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Approaches to sustainable tourism development associated with community empowerment. Systematic literature review

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Abstract

The research provides a comprehensive analysis of the most widely used approaches to sustainable tourism development associated with community empowerment. The study combined a bibliometric analysis and a systematic literature review of articles indexed in the Scopus database. Predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, identifying 61 articles published between 2018 and 2025, of which 54 were deemed relevant to the objectives of the study. The bibliometric analysis was conducted using the Bibliometrix – Biblioshiny tool, enabling the statistical processing of metadata and facilitating the interpretation of patterns and trends in the scientific literature. The main result is that the predominant approaches to sustainable tourism development associated with community empowerment are the top-down approach, which implies greater intervention by the State or actors outside the community; and the bottom-up approach, which encourages community participation in the management of their resources and assets. It is concluded that the bottom-up approach is considered more conducive to achieving community empowerment, as it allows local communities to

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actively participate in decision making, ensuring that their needs and aspirations are considered in the development process.

Keywords: Economic development; sustainable development; bottom-up approach; top-down approach; community development.

Enfoques del desarrollo del turismo sostenible asociados al empoderamiento comunitario. Una revisión sistemática de literatura

Resumen

La investigación proporciona un análisis exhaustivo de los enfoques más empleados en el desarrollo del turismo sostenible, asociados al empoderamiento comunitario. El estudio combinó un análisis bibliométrico y una revisión sistemática de literatura de artículos indexados en la base de datos Scopus, el cual incluyó criterios predefinidos de inclusión y exclusión, identificándose 61 artículos entre el 2018 y el 2025, de los cuales, 54 fueron relevantes para los objetivos del estudio. El análisis bibliométrico se desarrolló utilizando la herramienta Bibliometrix – Biblioshiny, lo que permitió el procesamiento estadístico de los metadatos, facilitando así la interpretación de patrones y tendencias en la literatura científica. El principal resultado es que los enfoques predominantes en el desarrollo del turismo sostenible asociados al empoderamiento comunitario son el de arriba hacia abajo, que implica una mayor intervención del Estado o de actores externos a la comunidad; y el de abajo hacia arriba, que fomenta la participación de la comunidad en la gestión de sus recursos y activos. Se concluye que el enfoque de abajo hacia arriba es considerado más propicio para lograr el empoderamiento comunitario, ya que permite a las comunidades locales participar activamente en la toma de decisiones, asegurando que sus necesidades y aspiraciones sean consideradas en el proceso de desarrollo.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo económico; desarrollo sostenible; enfoque de abajo hacia arriba; enfoque de arriba hacia abajo; desarrollo comunitario.

1. Introduction

According to the World Tourism Organization (2024), the global tourism sector is growing steadily. In 2023, tourism export revenues were estimated at US\$1.6 trillion, representing approximately 3% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). More

people are choosing to spend their vacations and savings on travel, and after overcoming the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a clear trend toward nature-related destinations.

However, this tourism development, along with the unconscious and excessive activities of humans, has caused negative impacts from

environmental, social, and economic perspectives. Mihalic (2020), Banerjee & George (2024), and Drápela (2023) note that the acceleration and growth in tourism supply and demand have led to the intensive use of ecological resources at destinations, resulting in the destruction of cultural attractions and negative impacts on social and economic environments. This has led to greater attention being paid to the implementation of responsible tourism.

In the 1970s, the concept of sustainable tourism began to emerge with the aim of conducting tourism activities with the least possible impact on the environment, integrating and respecting local society and culture, while promoting the economic development of the community or locality. According to Purnomo et al. (2020), the concept of sustainable tourism development emphasizes four principles: economically feasible; environmentally sustainable; socially acceptable; and technologically appropriate. It implies the proper planning and management of natural and cultural resources to ensure their availability for future generations without causing negative environmental or socio-cultural impacts. It seeks not only to meet the expectations of visitors, but also to enhance the reputation and commercial viability of the destination, thereby generating economic benefits for the local population.

Thus, sustainable tourism is positioned not only as a strategic instrument for economic progress but also as a fundamental community empowerment mechanism, as supported by Anzaldúa-Soulé et al. (2020). It represents a significant opportunity for urban and rural areas that lack economic alternatives. Through sustainable tourism, communities can strengthen

their participation in decision-making, preserve their cultural and natural heritage, and improve their quality of life in a sustainable manner. From this perspective, the following research question is posed: What are the main characteristics of the most used approaches in sustainable tourism development associated with community empowerment from 2018 to 2025? Hence, the objective was to describe the approaches used in sustainable tourism development.

