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Dimensions of Rural Participation (Decision-Making, Implementation, and Benefit Sharing) and Tourism Sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria			
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Keywords		Abstract	
rural participation, decision-making, tourism sustainability, benefit sharing, community-based tourism, sustainable tourism development		Although community participation is generally accepted as an important element of sustainable tourism development, empirical evidence regarding the impact of the various aspects of community participation on the sustainability of tourism development is limited especially in the context of developing countries. The present study looked at the linkages between the participation in decision making, implementation and benefits sharing among rural communities and the sustainability of tourism in Cross River State, Nigeria. For this study, a correlational survey design was used. The population was those residents of rural communities within key tourism destinations in the State and a sample of 688 respondents were selected by a multistage sampling procedure. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data on the dimensions of rural participation and tourism sustainability. Simple linear regression was used to analyze the data at the .05 level of significance. The results showed that the rural participation in decision making was a significant predictor of tourism sustainability (R = .781, Adjusted R ² = .610, F = 1073.519, p < .05) and explained 61.0% of the variance in tourism sustainability. The participation of rural people in implementation was also a significant predictor of tourism sustainability (R = .796, Adjusted R ² = .633, F = 1187.480, p < .05), with the highest predictive variation of 63.3% among the dimensions explored and was the strongest predictor. Rural participation in benefit sharing, too, had a significant relationship with tourism sustainability (R = .701, Adjusted R ² = .491, F = 664.421 and p < .05), explaining 49.1% of the variance in tourism sustainability. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers come to the conclusion that sustainable tourism development is heavily reliant on meaningful participation of the community in the process of tourism development. It calls for the formalisation of participatory governance structures, increased community involvement in tourism implementation and equitable benefit sharing to improve the sustainability of tourism in Cross River State and other similar tourist locations. The study makes a significant contribution to the literature on sustainable tourism	
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	by illustrating the differential effects of the participation dimensions on the dimension of sustainable tourism in a developing country context.
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Introduction and Background

The growing emphasis on sustainable development has transformed tourism planning from an economic focus to one that integrates economic, environmental, and social sustainability. Sustainable tourism seeks to benefit local communities, conserve natural and cultural resources, and ensure equitable distribution of tourism benefits (Reindrawati, 2023; UN Tourism, 2024). Consequently, community participation has become a fundamental requirement for sustainable tourism development. Local communities are custodians of the natural and cultural resources upon which tourism depends. Studies have shown that meaningful community participation enhances destination competitiveness, environmental stewardship, social cohesion, and public support for tourism initiatives (Amoako et al., 2022; Reindrawati, 2023). In rural destinations, participation also strengthens conservation efforts, improves visitor experiences, and promotes long-term sustainability (Alemayehu, 2024; Widjaja et al., 2025).

Community participation comprises three major dimensions: decision-making, implementation, and benefit sharing. Decision-making enables communities to influence tourism policies and planning; implementation involves active participation in tourism activities, resource management, and service delivery; while benefit sharing ensures equitable distribution of tourism's economic and social gains. Destinations that embrace these forms of participation generally experience stronger community support, better resource conservation, and improved tourism sustainability (Nurita, 2026; Reindrawati, 2023).

In Nigeria, Cross River State is recognized as a leading tourism destination because of attractions such as Obudu Mountain Resort, Agbokim Waterfalls, Cross River National Park, Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary, Marina Resort, Tinapa Business Resort, Leboku Festival, and the Calabar Carnival. These investments were intended to promote employment, rural development, and environmental conservation. Despite these efforts, concerns remain regarding the sustainability of tourism in the state. Many host communities continue to experience poverty, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental degradation arising from illegal logging, poaching, and encroachment into protected areas. These challenges raise questions about whether tourism development has generated meaningful benefits for local communities or adequately incorporated them into tourism governance. Evidence suggests that communities are more likely to support tourism and conservation when they participate in decision-making and benefit from tourism activities. Conversely, exclusion from planning and unequal benefit distribution often reduce community support and threaten tourism sustainability (Reindrawati, 2023; Amoako et al., 2022). Anecdotal evidence further indicates that many rural communities in Cross River State have limited influence over tourism decisions and receive relatively few tourism benefits.

Although previous studies have examined community participation in tourism, limited

empirical evidence exists on how its individual dimensions—decision-making, implementation, and benefit sharing influence tourism sustainability in Cross River State. This study therefore investigates these relationships to provide evidence that can guide tourism policy, destination management, and community participation strategies.

