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Responsible Tourism: Integrating Social Sustainability through Women Empowerment

Research on sustainability in tourism has increasingly focused on environmental and economic – rather than social – sustainability, especially in its practical applications. This case study of responsible tourism in Kumarakom, India, contributes to the growing body of literature on social sustainability, following a qualitative research design adopting both method and data triangulation. This includes field visits, interviews, and document analysis. The findings demonstrate the exceptional level of community participation and satisfaction at Kumarakom. This has been achieved through the continuous support, coordination, and collaboration of various stakeholders and strong, efficient government support. Moreover, the results highlight the significance of gender equality and women's empowerment as integral elements of social sustainability. This study contributes to the development of tourism theory and governance by demonstrating how the substantive and procedural aspects of social sustainability intertwine with its broader potential as a channel for communication; furthermore, it aims to play a constructive role in the larger debate on sustainability following the establishment of a thriving market.

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Introduction

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2019), tourism can contribute to sustainable development in many ways. In light of this potential, the tourism sector is currently being inundated with various buzzwords such as sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, green tourism, etc. Responsible tourism (RT) is a popular initiative that promises to enhance business prospects by improving holiday experiences, residents' quality of life, socio-economic levels, and natural resource security in tourist destinations; it has subsequently attracted significant attention from academics and practitioners in the field of tourism (Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Mihalic, 2016; Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017). At the same time, critics question the practicality of these concepts by arguing that these forms of tourism create a sense of fantasy (Burrai et al., 2019). Wheeller (1994) notes this over-conceptualisation creates danger of "being caught in the quagmire of jargon and debate" and demonstrates a so-called 'start-up-bravery' (p. 9). Thus, it is vital to examine the necessary measures and appropriate action to fully comprehend the best procedure for implementing sustainability plans for responsible tourism destinations.

Responsible tourism is also rooted in the understanding that ethical behaviour helps realise actions to promote sustainability goals – that is, it encourages adaptations in all forms of behaviour to reduce the negative physical, economic and environmental impacts of tourism while meeting changing needs and social attitudes (Tay et al., 2016). Arguably, most studies on responsible tourism have applied a unidirectional approach, focusing only on specific research areas. For instance, past research has focused specifically on stakeholders' perspectives and responsibilities (Kusumawati & Huang, 2015; Camilleri, 2016; Dabija et al., 2017), ethical and social responsibility (Hanafiah, 2016; Mihalic, 2016; Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017), or business and marketing (Font & McCabe, 2017; Camilleri, 2018). Likewise, few prior studies have followed up with investigations of responsible tourism destinations and

their levels of social sustainability. This context directs us to the following research questions:

> *(1) How do residents interact with tourists and what are their perceptions of responsible tourism (RT)?*
>
> *(2) How have RT activities helped social development?*
>
> *(3) To what extent has RT helped continuous social development after Kumarakom has been established as a famous tourism destination?*

This case study analyses RT in Kumarakom, Kerala, India — one of the leading RT destinations in a developing country. The answers to these questions are crucial as they indicate the potential of continued development as touristic demand increases. In this sense, the current study tries to fill this gap in the literature by investigating how the established responsible tourism destinations continue to advance sustainable practices with a particular focus on the specific social context.