2. Sustainable tourism: theoretical basis

From the perspective of community empowerment, sustainable tourism seeks to support communities locally, to such an extent that it can positively impact tourism development; for this purpose, the theoretical approach to these elements is presented.

2.1. Sustainable tourism

Tourism is a dynamic cultural exchange that fosters peace and sustainable development by promoting understanding among diverse communities. This interaction benefits both hosts and travelers, creating opportunities for mutual growth and respect. Integrating sustainability with community empowerment—through local participation in tourism planning—is increasingly vital.

As one of the fastest-growing global industries, tourism also drives sectors like construction, agriculture, and fishing, and is widely seen as a positive force (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). However, it brings challenges, including environmental degradation (Zhou et al., 2022; Rao, 2021) and

the commodification of local cultures, which can erode authenticity (Alamineh et al., 2023). Over-reliance on traditional tourism models has strained infrastructure, weakened social networks, and contributed to tourism fatigue in high-traffic destinations (Torkington et al., 2020).

In response, alternative models have emerged—such as sustainable, green, and community-based tourism (Balida, 2024; Sulistyo et al., 2023). Sustainable tourism aims to balance economic, social, and environmental outcomes through inclusive, responsible practices. All stakeholders—from agencies and service providers to tourists—share responsibility for minimizing impact and promoting eco-friendly behavior (Khan et al., 2023).

Tourism sustainability, according to Giampiccoli et al. (2020), should be a universal principle enforced by governments. Achieving it requires empowering communities and ensuring their active role in tourism governance. The UN Environment Program and World Tourism Organization (2005) outlined 12 goals for sustainable tourism, including local control, which emphasizes community involvement in tourism planning and development.

Giampiccoli et al. (2020) emphasize that the sustainability of tourism should be an intrinsic and universal principle of all forms of tourism that governments should enforce. Thus, it is considered essential to empower the community to achieve sustainable tourism development. Experts agree that tourism sustainability and community empowerment must go hand in hand.

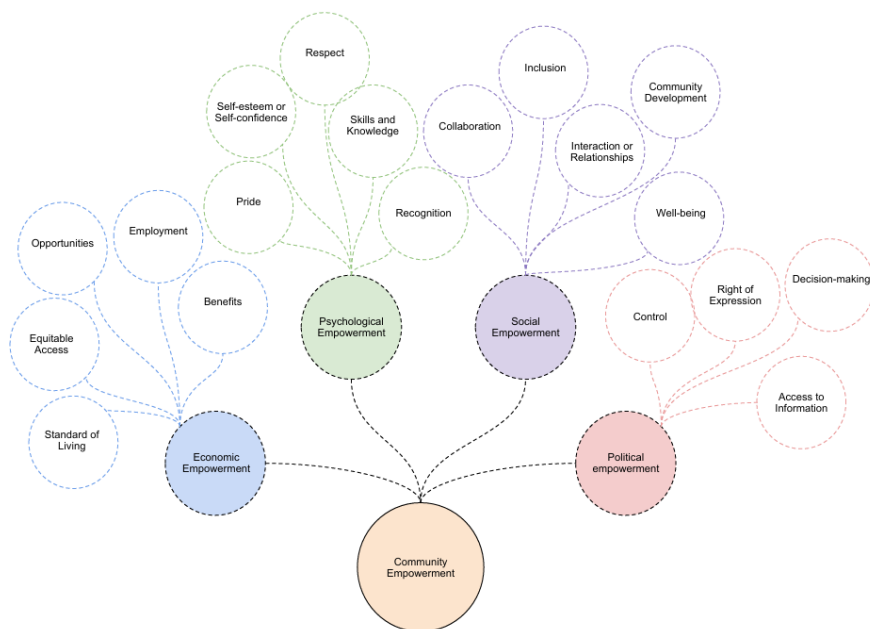
The United Nations Environment

Program and the World Tourism Organization (2005) established an agenda of twelve objectives for sustainable tourism, covering economic, social, and environmental aspects. This agenda serves as a framework for policies that seek to minimize negative impacts and maximize the positive contributions of tourism at the local and global levels. One of these objectives is local control, which proposes to involve and empower local communities in planning and decision-making about the management and future development of tourism in their area, in consultation with other stakeholders.