Statement of the Problem

Tourism development is expected to generate employment, improve livelihoods, conserve environmental resources, and promote rural development. However, in many tourism destinations, increased investment and visitor arrivals have not translated into improved living conditions for host communities or better environmental outcomes.

Despite substantial investment in tourism infrastructure and attractions in Cross River State, many host communities continue to face unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, limited social amenities, and environmental degradation resulting from unsustainable resource use. These conditions raise concerns about whether tourism development is achieving its sustainability objectives. Although existing literature recognizes community participation as essential for sustainable tourism, participation is multidimensional, encompassing decision-making, implementation, and benefit sharing. Most previous studies have examined participation as a single concept, providing limited understanding of how these individual dimensions influence tourism sustainability. Furthermore, empirical evidence on this relationship is scarce in Cross River State. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between the three dimensions of rural participation and tourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria. The findings are expected to provide evidence for developing more inclusive and sustainable tourism policies and management practices.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between dimensions of rural participation and tourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between rural participation in decision-making and tourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria.
2. Determine the relationship between rural participation in the implementation of tourism activities and tourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria.
3. Examine the relationship between rural participation in benefit sharing and tourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

H01: There is no significant relationship between rural participation in decision-making and tourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria.

H02: There is no significant relationship between rural participation in the implementation of tourism activities and tourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria.

H03: There is no significant relationship between rural participation in benefit sharing and tourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Rural Participation in Decision-Making and Tourism Sustainability Empirical evidence indicates that sustainable tourism depends largely on the active involvement of local communities in tourism planning, policy formulation, resource management, and governance. Participatory decision-making enhances community ownership, promotes conservation, and improves tourism sustainability. Reindrawati (2023), in a systematic review of studies from developing countries, identified operational, structural, and cultural barriers including inadequate information, limited institutional support, and unequal power relations that hinder community participation. The study concluded that meaningful community involvement is essential for sustainable tourism development. Similarly, Tian et al. (2023) found that although tourism generated economic benefits in Miao villages of China, governance remained largely top-down, limiting community participation and empowerment. Warinda and van der Merwe (2023) also reported that inadequate community involvement in tourism governance reduced local participation in conservation and tourism projects in Zimbabwe. Likewise, Yanes et al. (2019) observed that although tourism policies in Colombia acknowledged community participation, they provided limited practical mechanisms for involving local communities in decision-making.

These studies demonstrate that inclusive decision-making strengthens community empowerment, improves resource protection, and enhances tourism sustainability. However, most evidence originates from Asia and Latin America, with limited empirical studies from Nigeria, particularly Cross River State. Furthermore, few studies have examined decision-making participation alongside the developmental, economic, social, and environmental dimensions of tourism sustainability. These gaps justify the present study. Rural Participation in the Implementation of Tourism Activities and Tourism Sustainability Community participation during the implementation of tourism activities is equally important for achieving sustainable tourism. Active involvement in project execution, resource management, service delivery, conservation activities, and destination management promotes local ownership, employment, and long-term sustainability. Siraphatthada (2021) found that innovation adoption, quality management, and stakeholder participation significantly enhanced community-based tourism development in Thailand. Ali et al. (2022) similarly reported that community participation in ecotourism implementation improved residents' quality of life and contributed to sustainable tourism development. Zielinski et al. (2020) identified active community participation, local leadership, and stakeholder collaboration as critical success factors for community-based tourism.

Likewise, Ćurčić et al. (2021), Warinda and van der Merwe (2023), and Tian et al. (2023) consistently found that meaningful community involvement in implementing tourism projects strengthens social cohesion, local empowerment, conservation efforts, and tourism sustainability. Although international evidence consistently supports community participation during

implementation, empirical studies remain limited in Nigeria, particularly Cross River State. Moreover, few studies explicitly relate implementation participation to the multiple dimensions of tourism sustainability, creating a clear research gap addressed by the present study. Rural Participation in Benefit Sharing and Tourism Sustainability Equitable benefit sharing is a fundamental principle of sustainable tourism. Fair distribution of tourism's economic, social, environmental, and developmental benefits encourages community support for tourism and conservation initiatives.