The UNWTO also highlights that in order to promote sustainable tourism, social sustainability is crucial and ensures "viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation" (2019, p. 1). Social sustainability is a fundamental pillar of sustainable tourism and has been gaining increasing significance. In this regard, this study investigates the current context of social sustainability in the responsible tourism practice at Kumarakom, Kerala, India. Compared to environmental and ecological sustainability, there are a few frameworks evaluating these sociological aspects (Mihalic, 2016). Therefore, this study conceptualization follows the 'prism of sustainability' (Cottrell & Vaske, 2006), with a special focus on socio-cultural dimensions for assessing responsible tourism practices (Figure 1).
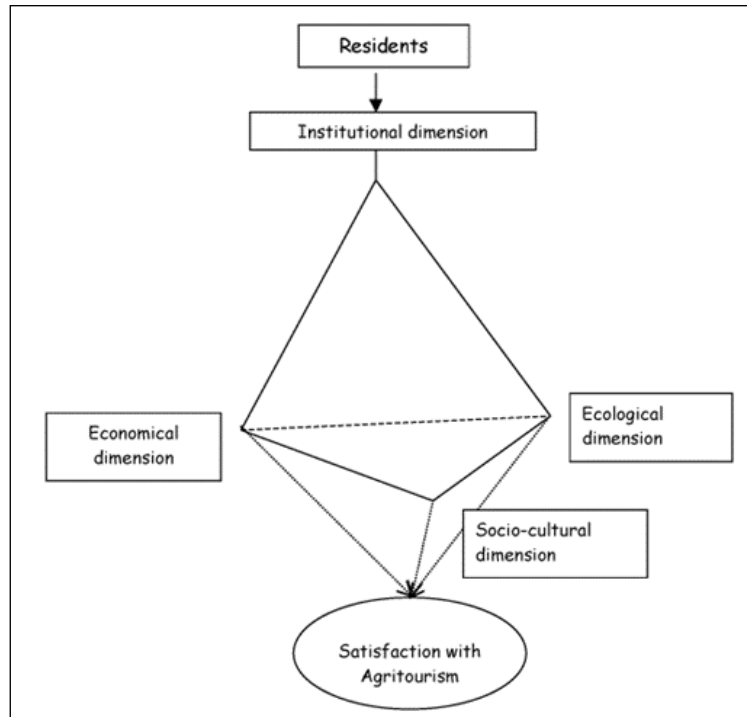
Figure 1: Prism of sustainability adapted from Cottrell & Vaske (2006)

Literature Review

Tourism and sustainability

The drive to incorporate sustainability perspectives in tourism has been accelerating for the last four decades; meanwhile, several newer concepts have emerged, including green tourism, sustainable tourism, ecotourism, responsible tourism, and the like (Dileep, 2018). Considering the outstanding economic potential of tourism and its potential as a strategy for sustainably developing locations with various resources attractive to tourists, countries have swiftly moved to develop the sector (Jeong et al., 2014). International bodies like the UNWTO have been urging tourist destinations to adhere to principles of sustainable development. This sizeable economic sector can only be treated as sustainable when it can engender development compatible with the socio-economic requirements and environmental constraints of areas under protection (Ristić et al., 2019). Touristic businesses must act more responsibly as they function within a physical and social environment, and organisations that exist in destination areas must similarly act in the best interests of nature and society as a

whole (Su & Swanson, 2017). Since the tourism sector heavily relies on ecological and cultural resources, destinations necessitate responsible practices on the parts of its industries and other stakeholders (Sheldon & Park, 2011). It is difficult to find a universally accepted definition for 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019). Since the concept of sustainability was clarified in the Brundtland Report: Our Common Future, the term has gained increased significance in the parlance of the tourism industry as well. The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2007, p.1) defined the concept of sustainable tourism as "development that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future" (p. 19). Vehbi (2012) pointed out that sustainability fundamentally aims at long-term environmental, economic, and community health. As of late, sustainable tourism has featured prominently in the discourses surrounding rural tourism, mainly because it exhibits an intricate interaction between ecological resources, tourism development, and host societies (Palmisano et al., 2016). The concept of sustainable tourism, though lacking a consensus, later, the UNWTO (2019, p.1) modified the definition as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities."

Sustainable tourism necessitates a collaborative and participative initiative from all industrial elements, policymakers, planners, and other stakeholders to prioritise environmental and social issues in their day-to-day operations. Lee (2013) argued that its perceived economic, social, and cultural benefits could promote sustainable tourism, while the opposite can also be possible. The 53rd session of the Commission for Social Development of the UN, considering the social aspects of sustainable development, requested its member states to augment policy coherence within social sectors; this could be done by bilaterally incorporating social policy/perspectives into more comprehensive policymaking

processes and integrating ecological and economic sustainability into social policymaking (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Social inclusion, Social Development for Sustainable Development).

Social sustainability as an inevitable pillar of sustainable development

The significance of social responsibility in the development of tourism may have its roots in the 1990s. Kasim (2006) pointed out that it is essential to preserve a local community's lifestyle and hospitality by preserving its social fabric, ensuring opportunities for its residents, and protecting it from external exploitation. Mowforth & Munt (2016) emphasised, along with economic and environmental sustainability, the capacity of social sustainability to enable communities to absorb inputs such as short- or long-term crowding and to sustain their functioning without – or with minimal – social disharmony; meanwhile, cultural sustainability allows communities to preserve or adapt elements of their unique cultural identities.

