

Community-Based Tourism Development as a Sustainability Strategy for Local Tourism Destinations: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has emerged as a strategic approach to achieving sustainable tourism development by integrating community participation, socio-economic benefits, and environmental conservation. This study places CBT in the context of sustainable development and highlights key dimensions influencing the sustainability of local tourism destinations. Purpose: This research aims to review and synthesize existing literature on CBT development as a sustainability strategy and to conceptualize relationships among social, economic, and environmental dimensions within CBT frameworks. Methods: A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following PRISMA guidelines. Articles were retrieved from the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases using predefined keywords. From an initial identification of 42 publications published between 2000 and 2024, 28 peer-reviewed articles met the inclusion criteria after the screening and eligibility assessment stages. The selected studies were analyzed using thematic analysis and a review matrix to identify conceptual trends, key dimensions, governance mechanisms, and sustainability outcomes of CBT initiatives. Results: CBT significantly supports sustainable tourism by empowering communities, preserving culture, ensuring equitable income, and promoting environmental responsibility. Community participation and effective management structures are key to achieving sustainable outcomes. Conclusion: CBT represents a holistic and viable strategy for sustainable local tourism development across diverse local tourism settings.



INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been widely recognized as a major driver of economic growth, employment creation, and regional development worldwide (UNWTO, 2020). Nevertheless, conventional tourism development models have been criticized for generating economic leakages, environmental degradation, and social inequalities, particularly in developing and peripheral destinations (Sharpley, 2020). These challenges have encouraged the emergence of alternative tourism approaches that emphasize sustainability, local participation, and community empowerment (Hall et al., 2015).

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has emerged as one of the most prominent alternative models aimed at integrating local communities into tourism planning, management, and benefit distribution (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). CBT seeks to ensure that communities are not passive recipients of tourism impacts but active stakeholders who participate in decision-making and control local tourism resources (Suansri, 2003). Scholars consistently link CBT to sustainable development principles, as it attempts to balance economic viability, socio-cultural preservation, and environmental conservation (Dangi & Jamal, 2016).

The concept of sustainable development, defined as meeting present needs without compromising future generations (WCED, 1987), has significantly influenced tourism policy and research. Sustainable tourism integrates environmental protection, socio-cultural integrity, and economic sustainability (Lane, 1994; UNWTO, 1994). Increasingly, community participation and equitable benefit-sharing are recognized as central pillars of sustainable tourism frameworks (Sharpley, 2020). Within this context, CBT is frequently positioned as a localized and practical implementation of sustainable tourism principles (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019).

Despite its theoretical alignment with sustainability, the conceptualization and implementation of CBT remain contested. Some scholars frame CBT primarily as a community development tool emphasizing empowerment and social justice (Honggang et al., 2009), while others approach it as a tourism competitiveness strategy relying on community participation (Liu, 2000). Furthermore, the concept of “community” itself is complex and heterogeneous, involving diverse stakeholders with unequal power relations (Fan et al., 2023). In practice, many CBT initiatives face governance weaknesses, limited institutional capacity, uneven benefit distribution, and dependency on external actors (Prakoso et al., 2020; Kayat, 2014). These inconsistencies reveal a gap between the normative ideals of CBT and its empirical implementation.

Although numerous studies discuss CBT and sustainable tourism, the existing literature remains fragmented across conceptual debates, case-specific analyses, and thematic discussions of participation, governance, or environmental outcomes. There is still limited integrative synthesis that systematically examines how the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability are conceptually interconnected within CBT frameworks. Moreover, inconsistencies in defining community control, empowerment mechanisms, and sustainability indicators create ambiguity in evaluating CBT as a coherent sustainability strategy. This lack of conceptual integration



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Vol. 01, No. 1, February 2026

Management and Applied Learning in Local and Adventure Tourism (MALALA)

highlights the need for a systematic review that critically synthesizes existing knowledge and clarifies the theoretical positioning of CBT within sustainable tourism discourse.

In response to this gap, this study addresses the following research question: How is Community-Based Tourism conceptualized and positioned as a sustainability strategy for local tourism destinations within existing scholarly literature?

This study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it provides a systematic and integrative synthesis of CBT research by connecting community development theory and sustainable tourism frameworks within a unified conceptual structure. Second, it proposes a clarified conceptual mapping of the relationships among social, economic, and environmental dimensions in CBT development, thereby strengthening the theoretical foundation for evaluating CBT as a sustainability strategy.