Ali et al. (2022) found that equitable tourism benefits improved residents' quality of life and increased support for tourism development in Bangladesh. Similarly, Guo and Jordan (2022) showed that unequal access to tourism opportunities created social exclusion and resistance to tourism development in China. Studies by the World Bank (2022–2024) and Living on the Edge: Benefit-Sharing from Protected Area Tourism further demonstrated that communities receiving direct benefits such as employment, infrastructure, and revenue-sharing were more supportive of conservation and tourism sustainability. Recent studies on community-based tourism (2024) and a systematic review of African community-based tourism (2026) also concluded that equitable benefit-sharing strengthens community welfare, social cohesion, conservation, and long-term tourism sustainability, whereas unequal benefit distribution often leads to conflict and weak community support. Despite these findings, important gaps remain. Most studies examine community participation as a single construct rather than distinguishing participation in decision-making, implementation, and benefit sharing. In addition, most empirical evidence comes from Asia, Europe, and Latin America, with limited studies from Nigeria and Cross River State. Few studies also examine how this participation dimensions jointly influence the developmental, economic, social, and environmental dimensions of tourism sustainability.

Research Gap

The literature reveals four major gaps:

Most studies treat community participation as a single construct instead of distinguishing participation in decision-making, implementation, and benefit sharing.

Empirical evidence is concentrated in Asia, Europe, and Latin America, with limited studies from Nigeria, particularly Cross River State.

Few studies simultaneously examine the influence of participation on the developmental, economic, social, and environmental dimensions of tourism sustainability.

Limited research investigates the direct relationship between different forms of rural participation and multidimensional tourism sustainability.

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, a correlational survey research design was used. The design was deemed suitable as it allowed the researcher to explore the relationships between the dimensions of rural involvement and tourism sustainability while holding constant all the variables. In particular, how much rural involvement in decision making, implementation of tourism activities, and benefit sharing was found to predict the sustainability of tourism activities in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Area of the Study

The study was carried out in Cross River State in Nigeria. The state is in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria and is known as one of the highest tourism centres of the state. The Cross River State has a number of significant tourist sites like Obudu Mountain resort, Agbokim Waterfalls, Cross River National Park, Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary, Marina Resort, Tinapa Business resort and the celebrated Calabar Carnival. The state also has a wealth of ecological and cultural values which can be utilized for tourism. The state was selected based on its strategic position in the tourism industry and the rural dwellers who are around or in the tourist centres of the state.

Population of the Study.

The population of this study was adult residents of the rural communities within the major tourism destinations in Cross River State. These residents were the first stakeholders in tourism development as they are in direct contact with the tourist resources and are expected to be involved in tourism planning, implementation and sharing in the benefits of tourism.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 688 respondents was used for the study. The sample size was deemed to be sufficient for analysis of regression and for the generalization of the findings to the study population. The respondents were carefully selected using a multi-stage sampling method from the rural communities located within tourism-hosting areas in Cross River State. First stage: Choice of tourism destinations and host communities. The identified communities were then proportionately sampled across the communities with appropriate probability sampling methods for respondents to ensure representativeness.

Instrumentation.

A structured questionnaire was prepared by the researcher in accordance with the study's objectives and the literature related to community participation and the sustainability of tourism. The instrument had 2 sections. Section A was used to collect information about respondents' demographic characteristics and Section B was used to measure the study variables.

Rural participation was considered on three aspects: Rural participation in decision making; Rural participation in implementation of tourism activities; and Rural participation in benefit sharing. Four dimensions were used to measure tourism sustainability: Developmental sustainability, Economic sustainability, social sustainability and Environmental sustainability. A four-point Likert-type scale was used to measure responses, with Strongly Agree (4) and Strongly Disagree (1) being the extreme points.

Validity of the Instrument

Face and content validation was conducted by experts from tourism studies, EE and measurement and evaluation. The feedback they provided on the questionnaire was considered and included in the final version of the questionnaire to ensure that the questionnaire was suitable in measuring the constructs in the study.

Reliability of the instrument.

A pilot study was carried out with respondents whose characteristics were similar to that of the study population, but not from the sampled communities. For the results of the pilot study, data were analyzed using the Cronbach's Alpha statistics for reliability analysis. The reliability coefficients were obtained as follows: Rural participation in decision-making ($\alpha = .78$); Rural participation in implementation ($\alpha = .88$); Rural participation in benefits sharing ($\alpha = .87$); Tourism sustainability ($\alpha = .93$) which was considered satisfactory and it was reliable for data collection as an internally consistent instrument.

The data collection process.

The questionnaires were administered in the selected communities by the researcher with the support of trained research assistants. Data collection started after the consent of community leaders and stakeholders was taken. Completed questionnaires were collected on the spot after being filled out to obtain a high return rate.

The method used to analyze the data.

The data obtained were coded and analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The respondents' characteristics were summarized using descriptive statistics and the hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression analysis at 0.05 level of significance.

The regression model is expressed as:

$$[Y = a + bX + e]$$

where:

(Y) = Tourism Sustainability;

(a) = Constant (intercept);

(b) = Regression coefficient;

(X) = Dimension of Rural Participation; and

(e) = Error term.

The coefficient of determination (Adjusted (R^2)) was used to determine the proportion of variance in tourism sustainability explained by each dimension of rural participation, while the F -statistic and associated probability values were used to determine the significance of the regression models.

Operationalization of Variables

The study involved the two main variables of involvement in rural and tourism sustainability. Three dimensions of participation were used to assess rural participation: decision making, implementation and benefit sharing, each with 5 items, total 15 items. Twenty items in four dimensions (developmental, economic, social, and environmental sustainability) were used to gauge the sustainability of tourism. Each item was scored on a four-point range Likert Scale (Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). The rural participation scale scores were higher for the scores of those who indicated a higher level of participation of the rural people in the tourism development process, and higher scores on the tourism sustainability scale scores indicated a higher level of perceived tourism sustainability in tourism destinations in Cross River State.

Results:

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant relationship between Rural participation in decision-making and Tourism sustainability in Cross River State. The independent variable in this hypothesis is Rural participation in decision-making; while the dependent variable is Tourism sustainability. Simple regression analysis was employed to test this hypothesis. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 1.

The simple regression analysis of relationship between Establishment of conservation clubs and the Tourism sustainability produced an adjusted R^2 of .610. This indicated that the Rural participation in decision-making accounted for 61.0% of the determinant Tourism sustainability in the study area. This finding is a critical indication that Establishment of conservation clubs is relatively high in the area of the study. The F-value of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) obtained from the regression table was $F = 1073.519$ and the sig. value of .000 (or $p < .05$) at the degree of freedom (df) 1 and 686. The implication of this result is that Rural participation in decision-making is a significant predictor of Tourism sustainability. The identified equation to understand this relationship was that $\text{tourism} = 14.321 + 3.026 (\text{rural participation in decision-making})$.

Table 1: Simple regression result of relationship between Rural participation in decision-making and Tourism sustainability

<i>Model</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R. square</i>	<i>Adjusted R. square</i>	<i>Std error of the estimate</i>		
1	.781(a)	.610	.610	3.33561		
Model	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	p-value	
Regression	11944.257	1	11944.257	1073.519*	.000(a)	
Residual	7632.621	686	11.126			
Total	19576.878	687				
Variables	<i>Unstandardized regression weight B</i>	<i>Standardized regression weight</i>	<i>Beta weight</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p-value</i>	
(Constant)	14.321	1.686		8.495	.000	

Electronic book	3.026	.092	.781	32.765	.000
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* Significant at .05 level.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant relationship between Rural participation in implementation and Tourism sustainability in Cross River State. The independent variable in this hypothesis is Rural participation in implementation; while the dependent variable is Tourism sustainability. Simple regression analysis was employed to test this hypothesis. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 2.

The simple regression analysis of relationship between Rural participation in implementation and the Tourism sustainability produced an adjusted R^2 of .633. This indicated that the Rural participation in decision-making accounted for 63.3% of the determinant Tourism sustainability in the study area. This finding is a critical indication that Establishment of conservation clubs is relatively high in the area of the study. The F-value of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) obtained from the regression table was $F = 1187.480$ and the sig. value of .000 (or $p < .05$) at the degree of freedom (df) 1 and 686. The implication of this result is that rural participation in implementation is a significant predictor of Tourism sustainability. The identified equation to understand this relationship was that $\text{tourism} = 42.959 + 1.674 (\text{rural participation in implementation})$.