Social sustainability can be viewed from multiple angles. According to Vallance et al. (2011), social sustainability, as a dynamic concept (Dempsey et al., 2011), is classified into three schemas: development sustainability (dealing with basic needs such as the creation of social capital, justice, equity, etc.); bridge sustainability (related to behaviour modification in order to achieve bio-physical environmental goals); and 'maintenance sustainability' (the restoration and preservation of socio-cultural features). Meanwhile, Helgadóttir et al. (2019) argued that social sustainability incorporates procedural and substantive perspectives and that it is an essential aspect in dealing with tourism development issues. The substantive aspect of social sustainability is related to the needs, rights, and general well-being of the local community, and the procedural dimension refers to the means of achieving those substantive aspects, such as enhancing information access, roles in decision making, empowerment, and

democratic governance (Boström, 2014). Bacon et al. (2012) have linked social sustainability to a local community's quality of life, both currently and in the future. Quality of life is often understood as the degree of well-being experienced by an individual or a community, and it consists of material, community, emotional, and health-and-safety well-being (Hall, 2015; Skevington et al., 2004). Ensuring sustainability in these realms can help develop community-based tourism initiatives (Woo et al., 2015). Timur & Getz (2009) research formed a social sustainability framework, which consists of social justice and equity, social capital, social infrastructure, and engaged governance. It has also been argued that social sustainability must be grounded in equality, democracy, and social justice.

Regarding the assessment of social sustainability, Hipsher (2019) identified various stakeholder categories such as workers/employees, the local community, society, consumers, and value chain actors, as well as a few impact categories such as human rights, working conditions, health and safety, cultural heritage, governance, and socio-economic repercussions. It deals with social equity for access to services, facilities and opportunities, and social sustainability of residents – that is, their capacity to sustain themselves at an acceptable level of functioning (Bramley et al., 2010). The benchmark for social sustainability is "a society that is socially just, equal, without social exclusion and with a decent quality of life, or livelihood, for all" (Koning & Smaling, 2005, p. 70). Hermawati (2020) stated that socially sustainable local communities are characterised by features such as equitability, diversity, interconnectedness, democratic functioning, and good quality of life.

'Corporate social responsibility' is a term often used in business parlance that urges businesses to enhance the well-being of the communities through voluntary business practices and contributions of corporate resources (Lee & Xue, 2020). Nevertheless, in sustainable tourism, social responsibility, sustainability, and environmental and cultural are

increasingly crucial – sustainable operation has increasingly been a concern for the tourism industry and its various stakeholders (Sheldon & Park, 2011). Su et al. (2016) stated that destination social responsibility (DSR) could improve local perceptions about the impacts of tourism; furthermore, DSR has a direct, as well as an indirect, and positive influence on local support for tourism and perceived quality of life. Some argue that social responsibility concerns preserving social values, cultural heritage, and values and ways of life (Vallance et al., 2011). Some others suggest that social responsibility is an obligation of diverse stakeholders to act for society's benefit at large (Su & Swanson, 2017). To ensure sustainability, the tourism sector needs sufficient awareness and support from all stakeholders to plan and manage touristic development and provide more significant benefits to the local communities (Lee & Jan, 2019). DSR emphasises the responsibility of various stakeholders in a touristic destination to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism on society, the economy, and nature and improve local residents' well-being (Su et al., 2016).

Community-based tourism is a pillar of socially sustainable tourism, and when properly planned and managed, can enhance the quality of life of the local community, garner greater respect for local cultures, and sustain local biodiversity (Gurung & Seeland, 2008; Lepp, 2007). As such, it is of paramount importance to make sure that community-based tourism initiates local economic opportunities to facilitate these processes (Lee, 2013; Ohe & Kurihara, 2013).

Study site

Kumarakom is a famous tourism destination in the Kottayam district, Kerala, India. It is located approximately 13 kilometers away from the city of Kottayam. A small, quiet village on Vembanad Lake hosts a wide variety of vegetation and luxurious sightseeing, canoeing, and fishing experiences. As a famous backwater tourist destination, Kumarakom

attracts thousands of visitors every year and was one of three places selected for responsible tourism initiatives beginning in March 2008. After some initial hiccups, Kumarakom became well-known for its responsible tourism practices. It inspired the Kumarakom Tourism Model (KTM) and accumulated several international and national awards, including a 2020 Gold Award from the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA).

