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Tourism Planning in Developing Countries: Review of Concepts and Sustainability Issues

Patrick B. Cobbinah, Rosemary Black, Rik Thwaites

Abstract—Globally, issues of sustainable development have become the fulcrum around which current international discourse revolves. Many governments in both the developed and the developing countries are focusing on strategies to achieve sustainable growth. Tourism has been identified as a major sector in safeguarding a sustainable future. However, research has shown that tourism if not properly managed can be detrimental. This paper posits tourism in the sustainable development discourse, exploring how the historical evolution of tourism and issues of sustainability have informed the state of tourism activities in the developing countries. Using secondary data analysis, the paper reveals that current conceptual explanations of tourism are linked to sustainable development. However, tourism activities in developing countries are usually driven by profit without adequate consideration for environmental and social factors. The paper raises two questions and further recommends that tourism activities should be informed by sustainable development principles.

Keywords—Developing countries, mass tourism, sustainable development, sustainable tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

TOURISM is increasingly gaining dominance in the socio-economic development literature as a recognized tool for achieving sustainable development especially in developing countries [1]-[3]. Its potential to contribute to sustainable development was emphasized during the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development by launching the ‘Sustainable Tourism –Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP)’ [4]. Economic gains and environmental conservation have been the driving force propelling the growth of tourism, especially in developing countries [5]. The United Nations Development Programme [6] identifies tourism as a powerful engine for accelerating socio-economic development and safeguarding biodiversity and cultural heritage in developing countries. Moreover, Gossling et al. [7] observe that the use of tourism as a means of achieving sustainable development has been the major focus of several development agencies, including Department for International Development, World Tourism Organisation (WTO), the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

P.B. Cobbinah is with the Institute for Land, Water and Society, School of Environmental Sciences, Charles Sturt University, P.O. Box 789 NSW 2640 Albury-Wodonga Campus, Australia (phone: +61 (0)412749960; e-mail: pcobbinah@csu.edu.au).

R. Black and R. Thwaites are senior lecturers with the School of Environmental Sciences, Charles Sturt University, P.O. Box 789 NSW 2640 Albury-Wodonga Campus, Australia (e-mail: rblack@csu.edu.au, rthwaites@csu.edu.au).

In terms of socio-economic development, tourism is considered to be one of the most significant phenomena of the 20th century with an annual growth of 7.4% [8], [9]. Accordingly, tourism recorded an unprecedented growth globally over the past half century and it is considered one of the world’s largest industries [5]. Multi-national organisations, donor agencies and non-governmental organisations have long identified tourism as a sector which could effectively promote economic and human development by contributing to sustainable development [10]-[12].

However, the literature on tourism suggests that tourism activities can be damaging not only to the natural environment but social and cultural characteristics of a community [13], [14]. For instance, Stronza and Gordillo [13] argue that tourism is infamous for its potential to cause damage to natural habitats and local communities. Moreover, the tourism industry has a general tendency to cause negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts [14] such as water and air pollution, loss of cultural values and infiltration of foreign culture.

Given the above potentials and challenges of tourism, this paper reviews the concept of tourism from a historical perspective, explores ways of making tourism sustainable and examines how the historical evolution of tourism and issues of sustainability have informed the state of tourism activities in developing countries. The paper further explores the challenges impeding tourism from contributing to sustainable development in developing countries and make recommendations accordingly.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research focused on the analysis of theoretical and conceptual knowledge in available literature especially on developing countries. The paper establishes the historical perspective and recent discussions on tourism and sustainable related concepts within the broader sustainable development context. Accordingly, the study examines the state of tourism development in developing countries and presents the challenges obstructing the realisation of sustainable development in tourism activities based on current discussions.

The study was carried out by analysing peer-reviewed literature from published sources such as books, journal articles and conference proceedings. Web search in major electronic databases such as SAGE Journals online, JSTOR, and CABI was undertaken focusing on issues relevant and related to tourism and sustainable development. Additionally,

published documents from major international organisations which are into tourism and sustainable development related issues including World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), UN, WTO, UNWTO, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Department for International Development (DFID).

III. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF TOURISM

The concept of tourism dates back several centuries, and has its roots in a old Saxon term “torn” which means “departure with the intention of returning”, and was used to refer to vacation trips embarked upon by peasant farmers during the 12th century’ [15]. However, Theobald [16] stated that the term tourism was derived from a Latin word “tornare” which means movement around a central point or axis. Both conceptualisations of the origin of the concept emphasised movement of people from one place to another with the aim of returning.

During the middle ages, people travelled across continents mainly for religious purposes to visit sanctified places and holy shrines [17]. The term tourism was, fully conceptualised in the 20th century [15], with the World Bank [18] defining it as “the activities of people travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for no more than one year for leisure, business, and other purposes not related to an activity remunerated from the place visited” (p.393). The concept was used to refer to a short- term temporary movement of people to a destination outside the places of work and residence for all purposes [19].

The post Second World War period was characterised by an exceptional growth in global tourism [20]. The growth in tourism was fuelled by the industrial revolution which led to the improvement in the socio-economic conditions such as higher incomes, longer paid holidays, improved transport system and low travelling costs [20], [21]. This type of tourism was characterised by the concentration of high volume sales with high throughputs and turnarounds, shifting of large group of people (en masse) to specific developed destination with the capacity of absorbing large numbers, and full utilisation of packaged holiday components offered as a single product at an all inclusive price.

Development of large transport systems, infrastructure, accommodation, supporting facilities and attractions within the destination, and market approach centred on more hedonistic motives for travel, such as sun, sea and sand tourism products, formed part of the growth in tourism [22]. The assessment of this type of tourism growth from the perspective of improved economic conditions, increasing consumption and high motivations to travel gave birth to “mass tourism” [23]. The next section examines the period of mass tourism.

A. Mass Tourism

Sharpley [21] explains mass tourism as a political, economic, social and geographical phenomenon which is characterised by the movement of people with the aim of

enjoying their holidays. The major features of mass tourism include the purchase of commodities produced under conditions of mass production; hedonistic motives and the participation of large number of people [21], [22], [24]. Other characteristics were the dominance of individual producers in industrial markets; commodities little differentiated from each other by fashion, season, and specific markets segments; and relatively market choice [22], [24]. It is espoused by Vanhove [25] that the participation of a large number of people in mass tourism creates employment opportunities and generates income for the wider community. The concept was embraced globally especially in developing countries as a clean and renewable activity, with the potential to stimulate socio-economic development [20].

However, in the 1970s, some writers started questioning the negative impacts of mass tourism especially on the preservation of the environment and socio-cultural practices, in addition to the unequal distribution of financial benefits [26]-[29]. The environmental and socio-cultural impact of mass tourism manifested in the form of loss of natural habitat for flora and fauna, pollution of air and water bodies, adulteration of local cultures and unsustainable management of natural environment. Ross and Wall [30] argue that successful tourism should expand beyond economic indicators and should not be measured primarily in economic terms but should incorporate environmental and social needs. There needs to be a balance between the demands of economic viability, environmental stability and social and cultural compatibility at all levels from global to local in all aspects of tourism operation [31]. This resulted in sustainable tourism debate in the 1980s. The next section discusses the concept of sustainable tourism.

B. Making Tourism Sustainable: The Concept of Sustainable Tourism

The concept of sustainable development has been explained by the Brundtland Commission as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [32] (p. 43). Sustainable development has among its objectives to ensure the availability of adequate resources for the population; equitable distribution of resources, economic development as well as environmental protection for the benefit of both the present and the future generations [33]. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 created a common platform for developing and strengthening the pillars/principles (triple bottom line) of sustainable development (economic development, social development and environmental protection) to make them mutually reinforcing at the local, national, regional and global levels [4].

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the activities of the WCED (publication of Brundtland Commission’s report, and the Earth Summit) regarding sustainable development raised public awareness on the need for alternative tourism [34]. This further deepened the consciousness of the impacts of mass tourism as sustainable development principles were applied to

tourism activities [20], [35]. The WTO, realising the potential dangers of mass tourism, started adopting the principles of sustainable development in the planning and management of tourism [35]. According to Berno and Bricker [20] “the concept of sustainable tourism arose out of recognition of both the economic importance of tourism, as well as its realised and potential impacts.” (p.13) Sustainable tourism, with its economic importance, significant use of natural resources and environmental conservation principles [9], was captured under the “Agenda 21 for Travel and Tourism Industry”, an action plan for sustainable tourism development, in 1996 [36].

Highlighting the potential impacts of tourism, the concept of sustainable tourism emerged again in 1997 during the United Nations General Assembly special session [9], [37]. The Assembly reviewed the Agenda 21 and further deliberated on ways to develop action oriented sustainable tourism programme for the world [37]. The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, in its seventh annual session, endorsed sustainable tourism as an approach to economic development [38]. However, the call for sustainability gained global dominance in 1999 as WTO introduced nine basic rules for governments, tour operators, developers, travel agents, workers, host communities and tourists through its “Global Code of Ethics for Tourism” [9], [36].

Although global attention has focused on sustainable tourism and the impacts of mass tourism [32], [35], the definition and operationalisation of sustainable tourism has become a herculean task, with different interpretations by various scholars and international organisations [20], [39], [40]. For instance, the concept of sustainable tourism, according to the UN [40] is defined as activities of tourists resulting in the efficient management of resources in achieving economic, social and aesthetic needs while maintaining the integrity of the cultural system, essential ecological processes and biological diversity as well as life support systems. The UN’s definition of the concept is underpinned by environmental benefits (minimisation of negative tourism impacts, natural and cultural preservation and conservation, as well as efficient use of resources in tourism), economic benefits (importance of policy, planning and management, emphasising limits to tourism development, generation of economic profit for local people, and economic independence of local people), and social independence (participation and information, promotion of tourist observation and comprehension, and culture sensitivity towards local people and other stakeholders) [41], [42].

However, to ensure the realisation of sustainable tourism, certain conditions must prevail, and they include participation of host communities in the planning, development and management process, education of both tourists and local communities regarding tourism development, understanding and respecting the protection of wildlife habitat, energy efficiency and micro climate, and investment in alternative modes of transport which are environmentally friendly [43]. Elaborating on the above conditions, WTO [35]

conceptualises sustainable tourism as the one that meets the needs of “the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future tourism development” (p. 21). Sustainable tourism is fundamentally targeted at ensuring effective management of all resources by meeting the economic, social, and aesthetic needs of tourists “while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems” for the host communities [35] (p. 21).

The complexity of the interpretation of the concept coupled with its operationalisation challenges makes Swarbrooke [28] conclude that the debate on sustainable tourism lacks practicality, and that it is a surplus of wishful thinking [20], [28]. Swarbrooke [28] also indicates that the concept of sustainable tourism can create division in society if there continues to be a distinction between mass (bad) tourism and alternative (good) tourism, as all the adverse effects of tourism are attributed to the activities of mass tourism.

Being challenged with the complexity of the concept, Harrison [39] argues that sustainable tourism is an aspect of the dubious process of sustainable development which he considered a “doubly vague concept” (p. 72). Moreover, Butler [34] contests the term sustainable within the tourism context, highlighting its vagueness and stating that the sustainable development philosophy is just an extension of the broader goal of realising economic growth. The preoccupation on economic growth with no regard to social and environmental effects is self-defeating to the principles of sustainable development especially in the long term [34]. Young [29] however suggests that sustainable tourism should take into consideration the environmental, economic and social dimensions, and that the ultimate aim of sustainable tourism is the healthy state in which the above three dimensions are given equal attention [44].

As consensus on measuring and achieving sustainable tourism objectives has proven to be difficult [45], [46], many tourism academics have discussed the term within the context of sustainable development [46]-[49]. Twining-Ward [49] suggests that the goals of sustainable tourism should establish clearly the relationship between tourism and the basic principles of sustainable development. Sustainable tourism should be viewed as a means of achieving sustainable development by being environmentally sustainable and being able to contribute to the broader sustainable development policies and objectives [46].

A study conducted by Butler [47] further elaborates on the concept of sustainable tourism. He explained sustainable tourism development as a type of tourism which is developed and maintained in an area and remains viable over an indefinite period without altering or degrading the human and physical environment in which it operates to such a degree that it prohibits successful development of other activities and processes which may alter the environment. Butler [47] indicates that several researchers have referred to sustainable tourism as a form of tourism which can maintain its viability in an area over a period of time without considering its impact

on the human and natural environment.

Espousing on Butler [47] interpretation, Tosun [48] suggests that sustainable tourism development should be an adaptive paradigm, a part of parental concepts of development and sustainable development with an overarching objective of contributing to the objectives of sustainable development. Sustainable tourism should be understood as “accepting the commitment to providing healthy long term tourism thoroughly integrated with the other elements of the economy, and with environment and society in such a manner” that any policy directive will not unduly hinder the optimal functioning of the remaining [50] (p. 191).

In 2002, there was a global commitment to operationalise the concept of sustainable tourism through the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg. The summit launched “Tourism and Poverty Alleviation” through the UNWTO and further identified measures to enhance and promote sustainable tourism development and its operationalisation (UN, 2002). Sustainable development measures were proposed to ensure that returns from tourism benefit the local people within the host communities, while protecting and preserving the cultural and environmental resources as well as “enhancing the protection of ecologically sensitive areas and natural heritages” [4] (p. 33). Achieving sustainable tourism goals require systematic action and the availability of adequate resources at national and international levels to ensure ethical management of tourism activities [9].

Normative or ethical forms of sustainable tourism such as ecotourism, community-based tourism and pro-poor tourism have emerged and are considered as alternative forms of tourism as illustrated in Fig. 1 [51], [52], although Hall and Lew [53] assert these forms of tourism have existed since the 1950s and the 1960s, but mass tourism was dominant. Again, the focus of these alternative forms of tourism hinges on the underpinning principles of sustainable development (environmental, social and economic benefits) proposed by Adams [54].

Internationally, some of the terms for these alternative forms of tourism are used interchangeably because they have similar but not the same objectives [8]. For instance, ecotourism is often used along side community-based tourism in Asia [8]. Additionally, other forms of tourism such as green tourism, sport tourism and dark tourism have emerged over the past decade to streamline tourism activities in a particular direction [55].

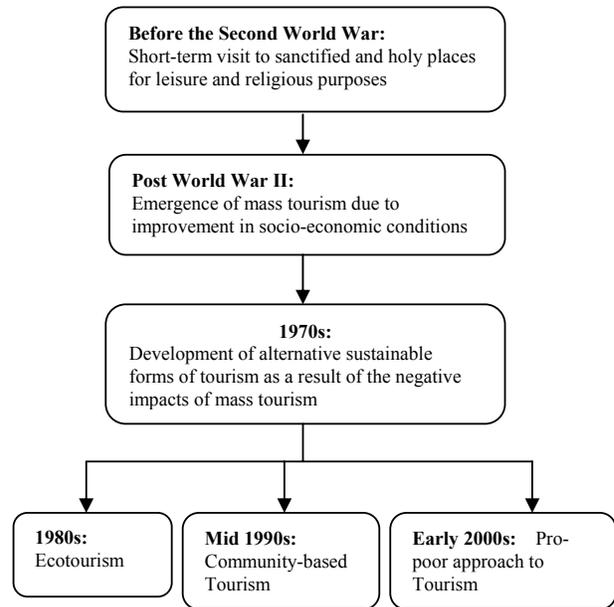


Fig. 1 Tourism Development (1900s to 2000s)

IV. STATE OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Central to sustainable development discourse are issues of poverty reduction, environmental conservation and local level development [56]. Over the past three decades, many international organisations including the DFID, World Bank, ADB, WTO and UNWTO have promoted tourism as a tool for reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development in developing countries through policies and programmes. However, lack of clear interpretation of the concept of sustainable tourism coupled with the high levels of poverty in developing countries pose a threat to sustainable development. Holden et al. [56] assert that the over dependence of developing countries on natural resources for their livelihoods raises critical concerns of tourism’s role in reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development. This section of the paper highlights the sustainable development issues in tourism activities in the developing countries.

Tourism development in developing countries has largely been linked to poverty reduction and sustainable development [57], [58]. Developing countries are endowed with rich tourism resources and attractions comprising natural, cultural and historical resources and wealth of wildlife [57], [59]. A number of studies have highlighted the socio-economic contribution of tourism to development by creating employment, generating revenue for government and income for individuals, stimulating community participation, conserving the environment, and protecting minority groups in developing countries especially in Asia and Africa [59] – [66]. Tourism’s role in poverty reduction is emphasised by and UNWTO [67] as being the primary source of foreign exchange earnings in 46 of the 49 poorest nations, as well as contributing significantly to the socio-economic development

in many developing countries.

Tourism-led development in developing countries has become an important theme and is increasingly gaining dominance in literature [58], [68], [69], with both local and national government searching for locally driven and innovative growth alternatives to diversify their economies while protecting the environment [58], [70]. Focusing on community development, local action and involvement in tourism have been encouraged by many developing countries including South Africa, Kenya, Costa Rica, Botswana and Laos as a tool for achieving sustainable development [58], [71]-[73]. For example in South Africa, in addition to longstanding popular tourist destinations such as Kruger Park, the Garden Route and Cape Town, a wide range of other localities are now seeking to drive development through tourism promotion [58] (p. 238).

However, the effectiveness of tourism in reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development at the local levels in developing countries has been questioned by scholars and practitioners [56]-[59], [74]. Aref [57] argues that the extent and nature of how tourism affects the poor is mostly based on superficial analysis. Major issues obstructing the sustainable development of tourism in many developing countries have been identified to include political instability [75], leakage of tourism benefits [76], weak infrastructure [77], increased foreign ownership of tourism enterprises and increased child prostitution [78] and the high level of unskilled labour [79].

Given its nature and state, tourism in many developing countries especially the sub-Saharan African countries is hardly recognised as an enterprise since “the tourism infrastructure is weak, tourism organisation is poor, and net revenue is meagre” [77] (p. 288). Adding to the meagre net revenue, Okech [59] argues that many tourism enterprises in developing countries are owned by companies in developed countries who are more concerned with profits than the environmental and social wellbeing of the poor, leading to the large outflows of tourism revenue. This raises question about the benefits of tourism in developing countries [59]. Being profit oriented organisations, Lea [78] maintains that the dominance of foreign companies in controlling and managing tourism enterprises in developing countries is a threat to sustainable development as huge amounts of foreign exchange are lost to the developed world. This situation perpetuates the conditions of the poor in developing countries. A research by Aref [57] reveals that despite the existence of many tourism attractions in Parseh in Iran, there is no significant contribution of tourism to poverty reduction due to lack of local capacity and inadequate government support. Again, a study undertaken by Holden et al. [56] confirms there is very limited contribution by tourism to poverty reduction in Elmina, Ghana with the situation being worsened by the absence of policies that target the inclusion of the poor in the tourism development process.

Many studies in the developing countries have proven that the normative and ethical components of tourism which are necessary ingredients for sustainable development are missing

in tourism activities [13], [48], [59], [65]. It is therefore not surprising that Sharpley [80] rarely recognises tourism as a sustainable development panacea. The challenges that hamper tourism’s role to contribute to poverty reduction and sustainable development are explored further in the next section.

V. CHALLENGES IMPEDING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Despite the potential of the tourism sector in contributing to sustainable development in developing countries, few local communities have realised significant benefits [13]. This section focuses on the major barriers inhibiting tourism from realising its objective of improving the socio-economic and environmental well being of communities, as well as threats tourism activities pose to sustainable development.

Jamieson and Nadkarni [81] identify four barriers, which if not resolved, will thwart the role of tourism in sustainable development in developing countries. These include little recognition of tourism’s potential accorded by aid agencies, especially in Asia; lack of government programmes and organisational capacity to respond to the opportunities provided by tourism development; little or no education or training of tourism officials in using tourism as a poverty reduction tool; and limited access to tourism infrastructure. This supports what Bushell and Eagles [82] proposed, emphasising inadequate formal education and foreign language skills as well as inadequate tourism development and management decision making skills as inhibiting factors.

Furthermore, the Overseas Development Institute [83] outlines fifteen barriers which prevent tourism from contributing to sustainable development. Key among them include lack of human capital, gender norms and constraints, lack of social and financial capital, and low capacity to meet tourists’ expectations. It has been debated by WTO [14] that tourism creates negative effects on the social, economic and the natural environment if not properly managed. These negative impacts include “increased demand for unskilled labour, forms of behaviour that are ‘parasitic’ (for instance, prostitution)” as well as “increase in social conflicts because of unequally shared benefits, increase in foreign dependence and pollution” [14] (p. 15). Other negative impacts have been identified to include the “loss of cultural identity, acquisition of harmful forms of behaviour and adoption of lifestyles involving conspicuous consumption” [14] (p. 15). For instance, Kamuro [84] indicates that the Maasai Mara National Park in Kenya and the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in Tanzania have severely been depleted as a result of the increase demand for firewood for cooking and heating in camps and lodges.

In discussing the challenges of tourism contributing to sustainable development in developing countries, Okech [59] notes that large amounts of foreign exchange are lost due to leakages resulting from structural dependency created through widespread foreign ownership and management. The Gambia is often cited as an example of a country which has

experienced very few benefits from tourism as a result of leakages [59]. Leakages reduce tourism's potential to alleviate poverty and stimulate local commitment to environmental conservation through broad-based development approaches [76]. Again, tourism tends to create several social vices in the name of generating employment. For instance, child prostitution in tourism activities especially in Kenya, Thailand and Sri Lanka has often generated negative impacts such as increase in teenage pregnancy and single parenthood, and the breakdown of the moral fabric of society [59], [78], [85], which tends to militate against sustainable development efforts.

It can be argued that there is a gap in the conceptualisation and application of tourism in developing countries. This situation has conscientised communities, individuals and groups to become more mindful of the negative effects of tourism as tourism attains unprecedented growth [9], [12], [86]. McGee and Andereck [86] note the negative impacts of tourism, if appropriate approaches are not employed, will overshadow its benefits and result in making the people poorer. Based on the above discussions, the paper points out two key questions to tourism planning and development in developing countries:

- (1). What are the "missing elements" preventing the sustainable planning and development of tourism in the developing countries? and
- (2). Are the principles of sustainable development applicable, realistic and achievable in tourism development in the developing countries?

Despite the challenges impeding sustainable tourism, the paper recommends conscious application of and adherence to sustainable development principles in tourism activities in developing countries. Both national and local governments in developing countries should develop strategies to incorporate sustainable development principles into tourism activities. This has the potential of not only safeguarding the environment but contributing to poverty reduction and achieving sustainable development.

VI. CONCLUSION

The paper has explored the theoretical and conceptual basis of tourism and its potential in contributing to sustainable development in developing countries. The paper has established and confirmed that current discussions on tourism have focused on achieving sustainable development. Sustainable development concerns in the tourism sector have engineered the emergence of sustainable forms and approaches of tourism development including ecotourism, community-based tourism and pro-poor tourism. Accordingly, the paper has noted that these alternative forms of sustainable tourism, though available as concepts, are not applied in many developing countries due to increased foreign dominance and lack of effective tourism policies, as well as lack of precise interpretation of the concept of sustainable tourism.

Although many studies have highlighted the significant

contribution of tourism to socio-economic development in the developing countries, this paper has revealed that very few benefits are realised by the local communities, due to foreign dominance and profit oriented enterprises. That notwithstanding, the paper showed that many developing countries especially in Africa lack effective policies that support community participation and involvement in tourism activities, thus leading to marginalisation of local communities, worsening poverty situation and increasing reliance on the natural environment. This situation threatens sustainable development efforts in the developing countries.

Given the importance accorded to sustainable development principles in the conceptualization and development of tourism, it is unequivocal that tourism has the potential to contribute to sustainable development by reducing poverty, conserving the environment and protecting host communities and regions. Nonetheless, the paper has noted that sustainable tourism in developing countries is confronted with two critical questions which have hampered its contribution to sustainable development.

While the paper recommends further study into the missing elements and the applicability of sustainable development principles in tourism, it proposes conscious adherence to and application of the underpinning principles of sustainable development in tourism activities by national and local governments in developing countries. Policy makers at both the local and the national levels of developing countries should design and enforce tourism policies that are geared towards stimulating local development and conserving the natural environment. This has the tendency of bridging the gap between the conceptualisation of tourism and its application. Subsequently, the adherence to and the application of the principles of sustainable development in tourism activities have the potential to contribute to the global efforts in creating a sustainable, functional and socially inclusive human environment.

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