TABLE 2: Simple regression result of relationship between Rural participation in implementation and Tourism sustainability

<i>Model</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R. square</i>	<i>Adjusted Square</i>	<i>R. Std error of the estimate</i>	
1	.796(a)	.634	.633	3.23256	
Model	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	p-value
Regression	12408.541	1	12408.541	1187.480*	.000(a)
Residual	7168.337	686	10.449		
Total	19576.878	687			
Variables	Unstandardized regression weight B	Standardized regression weight	Beta weight	t	p-value
(Constant)	42.959	.777		55.283	.000
Rural participation in implementation	1.674	.049	.796	34.460	.000

* Significant at .05 level.

Hypothesis 3

There is no significant relationship between Rural participation in benefits sharing and Tourism sustainability in Cross River State. The independent variable in this hypothesis is Rural participation in benefits sharing; while the dependent variable is Tourism sustainability. Simple

regression analysis was employed to test this hypothesis. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 3.

The simple regression analysis of relationship between Rural participation in benefits sharing and the Tourism sustainability produced an adjusted R^2 of .491. This indicated that the rural participation in decision-making accounted for 49.1% of the determinant Tourism sustainability in the study area. This finding is a critical indication that Establishment of conservation clubs is relatively high in the area of the study. The F-value of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) obtained from the regression table was $F = 664.421$ and the sig. value of .000 (or $p < .05$) at the degree of freedom (df) 1 and 686. The implication of this result is that rural participation in benefits sharing are a significant predictor of tourism sustainability. The identified equation to understand this relationship was that $\text{tourism} = 19.570 + 2.748 (\text{rural participation in benefits sharing})$.

TABLE 3: Simple regression result of relationship between Rural participation in benefits sharing and Tourism sustainability

Model	R	R. square	Adjusted R. Square	Std error of the estimate	
1	.701(a)	.492	.491	3.80748	
Model	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	p-value
Regression	9632.025	1	9632.025	664.421*	.000(a)
Residual	9944.853	686	14.497		
Total	19576.878	687			
Variables	Unstandardized regression weight B	Standardized regression weight	Beta weight	t	p-value
(Constant)	19.570	1.939		10.096	.000
Rural participation in benefits sharing	2.748	.107	.701	25.776	.000

* Significant at .05 level.

Discussion of findings

Rural Participation in Decision-Making and Tourism Sustainability

The study results showed that there was a great positive correlation between the rural participation in decision-making and tourism sustainability in Cross River State. The result revealed that the rural participation in decision making was a significant predictor of tourism sustainability ($R = .781$, Adjusted $R^2 = .610$, $F = 1073.519$, $p < .05$); it explained 61.0% of the variance in tourism sustainability. So, the null hypothesis was rejected. This discovery suggests that greater participation of rural communities in the planning, policy-making and decision-making

process in tourism is correlated with the sustainability of tourism. The regression coefficient also shows that every unit increase in rural participation in decision-making would lead to an increase in tourism sustainability.

It is hardly surprising since the local communities are the ones who most often bear the responsibility for managing tourism resources and are involved in tourism-related decisions. By engaging in tourism planning and governance, community members are more likely to feel the sense of ownership, responsibility and commitment towards the tourism projects and conservation programmes. This participation helps to build trust among stakeholders, minimise opposition to tourism programmes, and foster collaboration to maintain tourism resources and destinations. The discovery is in accordance with Reindrawati's (2023) study which found that inclusive decision-making structures are a prerequisite in developing countries to sustainable tourism development. The results of the study indicated that ineffectiveness of participation mechanisms, poor information availability, and lack of local community representation hindered tourism sustainability. Likewise, Tian, Stoffelen, and Vanclay (2023) found that top-down tourism governance arrangements restricted community empowerment and affected the sustainability of the tourism outcomes. Their research found that meaningful engagement of communities in tourism governance increases the likelihood of their supporting tourism and conservation programmes.

Results of the present finding also confirmed the findings of Warinda and van der Merwe (2023) which indicated that a lack of community participation in tourism governance affected the levels of commitment to the tourism enterprises and conservation in Zimbabwe. Similarly, Yanes et al. (2019) stated that tourism policies which do not include a way to involve the community for decision making negatively affect the effectiveness and sustainability of community-based tourism projects. The discovery also reinforces the sustainable tourism scholars' proposal of greater community involvement in decision-making processes leading to more transparency, accountability, social acceptance, and sustainable tourism projects. The recommendation is on the need for the policymakers and tourism managers in Cross River State to make participatory decision-making processes institutional, which will enable the rural communities to actively participate in tourism planning and governance.