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm (Lincoln, 1995) and followed a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is a useful approach, as it facilitates much broader insight into the different social factors and interdependencies in tourism (Frochot & Gyimóthy, 2001). This study applied both triangulation techniques (Natow, 2019). Triangulation refers to using multiple approaches or datasets in qualitative analysis for a more holistic investigation (Moon, 2019). Triangulation also has been used as a technique to appraise study validity by integrating information from multiple viewpoints. Data were collected through field visits, in-depth interviews, expert opinions, and documents.

Thirteen field visits were conducted from November 2019 to January 2020 (selected as per the availability of interviewees' convenience). Observations and experiences were recorded through field notes, which were taken as a valuable data source. Conceivably, these notes were important to examine whether the claims of responsible tourism were realised in practice. Moreover, field notes are an integral component of robust qualitative research. The majority of qualitative studies encourage researchers to take field notes to provide evidence and valuable insights for analysis (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017).

Five unstructured, in-depth interviews with various stakeholders (community members, tour guides, employees, and officials) were conducted. Participants were selected by using a snowball sampling technique for greater reach. Furthermore, three expert opinion

interviews were also conducted to understand theoretical and practical impediments to responsible tourism in Kumarakom. Here, purposive sampling was applied to select resourceful candidates who could provide context-specific, information-rich insights (Patton, 2020).

Reflexive thematic analysis, a constructionist method (Braun & Clarke, 2019), was used as data analysis technique. This analytical method differs from traditional thematic analysis by focusing on how individual experience is shaped by the data using a six-phase process (Figure 2). Each of these stages is "sequential, and each build on the previous, analysis is typically a recursive process, with movement back and forth between different phases" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 1).
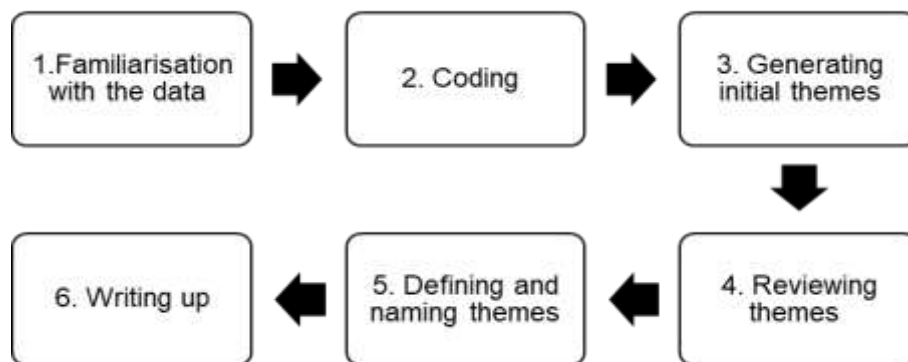

Figure 2: Braun & Clarke's (2019) six-staged reflexive thematic analysis

Findings and discussion

Though still a controversial topic, sustainability in the context of tourism usually aims to strike the right balance between the cultural, environmental, and social requirements of all stakeholders in addressing the effects of tourism (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). Present efforts to formulate the concept of responsible development have led to the creation of indices

aiming to quantify sustainability (Hall et al., 2015). For social sustainability, cultural, community, or financial aspects are reflected in practical and institutional terminology. Fundamental sustainability refers broadly to the requirements, privileges, and the well-being of individuals, while procedural sustainability concerns the means of achieving such ends, such as access to information, democratic decision-making, empowerment, and democratic governance. Reciprocity and trust between businesses and the broader society are central to sustainability practices, highlighting the benefits of responsible tourism and corporate governance in tourism in residents' living standards (Boström, 2012; Mathew & Sreejesh, 2016; Roca-Puig, 2019). For the reflexive thematic analysis undertaken in this study, these insights were considered while reviewing the broader themes that emerged.

For this study, three main themes (see Figure 3) were identified to illustrate the present context of Kumarakom: resident interaction with and approach toward tourists; collaboration, coordination and social responsivity; and women's empowerment and skill development.

