustainability in community-based tourism (CBT)

Research agenda area	Gaps addressed	Objectives
Power dynamics and equity mechanisms	Lack of comparative or longitudinal studies on how power dynamics shift within CBT over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine governance models (e.g., co-management vs. community-led) in shaping benefit equity • Investigate mechanisms to reduce elite capture and promote grassroots leadership
Intersectionality and inclusion	Limited exploration of how CBT addresses intersecting identities beyond gender, including youth, disability, LGBTQ+ groups, and indigenous knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore intersectional empowerment strategies in CBT planning • Study cultural identity’s role in inclusive CBT, especially among minority or displaced groups
Climate resilience and environmental justice	Limited engagement with climate adaptation or environmental justice in CBT literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigate CBT’s role in community-based climate adaptation • Study environmental stewardship and resilience in climate-vulnerable CBT destinations

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Research agenda area	Gaps addressed	Objectives
Digital inclusion and technology integration	Underexplored role of technology in either empowering or excluding CBT participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate the impact of digital tools (e.g., apps, e-commerce) on participation and market access • Examine digital divides and technology acceptance in CBT communities
Policy integration and governance systems	Insufficient understanding of how CBT policies align with national strategies or the SDGs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare how different countries integrate CBT into tourism and sustainability frameworks • Explore institutional arrangements (e.g., decentralization) that influence CBT success
Post-COVID tourism transitions	Lack of longitudinal studies on CBT transformation and resilience since COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigate adaptations in CBT post-pandemic, such as business model shifts and domestic tourism focus • Examine hybrid CBT models (e.g., agrotourism, digital nomadism)
Impact measurement and indicators	Absence of standardized metrics for social sustainability in CBT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and validate multidimensional impact tools for empowerment, inclusion, and equity • Explore community-led monitoring and evaluation frameworks

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