Therefore, this study aims to systematically review the existing literature on community-based tourism development as a sustainability strategy for local tourism destinations and to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that supports both academic advancement and practical policy formulation.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine Community-Based Tourism (CBT) development as a sustainability strategy for local tourism destinations. The review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency, rigor, and replicability of the research process (Page et al., 2021), and was informed by established SLR procedures in management and social science research (Tranfield et al., 2003). Scholarly articles published between 2000 and 2024 were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using predefined keywords, including “community-based tourism,” “sustainable tourism development,” “community participation,” and “local tourism destinations,” combined with Boolean operators (AND/OR).

The initial search identified 42 records. After removing 32 duplicate articles, 30 articles remained for title and abstract screening. Based on relevance to CBT and sustainability. The remaining 28 articles underwent full-text eligibility assessment using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, (2) publications written in English, (3) studies explicitly addressing CBT in relation to sustainability dimensions, (4) articles published between 2000 and 2024, and (5) empirical or conceptual studies with clear methodological explanations. The exclusion criteria included conference papers, book reviews, editorials, non-academic publications, articles not directly related to CBT and sustainability, and studies without accessible full text. After the eligibility assessment, 42 articles were selected for final synthesis. The complete selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure X). The selected studies were organized using a structured review matrix to extract data on research objectives, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, sustainability dimensions



(social, economic, environmental), governance mechanisms, and reported outcomes. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring conceptual trends, key dimensions, governance structures, and implementation challenges of CBT initiatives. As this research relied exclusively on secondary data from publicly available academic sources, no ethical approval was required. All procedures and criteria were documented to enhance methodological transparency and reproducibility.

RESULTS

1. Concept and Evolution of Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

The concept of community-based tourism (CBT) has evolved as a response to the lack of a unified theoretical framework and the need to clarify its conceptual foundations in tourism studies (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). Conceptual clarity is crucial because it influences theoretical development, policy formulation, and the evaluation of CBT outcomes in practice (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2016). Historically, CBT emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to mass tourism models that marginalized local communities and generated socio-economic and environmental problems (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). The primary objective of early CBT initiatives was to empower local communities and alleviate poverty through tourism-driven development (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012).

Since its emergence, CBT has been widely debated and conceptualized in tourism literature, resulting in multiple interpretations and theoretical perspectives (Prakoso et al., 2020). Some scholars conceptualize CBT as a community development approach that prioritizes empowerment and social equity (Blackstock, 2005). Other researchers emphasize CBT as a governance and participatory framework for sustainable destination management (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2023). These diverse interpretations demonstrate that CBT is a dynamic concept influenced by socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts.

From the synthesis of existing definitions, two dominant perspectives regarding the relationship between community and tourism development can be identified. The first perspective views CBT as a mechanism for community development through tourism activities, emphasizing empowerment, equity, and social justice as core outcomes (Honggang et al., 2009). This perspective argues that tourism should serve as a tool for broader community development objectives rather than solely economic growth (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). This approach is also supported by regional policy frameworks that promote community empowerment and inclusive development (ASEAN, 2016). Scholars further argue that CBT should prioritize transformative empowerment processes and participatory governance structures (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019).

The second perspective considers CBT as a tool for enhancing tourism development by mobilizing community resources and participation to improve destination competitiveness (Liu, 2000). This approach emphasizes the role of communities in providing tourism products, services, and cultural experiences to visitors (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). However, this perspective has been criticized for being rooted in neoliberal development logic and for failing to achieve genuine



community empowerment (Blackstock, 2005). Despite these differences, there is a general consensus that CBT is characterized by reliance on local resources, community participation mechanisms, and sustainability-oriented development goals.

2. Dimensions and Attributes of Community-Based Tourism

CBT was developed as an alternative tourism model to mitigate the adverse impacts of conventional tourism development and has increasingly been recognized as both a tourism development strategy and a community development approach (Oka et al., 2021). Scholars argue that CBT encompasses multiple dimensions, including economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political aspects (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). These dimensions reflect the multidimensional nature of sustainability and the complex interactions between tourism and local communities.

The literature highlights several key attributes of CBT, such as community participation, empowerment, ownership, benefit distribution, conservation, social capital, and governance mechanisms (Suansri, 2003). Participation is considered a fundamental principle of CBT because it ensures that communities are involved in decision-making processes and tourism governance structures (Kayat, 2014). Empowerment refers to the capacity of communities to control tourism resources and influence development outcomes (Mayaka et al., 2019). Ownership and equitable benefit distribution are essential to ensure that tourism revenues contribute to local economic development and poverty reduction (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019).

