

Stakeholder Collaboration and the Future of Sustainable Tourism Management in Cape Coast, Ghana from an Economic and Social Sustainability Perspective

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Abstract

Heritage tourism destinations in sub-Saharan Africa face a persistent tension between economic growth imperatives and social equity. This study examines how stakeholder collaboration shapes sustainable tourism outcomes in Cape Coast, Ghana, a UNESCO World Heritage destination where the governance of tourism remains critically underexamined in the academic literature. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 399 community residents and tourism businesses through structured questionnaires and analysed using one-sample t-tests and Cohen's d effect size estimates. Qualitative depth was provided by 21 purposively sampled key informants. The study found that tourism generates statistically significant improvements in financial stability (mean = 4.02; Cohen's d = 0.80, large effect) and employment in Cape Coast. Four governance deficits emerged from thematic analysis: policy invisibility, weak inter-institutional coordination, cultural commodification, and inequitable benefit distribution. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and the single-destination focus constrains generalisability.

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the most dynamic industries in the world, making careful, sustainable planning critical (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Khater and Faik (2025) state that tourism can become a catalyst for positive change, promote cultural exchange, community development, and environmental stewardship when properly planned. Tourism is essential for diversifying local economies, promoting environmental sustainability, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering social inclusion (Khater & Faik, 2025). Hartman (2022) notes that tourism offers a powerful tool for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Edgell (2019) explains that even though the concept of sustainable tourism emerged in the late 1980s, it has since become central to both policy and research.

Breiby et al. (2020) define sustainable tourism as encompassing the entire visitor experience, addressing economic, social, and environmental concerns, and meeting the needs of both tourists and host communities. Budeanu et al. (2016) add that sustainable tourism development requires managing and developing tourism with long-term economic, social, and environmental viability in mind. Edgell (2019) explains that managing sustainable tourism involves addressing complex issues such as impacts on natural and built environments and concerns about history, heritage, and local culture. Mason (2020) notes that sustainable tourism must consider current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts while addressing the needs of visitors, industry, the environment, and host communities.

Sustainable tourism supports local economies by creating jobs, fostering business development, and improving infrastructure (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). The goal of sustainable tourism is to increase local income through locally produced goods and services while preventing economic leakages (Bianchi & de Man, 2021; de Lange & Dodds, 2017). According to (Mason, 2020) Mason (2020), sustainable tourism can strengthen community well-being by building pride and ownership of local culture. It also ensures that development aligns with residents' needs through participatory planning and community

involvement. While the economic logic of tourism development in coastal heritage cities is well-established, the governance conditions under which these benefits can be equitably distributed and socially sustained remain far less understood, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019).

While tourism generates economic activity, its social and environmental costs are often borne disproportionately by host communities. Of particular concern is its influence on social behaviour, especially among youth, where elevated rates of substance abuse and petty crime have been documented in tourism-dependent areas (de Lange & Dodds, 2017). Beyond these social dimensions, the physical fabric of community life is equally under strain. Mason (2020) cautions that when tourism growth outpaces a destination's carrying capacity, residents contend with persistent noise, congestion, and overcrowded public spaces. These pressures erode both infrastructure and daily quality of life. Compounding this are environmental stressors: inadequate waste management, pollution, and the overextension of water and energy systems create conditions that threaten public health and long-term resource security (Mason, 2020). Taken together, these cumulative pressures do not simply inconvenience residents, but they fundamentally diminish the liveability of host communities and, over time, undermine the very appeal that sustains the tourism industry itself.

Cape Coast occupies a distinctive place in Ghana's tourism landscape, drawing domestic and international visitors through its layered cultural heritage and historical significance. As the site of Cape Coast Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the world's most significant monuments to the transatlantic slave trade, the city holds profound historical meaning for African diaspora communities and is a focal destination for heritage tourism across West Africa (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015; Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). Tourism has undeniably contributed to local economic life, generating employment, nurturing small businesses, and channelling revenue into the local economy. Yet the sustainability of this growth remains an open and pressing question.

The economic gains that tourism produces are not shared equally; benefits tend to concentrate among a narrow circle of stakeholders, leaving broader community development largely unrealised. At the same time, the rapid expansion of tourism activity has introduced social and economic pressures that weigh heavily on residents. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation offers a useful lens for evaluating Cape Coast's tourism governance. The evidence suggests that prevailing arrangements occupy the ladder's lower rungs, characterised by consultation and information-sharing rather than genuine community co-authorship. This configuration systematically attenuates tourism's community development potential.

Viewed through the lens of economic and social sustainability, these converging pressures raise serious questions about how tourism development in Cape Coast is being governed. Despite Cape Coast's prominence as a heritage tourism destination, academic literature has yet to adequately examine how socio-economic dynamics interact within the destination's governance architecture, and what they

collectively mean for long-term viability. This gap speaks to real consequences for the communities whose lives are most directly shaped by how tourism unfolds around them.