Rural Participation in Implementation and Tourism Sustainability

The study further revealed a significant positive relationship between rural participation in the implementation of tourism activities and tourism sustainability in Cross River State. The result indicated that rural participation in implementation significantly predicted tourism sustainability ($R = .796$, Adjusted $R^2 = .633$, $F = 1187.480$, $p < .05$), accounting for 63.3% of the variance in tourism sustainability. This was the highest explanatory power among the three dimensions of rural participation examined in the study. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. The finding suggests that the active involvement of rural communities in implementing tourism projects, managing tourism resources, providing tourism services, participating in conservation

activities, and maintaining tourism infrastructure contributes substantially to sustainable tourism development. Communities that actively participate in tourism implementation are more likely to perceive tourism as beneficial, support tourism initiatives, and contribute to the protection and maintenance of tourism resources.

The result agrees with Siraphatthada (2021), who found that active stakeholder engagement and participation in tourism implementation positively influenced community-based tourism development in Thailand. The study concluded that community involvement in tourism operations enhances destination performance and sustainability. Similarly, Ali et al. (2022) found that participation in tourism activities significantly improved community well-being and quality of life, thereby strengthening support for tourism development. The finding is also consistent with the study of Zielinski et al. (2020), which identified community involvement in project implementation, local leadership, and stakeholder collaboration as major factors facilitating the success and sustainability of community-based tourism initiatives in developing countries. Likewise, Ćurčić et al. (2021) reported that active participation in tourism implementation strengthened local economic development, promoted social cohesion, and enhanced the sustainability of rural tourism destinations. The findings of Warinda and van der Merwe (2023) similarly demonstrated that tourism projects become more sustainable when local communities play active roles in managing and implementing tourism activities.

The strong predictive effect of implementation participation observed in the present study underscores the practical importance of moving beyond consultation toward active community engagement in tourism operations. The finding suggests that sustainable tourism development in Cross River State depends not only on involving communities in planning but also on providing opportunities for meaningful participation in tourism implementation. This could be achieved through community-managed tourism enterprises, employment opportunities, conservation programmes, tourism service provision, and local capacity-building initiatives.

Rural Participation in Benefit Sharing and Tourism Sustainability

The findings further revealed a significant positive relationship between rural participation in benefit sharing and tourism sustainability in Cross River State. The regression analysis showed that benefit sharing significantly predicted tourism sustainability ($R = .701$, Adjusted $R^2 = .491$, $F = 664.421$, $p < .05$), accounting for 49.1% of the variance in tourism sustainability. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. Although the explanatory power was lower than those of decision-making and implementation participation, the result nevertheless demonstrates the importance of equitable benefit distribution in sustaining tourism development. This finding suggests that rural communities are more likely to support tourism development when they derive tangible benefits from tourism activities. Such benefits may include employment opportunities, income generation, infrastructure development, improved social services, educational opportunities, and other developmental gains associated with tourism. When tourism benefits are shared equitably, community members develop positive attitudes toward tourism, support conservation initiatives, and contribute to the protection of tourism resources.

The finding supports the study of Ali et al. (2022), which found that tourism participation improved community quality of life through the economic and social benefits derived from tourism activities. The researchers concluded that perceived benefits from tourism strengthen local support for tourism development and contribute to sustainable outcomes. Similarly, Guo and Jordan (2022) found that unequal access to tourism benefits generated social exclusion and conflict among community members, thereby undermining tourism sustainability. Their findings suggest that equitable distribution of tourism benefits is essential for maintaining social harmony and long-term support for tourism initiatives. The result is further supported by studies on benefit-sharing mechanisms in protected areas, which indicate that communities receiving direct tourism benefits are more willing to support conservation programmes and participate in destination management activities. Evidence from tourism and conservation projects has consistently shown that local support for tourism development increases when communities perceive that tourism contributes meaningfully to their socio-economic well-being. Conversely, exclusion from tourism benefits often leads to dissatisfaction, reduced participation, and resistance to tourism initiatives.

The finding reinforces the principles of sustainable tourism, which emphasize that host communities should not merely bear the costs of tourism development but should also enjoy its benefits. The implication is that tourism managers and policymakers in Cross River State should develop transparent and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms that ensure local communities receive a fair share of tourism-derived revenues and development opportunities. Such measures would strengthen community support, improve conservation outcomes, and enhance the sustainability of tourism destinations.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have important theoretical, practical, and policy implications for sustainable tourism development in Cross River State and similar tourism destinations in developing countries. The study established that rural participation in decision-making, implementation, and benefit sharing significantly predicts tourism sustainability. This implies that tourism sustainability is not solely dependent on the availability of tourism resources or government investment but is strongly influenced by the extent to which local communities are integrated into tourism development processes.

The significant relationship between rural participation in decision-making and tourism sustainability implies that involving local communities in tourism planning and governance enhances the sustainability of tourism destinations. When community members are given opportunities to participate in decisions affecting tourism development, they are more likely to develop a sense of ownership, trust, and commitment toward tourism projects. Consequently, tourism planners and destination managers who adopt participatory governance approaches are more likely to achieve sustainable tourism outcomes than those who rely on top-down decision-making structures.

The finding that rural participation in implementation was the strongest predictor of tourism sustainability suggests that practical involvement of local communities in tourism activities is critical to sustaining tourism development. This implies that community participation

should go beyond consultation and include active engagement in tourism operations, conservation activities, management of tourism facilities, and provision of tourism services. The finding further suggests that local capacity building, entrepreneurship development, and employment generation should constitute integral components of tourism development programmes. The significant relationship between benefit sharing and tourism sustainability indicates that communities are more willing to support tourism initiatives when they derive tangible economic, social, and developmental benefits from tourism activities. This finding implies that equitable distribution of tourism benefits is necessary for securing long-term community support for tourism development and conservation efforts. Tourism projects that fail to deliver visible benefits to host communities may experience resistance, apathy, and reduced sustainability over time.

Theoretically, the findings provide empirical support for the Theory of Sustainable Development, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle Theory. The results demonstrate that community participation influences attitudes, behaviours, and support for tourism development, which ultimately contributes to destination sustainability. The findings also reinforce contemporary sustainable tourism perspectives that advocate community-centred approaches to tourism planning and management.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between dimensions of rural participation and tourism sustainability in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study investigated the relationships between rural participation in decision-making, implementation, and benefit sharing and tourism sustainability.

The findings revealed that all three dimensions of rural participation significantly predicted tourism sustainability. Rural participation in implementation emerged as the strongest predictor of tourism sustainability, followed by participation in decision-making and participation in benefit sharing. The results indicate that sustainable tourism development is enhanced when rural communities are actively involved in planning tourism activities, implementing tourism programmes, and sharing the benefits derived from tourism development.

The study concludes that tourism sustainability in Cross River State depends substantially on the extent of community involvement throughout the tourism development process. Communities that are empowered to participate in tourism governance, implementation, and benefit distribution are more likely to support tourism initiatives, participate in conservation activities, and contribute to the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations. Therefore, community participation should be regarded not merely as a desirable component of tourism development but as a fundamental requirement for achieving sustainable tourism outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Tourism policymakers and destination managers should institutionalize participatory decision-making mechanisms by involving community representatives in tourism planning

committees, tourism boards, and destination management structures to ensure that local interests are adequately represented in tourism-related decisions.

2. Government agencies, tourism organizations, and development partners should strengthen community participation in tourism implementation through skills acquisition programmes, entrepreneurship training, capacity-building workshops, and employment opportunities that enable local residents to actively engage in tourism operations and management.
3. Tourism authorities should develop transparent and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms that ensure host communities receive a fair proportion of tourism-generated revenues, employment opportunities, community development projects, and social amenities arising from tourism activities.
4. Community-based tourism enterprises should be promoted and supported through financial assistance, technical support, and institutional backing to enhance local ownership and participation in tourism development.
5. Tourism development policies in Cross River State should incorporate community participation as a mandatory requirement at all stages of tourism development, including planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
6. Local communities should be sensitized on the importance of sustainable tourism and conservation through continuous environmental education and awareness programmes to strengthen their commitment to tourism sustainability.
7. Tourism managers should establish regular stakeholder consultation forums where community members can express their concerns, contribute ideas, and participate in decisions relating to tourism development and destination management.
8. Future tourism development initiatives should prioritize projects that generate direct socio-economic benefits for host communities, including infrastructure development, livelihood opportunities, educational support, healthcare services, and environmental conservation programmes.
9. Government and private-sector tourism investors should adopt inclusive tourism development strategies that recognize local communities as key partners rather than passive beneficiaries in tourism development.

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