Environmental conservation is another critical attribute of CBT, as communities often act as stewards of natural and cultural resources (Ngo & Creutz, 2022). Social capital and governance mechanisms also play important roles in fostering collective action, trust, and collaboration among stakeholders (Fan et al., 2023). These attributes collectively contribute to the sustainability of CBT initiatives and determine their long-term success.

Control, participation, and expected outcomes are widely recognized as core attributes of CBT. However, the degree of community control and participation varies across contexts. Some scholars argue that communities must fully own and manage tourism enterprises to achieve genuine CBT (Suansri, 2003). Other researchers suggest that partial control and benefit-sharing arrangements can also produce positive outcomes if governance structures are inclusive and transparent (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Partnership-based tourism arrangements between communities and external stakeholders have also been proposed as pragmatic models for CBT implementation (Simpson, 2008). Consequently, CBT can manifest in different forms depending on the socio-economic and institutional contexts of destinations (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012).

3. Community and Community Development in CBT

Community is a central concept in CBT and serves as both the foundation and the objective of tourism development. However, misunderstandings of the community concept have contributed to the failure of many CBT initiatives (Fan et al., 2023). Scholars have proposed structural and symbolic perspectives to conceptualize community. The structural approach defines community as



a geographically bounded social entity characterized by social institutions and demographic characteristics (Harper, 1989). The symbolic approach conceptualizes community as a social construct based on shared values, identity, and social relationships (Lee & Newby, 1983).

In the context of CBT, communities are best understood as dynamic networks of individuals who share common interests in tourism within a specific geographical context (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). These networks are characterized by collective action, reciprocity, and shared responsibility for tourism development outcomes (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2023). Understanding the heterogeneity of communities is crucial because power relations, social stratification, and stakeholder interests can influence CBT governance and benefit distribution.

Community development is closely linked to CBT, as tourism is often used as a tool to enhance social welfare, economic self-reliance, empowerment, and institutional capacity within communities (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). Core values of community development include participation, empowerment, ownership, and social capital (Veriasa & Waite, 2017). Previous studies indicate that CBT contributes positively to community development across social, economic, cultural, political, and environmental dimensions (Suansri, 2003). Scholars further argue that CBT should prioritize community development outcomes rather than solely focusing on tourism growth and visitor numbers (Gilchrist, 2003).

4. Sustainable Development and Sustainable Tourism Context

The concept of sustainable development was introduced by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 and defined as development that meets present needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs (UNWECD, 1987). This concept emphasizes intergenerational and intragenerational equity and has shaped global discourse on environmental protection and social development (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). Although tourism was not initially included in early sustainable development frameworks, it later became an important sector in sustainability discourse due to its economic significance and environmental impacts (Hall et al., 2015).

Sustainable tourism emerged in the 1990s and was defined by the World Tourism Organization as tourism development that balances economic, social, and environmental needs while preserving cultural integrity and ecological processes (UNWTO, 1994). Sustainable tourism aims to improve residents' quality of life, enhance tourist experiences, and protect natural and cultural resources (Lane, 1994). Over time, community participation and equity have become central components of sustainable tourism frameworks (UNWTO, 2005). Scholars argue that all forms of tourism should adhere to sustainability principles to ensure long-term destination resilience (Sharpley, 2020).

CBT is therefore positioned as both a community development strategy and a sustainable tourism model. CBT contributes to sustainable development by improving economic livelihoods, strengthening social and cultural systems, and promoting environmental conservation (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Sustainable tourism is built upon three pillars: economic, social, and environmental



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Vol. 01, No. 1, February 2026

Management and Applied Learning in Local and Adventure Tourism (MALALA)

sustainability. CBT development must align with these pillars to ensure the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations and local communities. Balancing sustainability objectives with CBT implementation strategies is crucial for achieving resilient and inclusive local tourism development.

DISCUSSION

Cultural resources represent a central component of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) within the broader framework of sustainable development. Cultural sustainability has been identified as a key global development objective, emphasizing the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage and identity across generations (Zhu & Rahmanita, 2023). CBT strongly highlights the presentation of authentic cultural practices, traditions, and local lifestyles, which differentiates community tourism from mass tourism models (Zielinski et al., 2020).

Local communities possess unique cultural capital that includes traditions, rituals, knowledge systems, and daily practices, which can be transformed into tourism products through cultural entrepreneurship and community-led tourism initiatives (Prakoso et al., 2020). Cultural performances, storytelling, traditional crafts, and participatory cultural experiences allow tourists to gain immersive insights into local cultures, thereby enhancing experiential tourism value (Moayerian et al., 2022). These experiences are particularly valued by tourists who seek authenticity and meaningful cultural engagement, rather than standardized tourism products (Zielinski et al., 2020).

Community participation is widely recognized as a fundamental pillar of sustainable tourism and CBT development. Local communities are the core actors in tourism destinations and play a decisive role in shaping tourism development outcomes (Budhiasa et al., 2016). Active community participation enhances the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and ethical foundations of tourism development, making it a critical determinant of sustainability (Salazar, 2012).

Participation involves community engagement in planning, decision-making, management, and evaluation of tourism initiatives, which strengthens local ownership and accountability (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2023). Empirical evidence shows that community participation significantly influences residents' support for tourism development and affects the long-term sustainability of tourism projects (Nugroho & Numata, 2022). Sustainable tourism development is therefore closely linked to the extent of community involvement in tourism governance structures and operational processes (Dangi & Jamal, 2016).

Community welfare constitutes a primary objective of CBT and sustainable tourism development. Tourism has the potential to improve residents' quality of life by generating income, improving infrastructure, and enhancing social services (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). In CBT, community welfare is considered a core outcome indicator that reflects social sustainability and inclusive development (Prakoso et al., 2020).

Indicators of community welfare include improved living standards, safety, social cohesion, and community pride, which are essential elements of sustainable tourism evaluation frameworks (Ngo & Creutz, 2022). Sustainable tourism is expected to ensure social equity and moral



responsibility by reinvesting tourism revenues into community development projects and infrastructure improvements (Havadi & Espinosa, 2020). Thus, CBT aligns with sustainable development goals by prioritizing community well-being as a central development outcome

CBT is typically organized through community institutions, cooperatives, or collective organizational structures that facilitate collective decision-making and management processes (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). Effective management structures are crucial for ensuring the long-term success of CBT initiatives, including governance frameworks, leadership mechanisms, and strategic planning processes (Van der Walt, 2008).

Strong community institutions enable self-management and reduce dependency on external stakeholders, thereby increasing community autonomy and resilience. Establishing tourism committees or collaborative governance platforms with external actors such as governments and NGOs can facilitate negotiation processes and improve management effectiveness (Zielinski et al., 2020). Effective management also enables communities to maximize tourism benefits while mitigating negative socio-economic and environmental impacts (Oka et al., 2021)

Environmental protection is a critical dimension of CBT and sustainable tourism development. Although CBT initially focused on social and economic aspects, environmental sustainability has increasingly become an integral component of CBT frameworks (Suansri, 2003).

CBT initiatives can adopt environmental management practices to minimize tourism-related environmental impacts, including waste management, conservation strategies, and sustainable resource use. Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) has emerged as a model that integrates CBT principles with environmental conservation objectives (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Promoting CBT as a guiding principle in tourism development can strengthen sustainability governance and environmental stewardship in tourism destinations (Saayman & Giampiccoli, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

This study begins with a comprehensive review of previous scholarly literature on community-based tourism (CBT). The analysis primarily focuses on an in-depth examination of the CBT concept and its key dimensions. By situating CBT within the broader context of community development and sustainable tourism, a conceptual framework for advancing CBT toward sustainable tourism has been systematically developed based on insights from prior research. The sustainability of CBT is examined from three major perspectives: social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Natural and cultural resources are identified as the fundamental foundations of the CBT conceptual framework and serve as essential assets for tourism development. Community participation and management are considered crucial components, as they represent the main mechanisms through which community engagement is operationalized within the CBT framework. Expected outcomes of CBT include economic benefits, equitable income distribution, improved community welfare, and environmental conservation, which are aligned with the key pillars of sustainable development.



The main contribution of the proposed conceptual framework lies in its theoretical and practical relevance. From a theoretical perspective, the framework integrates community participation and sustainable development concepts within existing tourism and community development theories, providing a systematic approach to understanding and evaluating CBT development. Practically, the framework offers new perspectives for facilitating community development and sustainable tourism initiatives. Communities can apply this framework to design tourism programs, balance economic, social, and environmental objectives, prevent overdevelopment and resource degradation, and ensure the long-term sustainable use of community tourism resources. Consequently, the framework supports stable community-based tourism economic growth and continuous improvements in residents' quality of life. Furthermore, the clearly structured CBT framework enables tourism developers and managers to design more scientifically grounded community participation strategies and governance mechanisms, thereby fostering harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships between tourism development and local communities. Future research is encouraged to further test and refine this conceptual framework to assess its applicability in evaluating the sustainability of community development and rural tourism development.

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Vol. 01, No. 1, February 2026

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