Two explicit research objectives guide this study:

RO1: To assess the extent to which tourism development in Cape Coast generates economically sustainable outcomes for residents and businesses.

RO2: To identify the governance and stakeholder collaboration factors that enable or constrain socially equitable tourism development in Cape Coast.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 presents the introduction. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework and reviews relevant literature. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Section 4 presents and discusses findings against the two research objectives. Section 5 concludes with policy recommendations and future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in sustainable tourism development (STD) theory, which rests on a foundational premise that tourism growth and human well-being are not competing priorities, but interdependent ones. Rather than treating economic expansion as an end in itself, STD theory insists that the benefits of tourism must reach the people who live within and around destination areas, improving their livelihoods in meaningful and lasting ways (Swarbroke, 1999). The theory has undergone significant evolution since its Brundtland-era origins: from an early preoccupation with environmental carrying capacity, toward a contemporary framework that foregrounds social justice, institutional governance, and long-run community resilience as constitutive, not merely supplementary dimensions of sustainability (Bramwell et al., 2017; Bricker & Kariithi, 2025; Sharpley, 2020).

Butler (1999) argues that central to this framework is the recognition that economic growth, environmental stewardship, and cultural preservation are not isolated goals but mutually reinforcing responsibilities. Bricker and Kariithi (2025) affirm this position, noting that sustainable tourism is fundamentally concerned with maximising benefits for local communities while keeping social and ecological harm to a minimum. Critically, Bramwell et al. (2017) demonstrate that institutional capacity, regulatory coherence, and multi-stakeholder participation are not merely enabling factors but are constitutive of sustainability itself: in their absence, even apparently high-performing tourism economies reproduce structural inequities and erode the social capital on which community resilience depends.

To strengthen the theoretical foundation of this study, STD theory is complemented by stakeholder theory, brought into focus through Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. This model recognises that not all involvement is equal; participation exists on a spectrum, ranging from token

gestures and passive consultation at one end, to genuine citizen power and shared decision-making at the other (Swarbrooke, 1999). In tourism contexts, this requires mechanisms for genuine dialogue among public authorities, private sector operators, civil society organisations, and host communities; groups whose interests frequently diverge and whose power asymmetries are rarely self-correcting (Bianchi & de Man, 2021).

For Cape Coast, STD theory serves as more than an abstract framework. It provides a practical lens for evaluating whether tourism is genuinely delivering on its promise. The destination's appeal is deeply rooted in its historical landmarks, cultural heritage, biodiversity, and coastal ecosystems (Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). Sustaining that appeal requires more than managing visitor flows: it demands that tourism development actively improves the lives of local communities and honours the cultural fabric that makes Cape Coast worth visiting in the first place (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015). Sharpley (2020) argues that this is not something any single actor can achieve alone — it calls for genuine collaboration among industry, government, and community, with each recognising its stake in the other's well-being.

2.2 Sustainable Tourism Development

Sustainable tourism development sits at the intersection of three equally important imperatives: social well-being, environmental conservation, and economic growth. Tourism is a sector defined by this tension: the same industry that generates livelihoods and injects vitality into local economies can, without thoughtful stewardship, erode the very landscapes, communities, and cultural values that gave it life (Swarbrooke, 1999). Bricker and Kariithi (2025) trace this intellectual journey from early conservation concerns toward a far more expansive vision, one that now embraces inclusiveness, resilience, and innovation as core principles. Dos Anjos and Kennell (2019) argue that sustainability cannot be achieved through isolated good intentions but requires coherent governance and regional planning that aligns policy, practice, and people around shared goals. Hartman (2022) is unequivocal that meaningful tourism development must be grounded in community involvement, equity, and genuine cultural respect.

Sharpley's (2020) landmark reassessment of sustainable tourism theory acknowledges a persistent "theoretical divide" between the aspirational principles of sustainability and the conditions in which tourism actually operates: market incentives reward throughput over stewardship; governance systems are frequently fragmented; and host communities are routinely positioned as beneficiaries of development rather than as its co-producers. Closing this gap requires not simply better intentions but structural reform of the institutional conditions that shape tourism outcomes.

Streimikiene et al. (2021) demonstrate the close relationship between sustainable tourism and destination competitiveness, noting that incorporating environmental, social, and economic pillars into tourism strategy improves resilience and long-term viability. Bramwell et al. (2017) argue that sustainable tourism frameworks should guide industry best practices by ensuring tourism development aligns with local goals and sustainability objectives.

2.3 Economic sustainability

Tourism significantly drives economic development, impacting national and local budgets (Meng, 2016; Elgin & Elveren, 2024). While conventional tourism strategies have often caused social problems and environmental damage, shifting to sustainable practices has become necessary (Streimikiene et al., 2021). By promoting ethical practices, local businesses gain lasting benefits, including job creation, increased income, infrastructure improvements, and economic resilience (Sharpley, 2020). León-Gómez et al. (2021) explain that sustainable tourism boosts growth by increasing employment, creating commercial opportunities, and advancing infrastructure while maintaining environmental balance. