### Community livelihood and Sustainability of religious tourism destination. The mediating effect of perceived benefits

### ABSTRACT

Reconciling the conservation of natural environments with community livelihoods presents a significant problem for the sustainable management of cultural sites, such as pilgrimage destinations, in developing nations. Researchers and practitioners are exploring methods to address this dilemma by linking the lives of individuals residing near pilgrimage sites with conservation initiatives. This study aims to evaluate the relationship between local community livelihoods and the sustainability of religious tourism destinations in the context of developing countries. A survey of houses was conducted to collect information from participants. Yamane's formula was utilized to choose a sample of 382 households. The research employs structured questionnaires distributed to household heads residing near Subukia Shrine in Kenya. The results indicated an indirect influence of local community livelihoods on the viability of religious tourism destinations through perceived benefits. This study's conclusions emphasize the significance of sustainable livelihoods and commitment to environmentally friendly practices. The convergence of sustainable livelihoods and local community perceived benefits is posited to facilitate the attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030 in less developed countries, like Kenya. The results of this study provide valuable insights for destination management organizations, legislators, and tourism stakeholders.

Keywords: Subukia Shrine, religious tourism, community livelihood, perceived benefits

### Introduction

In the past century, tourism has consistently expanded, emerging as one of the greatest economic sectors globally (UNWTO, 2020). Tourism creates jobs, generates foreign exchange revenue, attracts investment, stimulates economic progress, and significantly contributes to poverty reduction in numerous developing nations (UNWTO, 2020; WTTC, 2021). The UNWTO (2020) international tourism report indicates that global international visitor arrivals were 1,460 million, resulting in international tourism receipts of 1,481 billion USD. Nevertheless, Africa's regional share is significantly lower in comparison to other global areas. In 2019, Africa attracted 71 million foreign tourists and earned 38 billion USD, accounting for merely 5% of global tourist arrivals and 3% of international tourism revenue (UNWTO, 2024). Notwithstanding the limited advancement of tourism, the sector has emerged as a pivotal catalyst for socio-economic development in underdeveloped countries across Africa and other global regions. Tourism serves as a significant catalyst for development by invigorating the local economy and leveraging destination assets, like the natural environment, climate, cultural legacy, and human resources, in which developing nations possess a comparative advantage (UNWTO, 2020).

Sustainable tourism development has emerged as a primary concern for policymakers, destination management organizations, and scholars worldwide. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development delineates a set of sustainable development goals aimed at eradicating poverty, safeguarding the planet, and guaranteeing prosperity for all by 2030 (UN, 2015). The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has prioritized the concept of sustainable development in all tourism-related initiatives.

Pilgrimage tourism merges tourism with religious experience (Bhandari et al., 2024) and the connection between spirituality and tourism can be interpreted through the lens of pilgrimage as tourism (Smith, 1992). For centuries, visitors have regarded the tombs or relics of saints as the origin of pilgrimage sites (Bartal, 2018). These pilgrimage sites are genuine when they convey historical facts or figures via relics, artifacts, and artificial things within a historical context or location (Niyas et al., 2025). The encounter of genuine religious mysteries is an essential aspect of pilgrimage for spiritual objectives (Cohen, 1988). Authenticity denotes a sense of genuineness or distinctiveness (Sharpley, 1994). For pilgrimage sites to attain authenticity, they must be developed in conjunction with historical contexts and artifacts (Wang et al., 2024), and the recreation of the historical era is essential for cultural heritage pilgrimage sites (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). Recognizing genuine experiences at pilgrimage locations and enhancing pilgrimage experiences is essential (Huang & Lin, 2023). Since, most of the religious visit sacred sites, including mountains, lakes, rivers, and springs, are situated in protected areas (PA) and they may contribute to the biological preservation of the region (Singh et al., 2021). This allows them to remain unblemished for an extended period, so qualifying for protection under contemporary planning frameworks.

Poverty and environmental degradation are interlinked challenges of worldwide significance in the twenty-first century (Burki et al., 2021). Numerous protected and cultural zones have been developed to safeguard the environment, primarily in distant and peripheral regions inhabited by marginalized groups. The creation of protected areas further disenfranchised impoverished communities residing near these zones, resulting in a pervasive absence of community support for conservation efforts (Bhammar et al., 2021; Htay et al., 2022). Disputes between livelihood and conservation goals have been the central theme of numerous talks in the past two decades (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011; Salafsky & Wollenberg, 2000; Nepal et al., 2022). Studies further demonstrate an important link between protected areas, such as cultural heritage sites, biodiversity conservation and community livelihoods (Ahebwa et al., 2016; Gidebo, 2023). This is premised on the argument that conservation and development can occur together. Furthermore, an emerging stream of literature on sustainability of tourism destinations, contends that local communities must be afforded a more significant involvement in their management, and their livelihood concerns must be adequately addressed (Rahman et al., 2022; Nepal et al., 2022; Pasanchay & Schott, 2021).

Owing to the rapid expansion of nature-based tourism, authorities regard this form of tourism as a crucial source of money, while local populations perceive it as an opportunity to enhance their living conditions (Mustika *et al.,* 2013; Haukeland *et al*., 2013).

The perceived benefit of tourism destinations by local communities has been documented by earlier studies. For instance, Binns and Ne (2003) examined the effects of tourism in South Africa and identified significant growth and beneficial benefits on the economic well-being of local communities Fennell and Nowaczek (2003) asserts that tourism generates substantial economic advantages for local populations in mountainous areas. Goodwin (2009) asserts that there is hope regarding tourism in local populations neighboring national parks in Indonesia and Zimbabwe. Anup and Resham (2014) found in their study of the Manaslu Conservation Area in Nepal that tourism participation enhances local income and elevates living standards. While, Ariyono et al., (2023) found that religious tourism of Sunan Ampel's tomb, Indonesia is a source of income for the local community. Studies have also demonstrated that individuals who profit financially from tourism tend to support tourism development (Shtudiner et al., 2018).

Arguably, higher levels of benefit receipt in communities surrounding tourism destinations correspond with sustainable livelihood and positive attitudes residents support of tourism destinations (Nepal & Spiteri, 2011). For instance, residents who perceive tourism benefits tend to have a more positive attitudes than those that perceive no tourism benefits. This suggests an indirect link between local livelihoods and local community support for sustainable destinations through perceived benefits.

Furthermore, tourism professionals and policy analysts have been encouraged to explore new strategies for tourism development as a result of the growing concern regarding the potential adverse effects that tourism may have on the means of subsistence and cultural values of local populations (Becken & Job, 2014). However, Spenceley (2008) brings to light the fact that practitioners' consultants conceal a substantial amount of data that investigates the linkages between tourism, community livelihoods, and conservation. In light of this, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the livelihood of local communities, the perceived benefits of religious tourism sites, and their continued existence.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the theoretical foundation of the study and hypotheses development. Section 3 presents the methodology. Section 4 discusses the findings. Finally, section 5 concludes

1. **Theoretical foundation and hypotheses development**

Social exchange theory has gained prominence in the sociology and social psychology literature and is regarded as one of the earliest theories of social behavior (Homans, 1958). Emerson (1981) asserts that social trade entails two individuals, each offering benefits to the other, based upon the rewards received from one another. The social exchange theory has been regarded as a suitable paradigm for comprehending people' perceptions of tourism impacts (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Nunkoo, 2016; Wang et al., 2023). Social exchange theory posits that individuals will participate in trades if (1) the resultant rewards are esteemed; (2) the transaction is anticipated to yield esteemed benefits; and (3) perceived costs do not surpass perceived gains (Zhang et al., 2021). These ideas indicate that residents will engage in exchanges with tourists provided they can derive benefits without facing intolerable expenses.

 Residents that perceive the outcomes of tourism as personally beneficial and believe that the advantages outweigh the costs would endorse and advocate for tourism growth (Çelik & Rasoolimanesh, 2023; Gannon et al., 2021). The advantage of employing social exchange theory lies in its capacity to elucidate both positive and negative views while analyzing connections at individual or collective levels. The evaluation of citizens' beliefs of the impact of tourism, which mostly influences their support for it, hinges on their values.

SET posits that social exchange encompasses economic and/or social results (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Whitener et al. (1998) assert that exchanges can yield benefits that are either economically advantageous or devoid of objective utility, and they further contend that the latter may substantially influence the social aspect of the connection. Sutton (1967) contends that, from a tourism standpoint, the interaction between the host community and guests can either facilitate beneficial and gratifying interactions or provoke and exacerbate tendencies toward exploitation by the host (p. 221). Numerous research (Yoon, Gursoy, and Chen, 2000) substantiate his claim that the economic, social, and environmental factors arising from the host-tourist exchange process influence inhabitants' opinions of tourism. **I**n analytical lens that offers such a perspective is the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (Scoones, 1998), which frames livelihood as holistic activities that not only include subsistence income and employment, but also the link between assets and the related options people retain to supplement alternative activities in order to generate income (Ellis, 2000). While rural community-based tourism development, should be guided by the principle of sustainable livelihoods (Anand, Chandan, & Singh, 2012).

Stone et al., (2022) provide empirical evidence from different researchers are highlighted to guide interested stakeholders, policy planners and practitioners to glean and adapt their strategies to achieve integrated conservation and community development. Stone and Nyaupane (2016), who studied the Chobe National Park and Chobe Enclave Community Trust, Botswana, the study provides a new methodological approach in understanding the changing relationships among tourism, conservation and community development by expanding community capitals framework. Gidebo (2023) structured questionnaires, focus group discussions and key informant interviews are used to collect data from local communities residing inside and adjacent areas of Nech Sar National Park in Ethiopia. The sample size for this research is 386 household heads. Household survey data is collected from residents of nine kebeles living inside/around NSNP. The results reveal that the local communities around the national park are exposed to various shocks and vulnerability contexts such as poverty, food insecurity, and resource use conflict.  Liu et al., 2022, examines how [cultural heritage conservation](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/conservation-cultural-heritage), often reflective of Western values, impacts local [sustainable livelihoods](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/sustainable-livelihoods) (SL) in Fujian tulou, China, a World Cultural Heritage Site. Drawing on data collected through in-depth interviews, non-participatory observations, and secondary sources, the findings revealed that changes related to tourism development and heritage conservation can reduce the sustainability of livelihoods in [living heritage](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/intangible-cultural-heritage) sites. Based on the theorical foundation and the empirical literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1: Community livelihood has a significant effect on the sustainability of religious tourism destination.*

Tourism is extensively promoted as a catalyst for socioeconomic development and a means to attain Sustainable Development Goals (Sharpley, 2022). Despite its significant potential, the sustainability of tourism is challenged by the dominant "neoliberal rationalities embedded in numerous tourism policy practices" (Hall, 2019; Sharpley, 2020). This constraint substantially impedes the advancement of more equal and just tourist practices. *Boluk et al*., (2019) has presented an intriguing area of investigation: examining indigenous societies' methodologies as "a positive alternative to the unsustainable trajectories of modernist development models" (p.853). This viewpoint is intimately connected to motivating examples of ecotourism-fueled growth in remote villages (Arizkha *et al*., 2023; Astiti *et al*., 2021; Bonye *et al*., 2022; Hitchner *et al*., 2009; Sabuhoro *et al*., 2021; Snyman, 2017). Nonetheless, our comprehension of the alteration of conventional social structures in these communities, prompted by tourism and its concomitant economic development, remains predominantly unexplored, frequently eluding scholarly inquiry and necessitating scrutiny to grasp the local ramifications of tourism development, particularly concerning the interplay between infrastructure, tourism, and community resilience.
Sustainable tourism is increasingly regarded as a catalyst for development in rural and remote communities in the Western world (Carson et al., 2022; Cattaneo et al., 2022). This approach is regarded as a technique for alleviating poverty ("pro-poor tourism") (Harrison, 2008; Spenceley, 2022) and for fostering human-centered, participatory development opportunities (Erskine & Meyer, 2012; Rahman et al., 2022; Rongna & Sun, 2020; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012; Spenceley & Meyer, 2012). The advancement of tourism in remote communities frequently imposes external perspectives, prompting inquiries regarding the sustainability and resilience of these communities as they become estranged from their traditional livelihoods, knowledge, and culture (Fletcher et al., 2016; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022; Hillmer-Pegram, 2016; Hussain, 2019; Hussain, 2016; Lara-Morales & Clarke, 2022). By studying household heads (HH) in Nepal’s Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA), Nepal *et al*., (2022) found that only some household heads were able to link livelihood improvement to ACA’s conservation efforts. In addition, the study reported that household heads who benefitted indirectly from tourism (e.g. ACA’s community development programs) perceived the link more than those directly benefitting from tourism. Based on the empirical literature the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H2. Perceived benefits mediate the relationship between community livelihood and sustainability of religious tourism destinations*

1. **Research methodology**
	1. **Study area**

The study area was the Subukia Shrine that is well-known as sacred to Christians in Kenya, a partner state of the East Africa Community. The Shrine, owned by the Kenyan Catholic Conference of Bishops, has served as a spiritual centre for the East African nation for the past 30 years in the remote Diocese of Nakuru. Annually, around 200,000 individuals visit the 200-acre Village of Mary, Mother of God, for Marian devotions, Mass, and reconciliation ceremonies, including around 50,000 attendees for Kenya’s annual day of prayer in early October.
Motivated by St. John Paul II’s exhortation during his 1980 papal visit for Kenya to establish a national Marian shrine, the Kenyan bishops selected the tranquil, centrally situated valley of Subukia, renowned for its healing spring. The 200-acre monument in the outskirts of Nakuru was dubbed the village of Mary Mother of God in 1983 by Cardinal Maurice Michael Otunga. The pristine, spring-fed water was promptly revered as a divine offering from the Virgin Mary. On January 1, 1992, Bishop Cornelius Kipng’eno Arap Korir, the bishop of the Diocese of Eldoret, celebrated the inaugural Mass at the shrine, coinciding with the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, during which he blessed the water. The spring-fed water is channelled into three distinct wells: the first for potable use, the second for cleansing, and the third for immersion. Pilgrims, comprising Protestants, non-Christians, Kenyans, and international visitors, ascend the steep mountain along the Way of the Cross to a modest chapel that contains the spring**.**

Despite its significance as a pilgrimage site within East Africa, the Shrine continues to face environmental degradation. Illegal loggers have been cutting down an increasing number of trees for the purpose of harvesting lumber or burning charcoal. As a result, the surrounding Subukia Forest, which is a part of the shrine and used to be home to a great deal of wildlife, has not been spared during this process. Furthermore, the formerly lush, green, and closed canopy of the forest is now interspersed with white and brown patches, indicating complete destruction, hence jeopardizing the long-term survival of the Shrine’s Spring. Additionally, subsistence farmers reside in the region, planting maize, engaging in dairy farming, and growing other crops on smallholdings (often less than 1 hectare). Many farmers live under the world's poverty threshold, lack access to essential utilities such as power and clean piped drinking water, and are susceptible to seasonal food insecurity. This further underscore the need to explore the nexus between local community factors and sustainability of the Shrine.

* 1. **Data collection**

The study focused on a sample of 382 households living around the Subukia Shrine. The data was gathered utilizing structured questionnaires that were distributed among household heads with the assistance of professional research assistants, who were fluent both in English and the local dialect. The household heads were chosen due to their status as primary breadwinners in rural settings and their greater familiarity with the subject matter and study area. The questionnaires were distributed using simple random sampling.

The questionnaire consisted on four parts. Part A collected demographic information of the respondents. Part B gathered information on sustainability of the Shrine as a religious tourism destination. Part C collected data on the community livelihood. Finally, Part C gathered data on perceived benefits

* 1. **Measurement of variables**

The study used a five-point Likert scale to measure the main variables. The items for each of the variables were borrowed from earlier studies.

The sustainability of religious tourism was assessed using an assessment that includes economic, environmental, cultural, social, and spiritual sustainability (Wani et al., 2025; Tsaur & Lin, 2023). The livelihood of the local community was assessed using four metrics: human assets, environmental assets, social assets, and financial assets (Panzarella et al., 2023). The mediator of the study was assessed through four items concentrating on job creation, investment, infrastructural development, and cultural interactions (López et al., 2018). The questionnaire additionally included key households’ head characteristics: income, educational attainment and gender.

* 1. **Regression model**

The study applied the following set of equations to test the hypotheses

Model 1. Testing the direct effect

$$SRTD= β\_{0}+β\_{1}GEN+β\_{2}IN+β\_{3}ED+β\_{4}CL+ε$$

Model 2. Testing the mediating effect.

The study utilized Hayes Process Macro to assess whether perceived benefits mediate the relationship between community livelihood and sustainability of religious tourism destinations. The following model was used.

$$SRTD= β\_{0}+β\_{1}GEN+β\_{2}IN+β\_{3}ED+β\_{4}CL+β\_{5}PB+ε$$

Where: SRTD, sustainability of religious tourism destinations; GEN, gender; IN, income; ED, education; CL, community livelihood; PB, perceived benefits and $ε$ error term

1. **Findings and discussions**
	1. **Response rate**

The study administered 382 questionnaires to household heads around the shrine. 327 questionnaires were returned. Several returned questionnaires were incomplete due to the respondents' demanding schedules or a lack of enthusiasm to participate. Consequently, the total number of questionnaires utilized was 300, which is approximately 78.53 response rate.

* 1. **Demographic statistics**

According to Table III, the predominant demographic of responders was male. Most households had an income below Ksh 10,000. A significant percentage of the respondents possessed a secondary school education.

Table I Demographic statistics

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Demographic characteristic |   | Frequency | Percent |
| Household’s head gender | Female | 90 | 30.0 |
|  | Male | 210 | 70.0 |
| Household Income | 0–10,000 | 102 | 34.0 |
|  | 10,001 –20,000 | 70 | 23.3 |
|  | 20,001 –30,000 | 69 | 23.0 |
|  | 30,001 – 40,000 | 36 | 12.0 |
|  | Above 40,001 | 23 | 7.7 |
| Household’s head education | Primary | 47 | 15.7 |
|  | Secondary | 164 | 54.7 |
|  | Tertiary | 89 | 29.6 |
| Source: Field data (2025) |  |  |  |

* 1. **Validity and Reliability**

The construct reliability analysis was assessed using Cronbach’s Alpha. More specifically, all the dimensions of sustainability of religious tourism destinations had a range of between 0.756-0.888 as indicated in Table II. While, community livelihood dimensions had a range between 0.704-0.818. On the other hand, perceived benefits had a value of 0.902. The result shows that one of the scales of the variables namely sustainability of religious tourism destinations, community livelihood and perceived benefits were greater than 0.7; implying that the scales are reliable. Further, the study performed the factor analysis The result presented in Table II show that the KMOs are greater than 0.5, which implies that the items are valid.

Table II: Validity and Reliability

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Construct or indicator** | **Communalities** | **KMO and Bartlett's Test** | **Cronbach's Alpha** |
|  |  | Λ | T | Df | ἀ | Items |
| **Economic sustainability** |  | 0.675 | 247.225 | 3 | .756 | 3 |
| I believe the Shrine’s income has increased | .611 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I think the Shrine attracts a large number of visitors | .755 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I think the Shrine has a positive reputation. | .688 |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Environmental sustainability** |  | .740 | 451.945 | 3 | 0.871 | 3 |
| I think the Shrine has promoted the protection of the natural environment and wildlife | .808 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I believe the Shrine has promoted the protection of local community biodiversity | .794 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I think the Shrine has helped in creating environmental awareness among local residents. | .784 |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Cultural sustainability** |  | 0.709 | 281.687 | 3 | 0.798 | 3 |
| The shrine has promoted the dissemination and preservation of local community culture | .710 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The shrine has promoted cultural exchanges between the visitor and the local community. | .735 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The Shrine helps generates a greater sense of pride and belonging among the local residents | .695 |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Social sustainability** |  | 0.669 | 247.245 | 3 | 0.768 | 3 |
| I feel that the shrine’s activities improve the living standards and infrastructure for the residents | .653 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I believe the Shrine has promoted fair access to economic resources, services, and rights to all people | .765 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I believe that those who visit the Shire show their enthusiasm and satisfaction after their visit. | .632 |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Spiritual sustainability** |  | 0.766 | 1053.456 | 10 | 0.888 | 5 |
| I believe the Shrine enables the visitors to get closer to God | .755 |  |  |  |  |  |
| Visiting the Shrine enables visitors to express their love and respect for God | .796 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The Shrine’s visitor are provided with information on the religious significance of the Shrine | .585 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The shrine officials are available for the pilgrims | .643 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The environment surrounding the shrine enables it maintain is religious meaning. | .688 |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Community livelihood (Human Asset)** |  | 0.667 | 226.284 | 6 | 0.785 | 4 |
| I believe that the health of the resident of this area is very good | .552 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The residents are engaged in gainful economic activities | .307 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I feel that the local schooling facilities for children are satisfactory | .708 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I think schools around the Shrine have enough teacher | .546 |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Community livelihood (Environmental Asset)** |  | 0.5 | 126.005 | 1 | 0.737 | 2 |
| I own a piece of land in this area  | .792 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I can access clean and safe water | .792 |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Community livelihood (Social Assets)** |  | 0.5 | 105.858 | 1 | 0.704 | 2 |
| I belong to a local association/organization | .772 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The community provides assistance when needed | .772 |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Community livelihood (Financial Asset)** |  | 0.711 | 453.910 | 6 | 0.818 | 4 |
|  I can get a bank loan easily | .622 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The income I earn is enough to meet my bills | .700 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I am enrolled with a pension scheme/ Sacco institution | .628 |  |  |  |  |  |
| I have enough money to save | .644 |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Perceived benefit** |  | 0.835 | 828.847 | 6 | 0.902 | 4 |
| The shrine has increased business and employment opportunities for the local community | .846 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The shrine has attracted investments in the area | .853 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The Shrine has improved the conditions of roads and other public facilities | .684 |  |  |  |  |  |
| The cultural exchange between visitors and residents has improved. | .733 |  |  |  |  |  |
| Source: Adopted and modified |  |  |  |  |  |  |

* 1. **Correlation analysis**

The study employed the Pearson pairwise correlation analysis to assess the nature and the magnitude of the relationship between the research variables. The results presented on table III demonstrate that sustainability of religious tourism is positively and significantly correlated with community livelihood and perceived benefits. However, gender, income and education are not significantly correlated with sustainability of religious tourism destinations.

Table III: Pairwise correlation matrix

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | SRTD | GEN | IN | ED | CL | PB |
| SRTD | 1 |  |  |  |  |  |
| GEN | -.052 | 1 |  |  |  |  |
| IN | .085 | -.025 | 1 |  |  |  |
| ED | .070 | -.095 | .363\*\* | 1 |  |  |
| CL | .647\*\* | -.039 | .122\* | .023 | 1 |  |
| PB | .594\*\* | .064 | .061 | -.023 | .401\*\* | 1 |

\*p<0.05

Source: Field data (2025).

* 1. **Regression analysis**

The study had two hypotheses. The first hypotheses sought to assess the direct effect of community livelihood on sustainability of religious tourism. The regression results shown in table III reveal a positive and significant link between community livelihood and sustainability of religious tourism destination (β = .276 SE= .024, LLCI= .228, ULCI=.324). These findings underscore the importance of local community capital (social, human, financial, natural, culture) in promoting sustainable tourism.

Empirical studies have also demonstrated that reconciling environmental conservation with community livelihoods poses a significant problem for the sustainable management of protected areas in developing nations (Abukari & Mwalyosi, 2020; Stone et al., 2022). The host communities and their livelihoods are essential for the sustainability and advancement of tourism in protected areas. It is essential to simultaneously address conservation and livelihood objectives when individuals reside in poverty and their livelihoods are significantly reliant on natural resources (Redford et al., 2013; Calvet-Mir et al., 2015).