2.2. Community empowerment

Community empowerment consists of strengthening the capacity of the community, especially the most disadvantaged, to participate in decision-making, influence their environment, and manage their affairs responsibly. It seeks to enable the community to become agents of change and take control of their own development, fostering independence, dignity, and personal and social control. Empowerment is an essential tool for alleviating poverty and improving the lives of individuals and society. Scheyvens & van der Watt (2021), Rachmawati (2020), Das & Chatterjee (2020), Joo et al. (2020), Park & Kim (2016), Hu et al. (2022), and Zhou et al. (2021) highlight that Scheyvens' 1999 framework is widely used to assess empowerment outcomes in tourism initiatives, as it provides an instrument to measure impacts on local communities across four dimensions: economic, psychological, social, and political empowerment (Diagram 1).

Diagram 1 Scheyvens' framework. Dimensions of community empowerment in tourism initiatives



Source: Own elaboration based on Rachmawati (2020), Das & Chatterjee (2020); Joo et al. (2020); Park & Kim (2016), Hu et al. (2022), and Zhou et al. (2021)

Economic empowerment refers to equitable community access to the economic opportunities and benefits generated by tourism development. Psychological empowerment addresses tourism's potential to raise residents' pride and self-esteem by promoting positive feelings about the community's unique characteristics. Social empowerment focuses on how tourism fosters community interaction and collaboration, promoting cohesion, well-being, and social capital. Political empowerment relates to the community's ability to control the direction, type, and level of tourism development in their area.

Other researchers, such as Sari et al. (2023), have limited their approach to three dimensions in their studies: socioeconomic, legal and institutional, and ecological. On the other hand, Kurniawan & Cahyono (2020), Joseph (2025) y Pranita et al. (2022) have considered the economic, sociocultural, and ecological dimensions in their research. Likewise, there are authors who have chosen to address only one specific dimension. For example, Kusumastuti et al. (2024) focus on the technological dimension, Montis et al. (2007) emphasize the environment, Ramkissoon (2023) delves into the

psychological and social dimensions, and Parga & Alonso (2019) focus on the social sphere.

As can be appreciated, the measurement of community empowerment in the context of sustainable tourism presents certain ambiguities, since in many cases the authors prioritize the evaluation of economic benefits, neglecting psychological and social aspects. On other occasions, they focus on measuring the tourist experience, as Chen & Yoon (2019) and Dibiku (2023) do, instead of considering the impact on the local community or on the ecological and environmental setting, as Tapia & Trujillo (2018) addressed.

3. Study method

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, both quantitative and qualitative. On one hand, metadata analysis was conducted using statistical and mathematical techniques to identify patterns and trends; on the other hand, a methodical analysis was carried out to examine the approaches used in the development of sustainable tourism associated with community empowerment. Thus, the study is based on a systematic literature review and does not involve primary data collection. Rodríguez et al. (2024a) mention that the significance of the systematic review is that it provides a synthesis of the current state of knowledge on a topic, allowing future studies to be better oriented.

Likewise, the research protocol began with the formulation of the following question: ¿What are the main characteristics of the most widely used approaches to sustainable tourism development associated with community empowerment in the period

2018–2025? Therefore, the specific objective was to describe the most used approaches in sustainable tourism development associated with community empowerment.

Similarly, the analytical-synthetic method was used to describe aspects linked to the approaches used in sustainable tourism development. Rodríguez et al. (2024b) state that this method provides a solid framework for examining and summarizing aspects of a specific topic. The data collection technique was a documentary review of original articles published in the Scopus platform. For this purpose, the descriptors "sustainable tourism" and "community empowerment" were used, linked by the Boolean operator AND. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied to define a period from 2018 to 2025. No language filter was applied as all articles were written in English.

Of the 61 retrieved articles, 54 had titles and abstracts relevant to the study's objectives. Subsequently, a bibliometric analysis was carried out using the Bibliometrix - Biblioshiny tool, which allowed to generate data visualizations, thus facilitating the interpretation of patterns and trends in the selected scientific literature. In addition, the articles underwent in-depth analysis to extract relevant information, and their most outstanding findings were then synthesized.

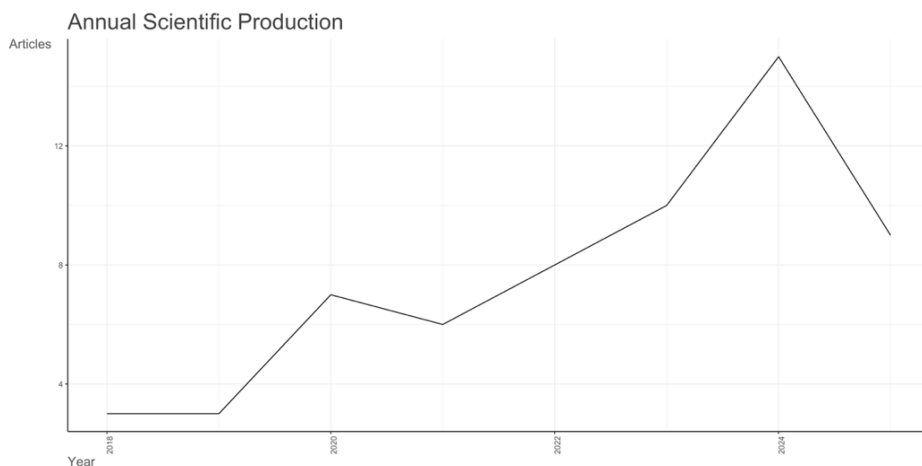
4. Sustainable tourism: results and discussion

The results indicate that the relationship between the terms "sustainable tourism" and "community empowerment" is a relatively unexplored research area. Diagram 2 shows an

increase in document production over time. It is noteworthy that the years 2023 and 2024 have the highest number of publications, reaching a total of 10 and 15 papers, respectively, in each year. Indonesia emerges as the country with the highest scientific production in this field, concentrating 44.3% of the total production. It is followed by Spain and China with smaller shares. The journals that have dealt most with the research

topic are "Sustainability (Switzerland)" and "IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science", with 6 and 7 articles in that order. As for the institutions with the highest participation in this field, Hasanuddin University (Indonesia) stands out, followed by Universitas Sebelas Maret (Indonesia) and Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Spain).

Diagram 2
Annual scientific production

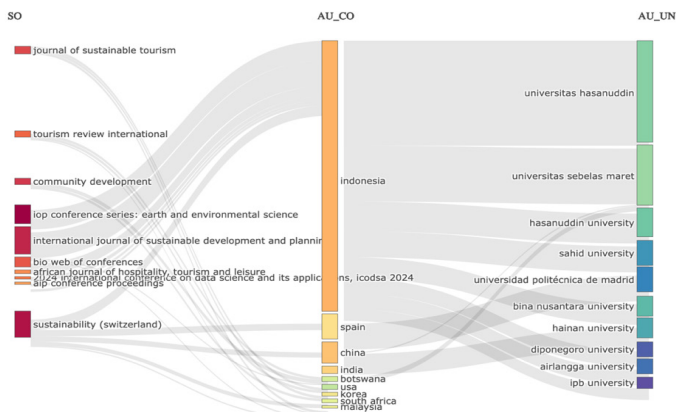


Source: Own elaboration with Bibliometrix - Biblioshiny software.

Diagram 3 also illustrates the relationship between scientific journals (left), authors' countries (middle), and affiliated institutions (right). It can be

seen that Indonesia leads in scientific research related to sustainable tourism and community empowerment.

Diagram 3
Three-field plot. Scientific journal - Author's country - Author's affiliation



Source: Own elaboration with Bibliometrix - Biblioshiny software.

Diagram 4 shows a word cloud reflecting the co-occurrence of terms, where the size of each word is proportional

to its frequency of occurrence in the analyzed documents.

Diagram 4

Nube de palabras



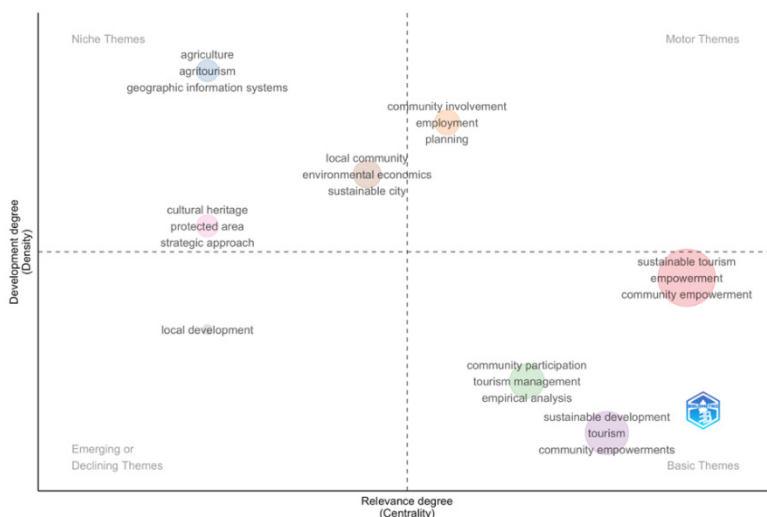
Source: Own elaboration with Bibliometrix - Biblioshiny software.

The most recurring terms are displayed with a larger size. Thus, according to the results, these terms are “sustainable tourism”, “community empowerment”, “empowerment” and “ecotourism”. Similarly, smaller sized words are observed, indicating that the selected documents are focused on the topic. This underlines the important role

of the community and its empowerment in sustainable tourism development.

The map shown in Diagram 5 identifies a conceptual structure of the study field made up of four quadrants that categorize the topics, based on their centrality (relevance within the field) and density (degree of internal development).

Diagram 5
Thematic map



Source: Own elaboration with Bibliometrix - Biblioshiny software

In the upper right quadrant, key concepts such as *sustainable tourism*, *empowerment*, and *community empowerment* form the thematic core of the field. Their high density and interconnection indicate conceptual maturity and centrality in both, theory and practice. The lower right quadrant includes essential but underdeveloped themes like *community participation*, *tourism management*, *sustainable*

development, and *empirical analysis*. While central topics require further theoretical and methodological development. Promoting empirical research can enhance their thematic depth.

In the lower left quadrant, topics such as *local development* appear isolated, with low centrality and density. Though marginal in current literature, they offer potential for emerging research,

especially if linked to core themes like empowerment or participation. The upper left quadrant features specialized topics like *agritourism*, *agriculture*, and *GIS*. These are dense but less connected to the central discourse. Their applied nature may explain the disconnection, though they hold promise for integration with sustainability and spatial planning. At the center, themes like *environmental economics*, *sustainable cities*, *employment*, and *community involvement* act as conceptual bridges. Their transversal nature makes them strategic for integrative research across governance, urban sustainability, and community well-being. Overall, the thematic map reflects an active

academic field focused on *community empowerment* in sustainable tourism, while highlighting the need for deeper interdisciplinary connections and stronger empirical foundations in key areas.

On the other hand, the dominant approaches to sustainable tourism development were identified. These approaches are top-down, which implies greater intervention by the state or actors outside the community, and bottom-up, which encourages community participation in the management of their resources and assets. The latter approach is considered more conducive to facilitating community empowerment due to its inherent characteristics (Chart 1).

Chart 1
Approaches to community empowerment in tourism development

Approach	Characteristics	Authors
Bottom-up	Driven primarily by the local community, where decisions and planning are made in a participatory manner. This model grants significant control to the community in the design and execution of programs, ensuring high participation in project implementation. As a result, a more equitable distribution of economic benefits is achieved, contributing to the economic, social, and political empowerment of the community. The voice and control of local communities are valued, allowing them to play a leading role in the tourism development process.	Cordon et al. (2023) Giampiccoli et al. (2020) Hermawan et al. (2023) Khalid et al. (2019) Manaf et al. (2018) Maskun et al. (2021) Mathew & Sushanth (2025) Meo & Panda (2020) Muhammad & Kim (2018) Murdana et al. (2021) Nguyen et al. (2022) Park & Kim (2016) Purnomo et al. (2020) Putra et al. (2025) Rachmawati (2020) Ramaano (2022) Ramkissoon (2023) Risfandini et al. (2023) Safari et al. (2023) Sulistyo et al. (2023) Trejo et al. (2021) Wani et al. (2024) Wibowo et al. (2023)

Cont.... Chart 1

Top-down	It is an initiative led by the government, where planning and decisions are mainly made by its authorities. It is based on external control, giving external stakeholders, such as officials and organizations, a prominent role in the design and execution of programs. The restricted participation of local communities in project implementation often yields economic benefits that, while demonstrable, are not distributed equitably and tend to accrue to external parties. In this context, community participation is limited, leaving local communities with little control and voice in the tourism development process. Hu et al. (2022) Noviana et al. (2025) Torkington et al. (2020) Zhou et al. (2021)
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Source: Own elaboration

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that, of the 54 articles analyzed regarding this topic, 86% study the bottom-up approach, while only 14% address the top-down. The 4 studies that analyze the top-down approach do so from a critical perspective, in contrast to the bottom-up which emphasizes the benefits gained for the community.

4.2. Top-down approach, the government and policies.

Sustainable development has gained global relevance, particularly with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations [UN], 2015). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2024) supports these goals by promoting tourism as a driver of inclusive and sustainable growth. According to Giampiccoli et al. (2020), all stakeholders—governments, private sector, NGOs, and communities—must contribute to sustainable tourism, a view echoed by Cordova-Buiza et al. (2025) and Velayati & Ahmad (2024).

However, top-down tourism policies have shown limitations. Park & Kim (2016) argue that government-led initiatives often exclude communities, leading to disempowerment and disengagement. Similarly, in China, centralized heritage management has reduced local participation (Zhou et al., 2021), while Hu et al. (2022) highlight political and economic disempowerment driven by self-serving management structures.

Although top-down models can hinder empowerment, government involvement remains essential for setting policies that protect ecological and cultural heritage. Giampiccoli et al. (2020) stress that regulation cannot be left to voluntary action, as private interests may override environmental priorities. Governments also play a key role in funding, promotion, education, and infrastructure development (Wibowo et al., 2023; Hermawan et al., 2023; Safari et al., 2023; Manaf et al., 2018).

Scholars emphasize the need for public policies that combine state support with community-based approaches (Putra

et al., 2024; Ardiansyah et al., 2024; Das & Chatterjee, 2020). Governments must enable local participation in decision-making and policy design, strengthen community education, and promote sustainable destinations.

Ultimately, tourism development must be resilient, equitable, and sustainable—rooted in inclusive governance and policies that distribute benefits fairly, protect resources, and empower communities. A comprehensive, community-centered approach is essential for long-term success.

4.3. Bottom-up approach and community empowerment

In the context of sustainable tourism, the importance of communities taking the lead in managing their natural and social environment is emphasized, even with the support of external actors such as the government. The bottom-up approach is recognized as prevalent in research, highlighting the centrality of the community in promoting its empowerment within the realm of sustainable tourism. Diagram 6 illustrates the bottom-up approach. It shows how the community achieves psychological empowerment by recognizing its ecological and cultural potential and interacting with external stakeholders.

Diagram 6
Bottom-up approach to community empowerment in the context of sustainable tourism



Source: Own creation with Adobe Firefly software

When communities gain control over their natural and cultural assets, they can lead their own development, fostering participation, social and economic growth, and improved quality of life in a more inclusive and sustainable way, with reduced government intervention. In this model, the community becomes both, the primary agent and beneficiary of sustainable development.

Park & Kim (2016), drawing on Friedmann's theories, emphasize the importance of empowering local communities through active participation in decision-making and economic planning. This strengthens civil society and promotes long-term sustainability. Community-led tourism development encourages access to information, fosters pride, and builds external

networks through social interaction. Education and skill-building—both formal and informal—are key to expanding opportunities and raising awareness of tourism's benefits. However, several barriers limit empowerment. Remote location, cultural norms (such as gender roles), elite dominance in tourism, lack of qualified jobs, scarce financial resources, and weak regulation, all constrain equitable participation. As noted by Kumar & Mandal (2025) and Khater & Faik (2025), power imbalances and resource deficits hinder communities from fully benefiting from tourism and achieving meaningful autonomy. Chart 2 summarizes the main factors that may limit community empowerment in tourism development.

Chart 2
Limiting factors of community empowerment in tourism development

Factor	Detail
Periphery	Geographic location, whether peripheral or central, influences how the community benefits from tourism. People living closer to the tourist center tend to receive personal and community benefits from tourism. Those located on the periphery are less likely to experience the same levels of empowerment compared to those nearer to the center.
Community Culture	Community culture influences the empowerment of its members, particularly regarding gender roles. In environments where cultural perceptions confine women to domestic roles, their opportunities to participate and interact with others beyond their homes are limited.
Elite Domination	The control of the elite in a tourism organization can limit the community's participation and benefits in tourism development. This can prevent the community from becoming empowered by restricting their access to tourism benefits. Unequal distribution, influenced by elite domination, favors the most powerful individuals in the community.
Type of Occupations in the Area	Perceptions of community empowerment derived from tourism vary depending on the types of jobs available in villages. Predominantly low-skilled and poorly paid jobs limit empowerment opportunities, particularly at the individual level, for the communities.
Lack of Financial Capital	The scarcity of capital in the community allowed external agents to establish tourism businesses due to the lack of local resources. This situation reduces the community's opportunities to participate in the tourism industry. An additional factor that hinders tourism benefits is the lack of proper regulations to support their involvement.

Source: Own creation based on Rachmawati (2020).

The results indicate that a bottom-up approach alone does not guarantee community empowerment, as it depends on broader social, cultural, political, and environmental factors (Rachmawati, 2020). Based on stakeholder theory (Freeman, Sautter, & Leisen), tourism planning must consider the interests of various actors—local businesses, governments, residents, and others—who influence and are affected by destination sustainability. Ignoring local interests can lead to overtourism and stakeholder dissatisfaction (Mihalic, 2020). Moreover, when communities fail to value their cultural and natural assets, they may prioritize short-term economic gains, risking resource overuse and long-term unsustainability.

4.3. Endogenous factors in community empowerment based on sustainable tourism

Studies by Wahyudin & Mutamimah (2025), Ali et al. (2024), and others compare communities promoting sustainable tourism and empowerment. Despite similar external conditions, outcomes vary—some succeed while others do not. Success largely depends on internal factors such as social dynamics, psychological resilience, and organizational strength, outweighing external opportunities or threats (Cordon et al., 2023).

Communities that capitalize on their unique strengths—through creativity, innovation, and adaptability—are more likely to thrive. Silva et al. (2022) note that social innovation fosters new forms of organization and knowledge, contributing to more resilient and inclusive societies. Ensuring accessibility—physical, informational, and emotional—is also key

to sustainable heritage management.

Technology plays a vital role in promoting destinations, preserving ecosystems, marketing local products, and enhancing safety and planning. Ramaano (2022) and Fatimah & Pujiarto (2019) emphasize its importance for biodiversity protection and sustainable rural tourism development.

Overall, the success of sustainable tourism and empowerment initiatives relies heavily on communities' ability to harness internal capacities and integrate technology. The study also reinforces the effectiveness of the bottom-up approach, which better addresses local needs and respects cultural and ecological specificities. It is viewed as more suitable for guiding policy aimed at community-based tourism.

However, this research has limitations—it draws solely from Scopus-indexed articles (2018–2025) and is largely Eurasia-focused. There is a need to expand research to the Southern Hemisphere, particularly in ecologically rich but underexplored regions.

Future studies should assess government commitment to sustainable tourism in these areas, investigate community-based models in heritage-rich regions, and analyze the impact of sustainable policies on mass tourism. This research not only contributes to existing knowledge but also lays the groundwork for future inquiry.

5. Conclusion

The predominant approach to sustainable tourism development is the bottom-up, which is fundamental to community empowerment. This approach allows local communities to actively participate in decision-making and ensures that their needs

and aspirations are considered in the development process. In addition, tourism development strategies should focus on sustainability and the conservation of local resources. This not only protects the environment but also ensures that communities can benefit from their resources in the long term.

Therefore, government intervention is essential in formulating inclusive tourism development policies that promote the participation of local communities. This not only promotes social cohesion but also ensures that tourism benefits are equitably distributed among community members. Furthermore, the state should support the allocation of financial resources, the promotion of tourist destinations, and the provision of appropriate infrastructure. Policies must align with local needs and encourage the training of community members.

Regarding the term “sustainable tourism,” it is crucial to understand that it goes beyond a mere tourism modality. It represents a comprehensive commitment of all subsystems of the tourism sector to environmental protection, as emphasized by Khan et al. (2023) and Giampiccoli et al. (2020). To achieve sustainable tourism development, it is important to implement practices that minimize environmental impact across all areas of tourist service.

Finally, more research is needed to evaluate the impact of implemented policies and the approaches used in sustainable tourism development, as well as to identify the best practices that can be replicated in different contexts. Additionally, there is a call for the scientific community in the Western region to address this issue in future research, as many communities have a rich cultural and natural heritage,

which is highly conducive to sustainable tourism development and community empowerment.

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