Resident interaction with and approach toward tourists

The relationships and interactions between tourists and residents are a crucial aspect of a tourist destination's social sustainability. This could be identified from local perceptions about touristic development, involvement, attitude, and interest. During the field visits, the residents of Kumarakom were actively involved in tourism in various ways. Andereck & Nyaupane (2011) opined that factors of quality of life such as social and physiological well-being, collaboration and personal development due to meaningful contact between residents and visitors, and how target groups for tourism communicate with residents must be considered to preserve the local quality of life when accommodating tourism.
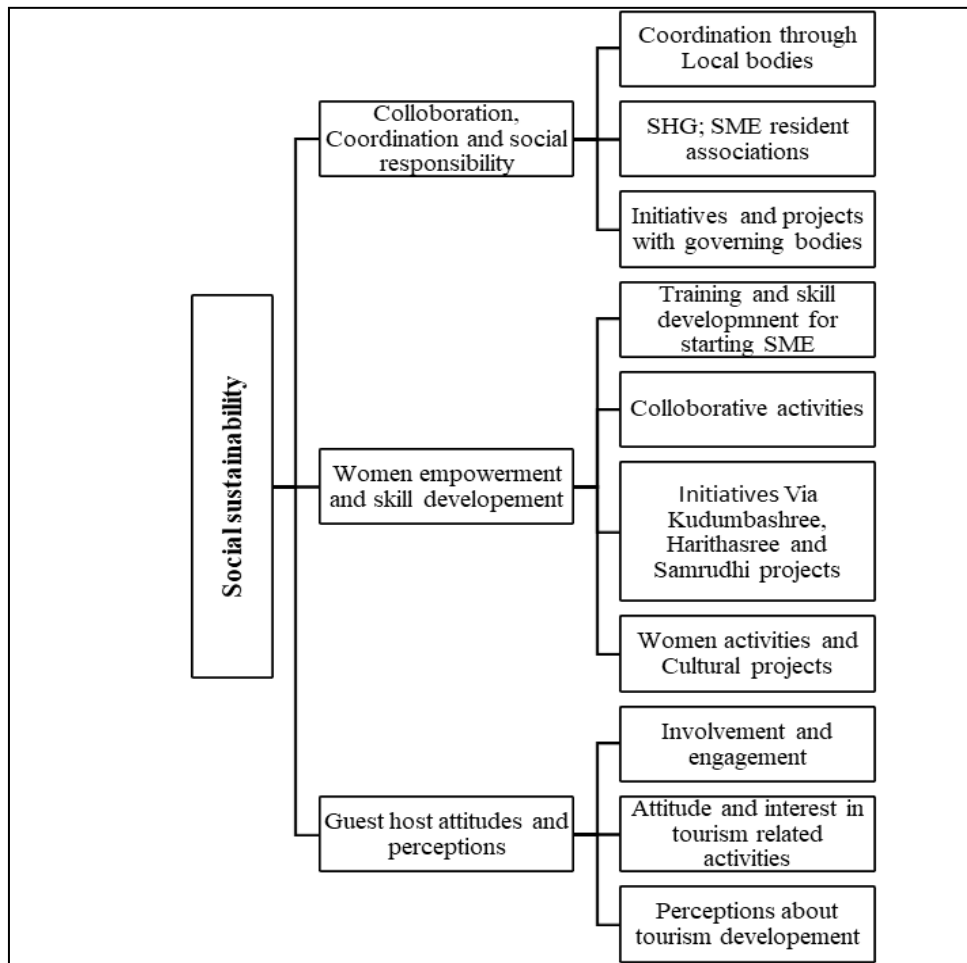
Figure 3: Reflexive thematic diagram (Source: Authors)

The respondents were involved in tourism in their everyday settings and had many insights about travellers, implying that they engaged with them attentively. The residents showed they cared about the quality of visitors' experiences. They expressed a desire to be informative, accommodating, and positive toward visiting tourists:

"... We are very proud that people from around the world were coming to enjoy our small village. Whatever the fame we are having now is mainly due to the tourism activities here. We live with tourism, and therefore, it is our responsibility and happiness to be very helpful to the tourists and provide as much support for them". (Interview 3, Male, 45 years)

Many local residents depend on tourism for their livelihoods. Their interactions, confidence in communication, and positive attitude towards tourism development indicate that Kumarakom maintains a higher level of social sustainability. According to Shyamlal & Deepa (2005), Kumarakom is now in the consolidation phase (2020) of Butlers' Tourist Life Cycle.

The local community members were well-informed about the visitors in their everyday life, indicating that they attended to them closely. Residents showed concern for the welfare of visitors. They demonstrated the belief that they should be friendly and hospitable and were enthusiastic regarding interactions with visitors.

A lakeside resident of Kumarakom stated,

"*it is a pleasure to interact with the tourists came here, due to tourism we all have a job and a quality of life. So, I am happy to help and involve as much as I can*" *(Interview 3, Male, 34 years).*

On the other hand, there were some passive indications about the possible issues impairing social sustainability in the current situation, especially from the community's senior members. Their concerns included changing lifestyles, increased alcohol consumption, and overcrowding. As per Interview 6 (Female, 65 years), tourism changes *locals' lives for the better*, but '*it also changing the way of life here, crowding, alcohol consumption and dressing styles changing*.' She also acknowledged that some of the changes were *'inevitable'*; nonetheless, it was a cause for worry among them. Another respondent, a dance teacher (Interview 11, Male, 55 years), opined that '*…look, everything is commodified, does not matter its culture or art, food or tradition. All are doing for money'*. Many of the informants underlined that this had increasingly become so in the last couple of years.

Coordination, collaboration, social responsibility

In Kumarakom, sustainable and fruitful collaboration among all stakeholders, including tourists and community members, was observed. This harmony is undoubtedly helping Kumarakom's social well-being.

"...the local bodies at the village level are the cornerstone of all tourism developments (Interview 3, Male, 58 yrs.).

From the beginning of the Responsible Tourism project in Kumarakom a decade ago, the village-level committee has successfully coordinated all tourism-related activities. Both the local community and the state government expressed appreciation for the role of these local bodies.

The government circular stated,

> *".... it was in March 2008 that the Responsible Tourism project was officially inaugurated in Kumarakom. The project has been a big success. The local bodies and the self-help groups are very receptive to their plans and initiatives. The project has also been successful in assuring the villagers that tourism can give them a livelihood. (Ministry of Tourism, GOK circular, 2019)*

Eventually, the success story of Kumarakom tourism resulted in the conception of the Kumarakom Model of Tourism. There have since been many studies examining the responsible tourism model, for instance, Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal (2012) and Mathew & Sreejesh (2017). The current study is in line with their findings on coordination and collaboration.

Moreover, it was crucial to coordination and collaboration that a significant portion of the revenue generated from tourism was funnelled to boost the quality of life of the local population. Ensuring local participation in the provision of products and services was one

approach to accomplish this aim. The current study identified many ongoing practices supporting the local community in Kumarakom, such as agricultural cultivation, promotion of self-help groups (SHG), and micro-enterprise activities. These activities have come across as tourism activities directly or indirectly. According to the Government of Kerala (GoK) website,

> *The RT initiative was kicked off with vegetable cultivation by the locals. Kudumbasree (self-help groups of women) were involved in the cultivation, and for the procurement, supply, and delivery of the produce, Samrudhi Responsibility Tourism Activity groups [see Figure 5] were formed. The Grama Panchayat also formed a Price-Fixing Committee and Quality Committee. GITPAC International is a specialised agency for managing the competitive bidding process.*

Figure 4: Women involved in agricultural practices (source: photos taken on field visits)

The crops supply food to 15 resorts in Kumarakom and are experiencing a boom in demand as they come new and mature organically. Farmers and self-help organisations initially raised fish and chickens for eggs for commercial supply, but they soon began to participate in other events and services linked to tourism that gave them extra revenue

(Brochure, 2019, Kumarakom RT cell). Through the 13 field visits, a considerable portion of the community was involved in SHG activities and agricultural cultivation (Figure 4 & 5).

Figure 5: Samrudhi Responsibility Tourism Activity group's initiatives – a Samrudhi agriproduct shop (source: photos taken on field visits)

Women's empowerment and skill development

Eliminating gender inequality is vital to socially sustainable growth because 'there can be no prosperity without gender equity' (Moreno & Cole, 2019, p. 903). All RT programmes were planned to involve growing industries, residents, NGOs, media, scholars, societies, and local governments. These ventures are entirely designed and directed by women for women, who actively engage directly or indirectly in the tourism industry. Women's work in the tourism sector involves livestock, small markets, hotels, arts and crafts, agricultural tourism, health tourism, and educational events. These activities increase women's engagement and improve women's self-esteem, self-reliance, and socio-economic standing. Participants may engage either in home-based projects (agriculture, crafts or

conventional food-processing units) or other activities (local markets, restaurants, tour guides) via the RT project's detailed plans and policies (see Table 1).

Table 1: Projects and initiatives under the social responsibility mission of RT cell

Initiatives & projects	Level of participation observed	Types of stakeholders
Kudumbasree units	Currently, there are 180 Kudumbasree units in Kumarakom, each group having 30 members on average	The local community, especially women
Farmers' groups	More than ten groups and in total 450-500 members. Most of the activities have been oriented toward home farming (around 600 families)	Local community and the village governing committee
National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) with RT cell		Local governing bodies
Small production units	With the Coordination of Kudumbasree and the Harithasree, homestead farmers, farmers' groups, and various cultural and environmental groups and clubs.	The local community, activists, government organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
RT think tank	Multi-stakeholder participation	All RT initiatives are planned for active participation by multiple sectors in the region, individuals, NGOs, the media, academics, the local community, and the local administration.
Community Tourism Safety Committee	Social responsibility component of Responsible Tourism	Community members and local bodies

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agricultural tourism, health tourism, and educational events. These activities increase women's engagement and improve women's self-esteem, self-reliance, and socio-economic standing. Participants may engage either in home-based projects (agriculture, crafts, or conventional food-processing units) or other activities (local markets, restaurants, tour guides) via the RT project's detailed plans and policies.

According to Cole (2018), gender is a system of cultural roles and social interactions between males and females marked by differential power and expectations that define an unequal allocation of wealth, employment, organisation, political authority, and rights and responsibilities in private and public realms. As a social tool, tourism can provide women with psychological and economic incentives in developed regions, which may increase women's overall socio-economic status. Furthermore, given key policy actors' contentions regarding tourism's adeptness in achieving this goal, data corroborating this argument is somewhat scarce. Quantifying the degree of empowerment tourism can offer women is theoretically difficult due to social, political, economic, and geographical differences among tourism destinations.

Empowerment is a process of change. The responsible tourism programmes in Kumarakom began with vegetable cultivation – Kudumbashree (women's self-help groups) were involved in harvesting, while Samrudhi Responsibility Tourism Activity groups were established to buy, supply, and deliver the food products. Kudumbashree and the Harithasree (agricultural project to enhance local farming), local farmers, farmers' associations, and cultural and environmental groups and clubs all participate in the process. The farm store programme — which started to enhance local farming and selling it locally, encourages harvests. Programmes operated by local authorities under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) apply to RT operations. Farmers and self-help groups were encouraged to produce fish, chicken, eggs, and agricultural products that offer substantial

tourism revenue; more than 15 Kumarakom hotels have bought vegetables from Kudumbashree. The entire village is involved in these projects, and these activities have already proven to promote women's empowerment in Kumarakom.

Many participants acknowledge the positive changes that have been accelerated by the Responsible Tourism mission in Kumarakom, which substantially contribute to the local community's social well-being, especially of women. Initiatives such as those promoting ethnic food restaurants and the agricultural mission (Harithasree) have been acknowledged for their positive contributions.

The various production units under the RT programme have provided the villagers with livelihoods and instilled them with self-confidence, and encourages self-sufficiency. According to two women in Kumarakom,

> *Once Samrudhi started, which is just 10-15 kilometres north, it was challenging. We do not have these worries now; we also went to Delhi to visit a food festival – it is a three-day train ride, one route. Running this business has encouraged us financially and of course. More notably, it emotionally toughened us and made us comfortable. Our perspective has shifted. (Interview 8, Women, 47 years)*

> *We were housewives who cooked for our families, rarely venturing outside the house. Nevertheless, today, we meet people from all over the world who enjoy the food we prepare. (Interview 9, Women, 38 years)*

This programme not only elevates women's socio-economic standing but also significantly contributes to their financial empowerment. The food is well known to be excellent, keeping local women occupied with work; the restaurant now offers catering services for local events.

Furthermore, the Responsible Tourism system in Kumarakom has carried out numerous activities such as local resource development, surveys of new tourist destinations within the area with the assistance of residents, resident education on tourism-related activities, community health initiatives, conservation, and the promotion of the increasingly popular indigenous art and culture. The programme coordinators also established new excursions previously unknown to tourists and developed various travel packages to help tourists experience Kumarakom in-depth, bearing in mind sustainable social and economic development. Kudumbashree units are currently extending their operations to other areas by adapting traditional industries to produce touristic goods and developing women's cultural groups to connect them with tourism. Under the Kudumbashree units, small and mid-sized enterprises now manufacture coir, paper bags, canned fruit, local snacks, rice flour, and arts and crafts in the active tourist hotspot. Such small-scale tourism companies have offered opportunities for employment to locals and have introduced tourists to local life.

Suvarna is another cultural group project that is active in Kumarakom's tourism. The activities under this project were observed to strengthen the local community, revitalize culture and heritage, and enhance social harmony. As per the RT cell official in Kumarakom,

> *"The participation of homemakers in the community led to the establishment of a culture community-Suvarna cultural group for visitors performing traditional forms of art (Thiruvathira, Kolkali, Vattakali). Another advantage of Responsible Tourism is children forming skilled Shinkari Melam party. The group includes girls and boys aged 8 to 14, which is the Shinkari melam squad of the first children in Kerala. Now several small clusters of women and kids take part in Kumarakom's cultural feast. Handicraft and painting teams operating in the destination make money and even make souvenirs and sell them". (Interview 4, Male, 34 years)*

All of these projects (Harithasree, Suvarna, Samrudhi with Kudumbasree) have enhanced the social sustainability of Kumarakom by providing economic growth, community involvement, job creation, and women's empowerment.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the social dimension of sustainable tourism, which is often overlooked. Social sustainability preserves the mainstream culture, social harmony, and social hierarchy of the local population. Financial and environmental sustainability in touristic development depends on the social aspect, as the only way to realise economic and environmental objectives is through engagement and collaboration from all key stakeholders.

To establish a tourist destination's socio-economic and cultural sustainability, local communities' quality of life cannot be compromised; furthermore, these communities should be active in managing tourism resources and engaging in reciprocal interactions with tourists. This study observed that the locals of Kumarakom displayed stewardship of the local environment, engagement in addressing informal communities' problems and a sensitivity to local issues. This indicates the exceptional level of community participation and satisfaction at this destination. The findings demonstrate the local community's active participation in the tourism industry, channelled through various collaborative projects (SME, SHG, and national poverty reduction mission initiatives). One of the novel characteristics of the projects in Kumarakom is their versatility in addressing the various relevant factors of social sustainability. For instance, projects like Samrudhi and Harithasree promote socio-economic gains and self-reliance among the residents. Meanwhile, Suvarna aims to enhance the socio-cultural stability of Kumarakom while exhibiting different local cultures through tourism. These initiatives are crucial because a lack of understanding of different lifestyles and cultures can be dangerous; in Kumarakom, there is a more equitable collaboration between

residents, tourists, governing bodies, and other stakeholders. The high level of community participation and the efficient coordination of local bodies are the cornerstones of Kumarakom tourism. Successful enterprises, such as ethnic restaurants, village visits, agritourism, and cultural activities, contribute to the community's social well-being. Finally, this study emphasises the effectiveness of the RT mission to empower the local women of Kumarakom.

Sustainability is impossible without gender equality and women's empowerment, especially in India's unique socio-cultural context. RT in Kumarakom has been enriched by the notable levels of women's participation in the sector. This study highlights that RT has enhanced the quality of life, financial earnings, self-dependency, and confidence levels among local women in the region. The hierarchical social systems of Kumarakom are evidence of this change, particularly in showcasing 'women in power'. Kudumbashree, an organisation oriented around women, has been a driver for adopting the Responsible Tourism initiative; it coordinated local women who were willing to work within the RT framework. To conclude, the study confirms that the Responsible Tourism activities in Kumarakom have contributed to continuous improvements in social sustainability.

This research widens current theoretical understandings by providing evidence for the practicality and successful application of sustainability in tourism, countering the arguments of critics. The findings are helpful for managerial bodies within the tourism sector, particularly as a reference when improving current projects or developing/implementing new initiatives concentrating on local communities' social aspects. Since social development projects are the most practical for producing multidimensional improvements, future studies should include the effects of social sustainability initiatives and over-dependency on tourism in the context of frequently occurring crises such as natural calamities and pandemics. Kumarakom serves as a compelling case study for this, as the entire community directly or

indirectly depends on the tourism sector's incomes. Consequently, the community's social equilibrium identified in this paper could potentially be easily affected.

Acknowledgment

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