The establishment of tourism zones and associated developments occasionally leads to the displacement and resettlement of local residents (Chen et al., 2024). This undermines economic structures and social and political systems and processes (Talukder & Khan, 2025). The host communities and their livelihoods are essential to the sustainability and development of tourism in the region. Morse (2025) propose a people-centered, holistic, and sustainable livelihood framework, founded on five principal elements: livelihood assets (economic, social, human, physical, and natural. While, Dioko (2024) and Hussain et al., (2024) propose the transformation of structures and processes (laws, policies, culture, and institutions) to promote local community livelihoods for sustainable tourism. The community is a crucial stakeholder and must be central to the design and execution of tourism project development (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). To foster a more sustainable sector, Rasoolimanesh et al. (2017) emphasized that community-based tourism must prioritize the engagement of the host community in the design and maintenance of tourism development. The host communities possess the natural resources essential for tourism growth. Sustainable development is the primary objective of community development initiatives (Peerapun, 2018), and given tourism's significant contribution to varied economic growth, meticulous tourist planning that engages the community at every phase of development is essential (Byrd et al., 2008).

Holland et al. (2022) observed that communities with equitable access to tourism and its benefits may exhibit greater resilience and be better equipped to leverage the connections between tourism-related livelihoods and the conservation of pilgrimage sites and other protected areas. Similarly, Gidebo (2023) discovered that local populations surrounding the national park face numerous shocks and vulnerabilities, including poverty, food insecurity, and conflicts over resource utilization.

From the standpoint of religious tourism, natural elements, especially extensive areas of land or water, that hold significant spiritual value for local populations and communities are classified as sacred sites (Dudl Purwanto, 2022). The holy natural site (SNS) may encompass "forests, groves, wildlife, mountains, landscapes, caves, stones, or bodies of water," among others. The IUCN (2008) defined sacred natural sites as locations possessing non-material importance to individuals, such as spiritual and aesthetic value. Moreover, natural environments such as rivers in India serve as a substantial resource for both nature and religious tourism (Gambhir et al., 2021), attracting numerous tourists consistently, especially on days deemed auspicious for sacred bathing.

Table IV. Regression analysis- Direct effect

|  |
| --- |
| **Coefficientsa** |
| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | Standardized Coefficients | T | Sig. |
| B | Std. Error | Beta |
| 1 | (Constant) | 1.438 | .195 |  | 7.380 | .000 |
| GEN | -.037 | .052 | -.033 | -.718 | .474 |
| IN | -.006 | .023 | -.014 | -.286 | .775 |
| ED | .058 | .039 | .073 | 1.477 | .141 |
| CL | .716 | .055 | .607 | 13.068 | .000 |
| a. Dependent Variable: SRTD |

Source: Field data (2025)

Based on the findings our study, the level of household head’s income has no significant effect with conservation perceptions, likely because in all the four communities, most community members were in the same income category with income levels below 80.6% earning less than Ksh 30,000 per month. People living in low-income households have limited access to financial resources and adaptive tools that could enhance their resilience to the impacts of climate change. Moreover, low-income households tend to prioritize daily necessities, so relegating environmental concerns to a lower priority.

The study further found that the gender of the respondent had no significant effect on sustainability of religious tourism destinations. Arguably, both men and women enjoy the same benefits from the shrine or else suffer the same costs from activities related to the Shrine; hence, they tend to share the same views on the need to ensure that the Shrine should be sustainable. Higher education is typically associated with attainment of college diploma or university degree. Further, educated people are considered to be in a position to take more rational decisions than the less educated. In addition, the more educated people are the more aware of the importance of conservation they become, unlike the less educated ones. While, beyond the classroom, the university experience offers a new environment and interactions with people, attitudes through awareness and education are not sufficient, and more attention to how attitudes and other social factors may influence a behavior, such as participation, is needed (Heberlein, 2012). The results of the study revealed that 70 percent of the respondents had primary and secondary school education, with only 30 percent with tertiary education. It can therefore be concluded that a large number of people with a low level of education can be associated with low knowledge in sustainability.

The second objective tested the mediation effect of perceived benefit on the relationship between community livelihood and sustainability of religious tourism destination. The study followed Hayes’s PROCESS macro (Model 4). The results from Table V indicate that perceived benefits partially mediates, as the direct effect of community livelihood on sustainability of religious tourism destinations and indirect effect of community livelihood through perceived benefits as a mediator are significant with the following: β = 0.276, CI: 0.228–0.324 and β = 0.095, CI: 0.056–0.140 respectively. Hence, H2 was supported.

Research on tourism has consistently shown that when residents receive personal benefits from tourism, they exhibit positive attitudes towards tourism (Su & Swanson, 2020; Garrido Pintado et al., 2024). According to Boley et al., (2018), "residents evaluating the costs and benefits of tourism are at the foundation of the social exchange theory.

Furthermore, Latkova and Vogt (2012) found that the use of social exchange theory in earlier research has led to the identification of three primary advantages that are derived from the development of tourism: economic, environmental, and sociocultural implications. It is possible for a community to have economic benefits such as increased earnings, an improved standard of life, and an increase in the number of jobs that are created (Kim et al., 2013). According to Latkova and Vogt (2012), environmental benefits may include a community that is less polluted, an increased knowledge of the necessity of protecting the environment, and incentives to protect and conserve natural resources. It is possible that sociocultural benefits will include the revitalization of a culture, which may include opportunities to be exposed to and better understand new cultures and people; increased knowledge and appreciation of local cultures; and the preservation of cultural identity (Latkova & Vogt, 2012; Wang *et al*., 2010). Furthermore, James and Essien (2019) suggest that improved public infrastructure and recreational amenities are associated with local community support for sustainable tourism.

***Table V: Mediating effect of perceived benefits***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Direct relationship | B | Se | LLCI | ULCI |
| CL−›PB | .304 | .040 | .225 | .383 |
| PB−›SRTD | .312 | .032 | .248 | .375 |
| CL−›SRTD | .276 | .024 | .228 | .324 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Indirect relationship | B | Se | LLCI | ULCI |
| CL−› PB−› SRTD | .095 | .021 | .056 | .140 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Source: Field data (2025)  |  |  |  |  |

1. **Conclusion**

The importance of stakeholder involvement in the conservation of cultural heritage, natural environments, and pilgrimage sites in developing regions remains inadequately comprehended. Although local people residing near protected areas are significant stakeholders, their involvement in conservation efforts is restricted. The pervasive poverty in many communities compels residents to depend significantly on resources from protected areas for their livelihoods, undermining the objectives of biodiversity protection. The livelihood activities of the local community in the examined region obstructed biodiversity protection initiatives. The preservation of the natural environment of cultural sites is significantly compromised due to agricultural land development, human habitation, overgrazing, fuelwood extraction, charcoal production, and illegal fishing. This has prompted stringent conservation policies, including the establishment of protected areas, which regrettably marginalized local communities and fostered animosity among local populations, destination management, and government officials. This paper aims to investigate the relationship between local community livelihoods, perceived advantages, and the sustainability of religious tourism destinations. The study examined data from a sample of 300 households residing near Subukia Shrine to test the hypothesis. The study's findings indicated a favorable and significant correlation between home livelihoods and the sustainability of the Shrine as a religious tourism attraction. This study's findings underscore the significant connection between sustainable livelihoods and the conservation of pilgrimage sites. Destination managers, local authorities, and tourism management entities should adopt a collaborative strategy to ensure the survival of pilgrimage sites while guaranteeing social and economic resources that support the livelihoods of local communities. Future study should concentrate on initiatives that strengthen the connection between the sustainable livelihoods of local communities and the sustainability of religious tourism destinations, particularly for marginalized grassroots groups residing near holy sites in developing countries. One limitation of this study is that is adopted a quantitative approach and cross-sectional data. Future research may employ alternative methodological approaches, such as interviews or longitudinal surveys, which could illuminate the dynamics of local community livelihoods and their influence on support for sustainable destinations.

COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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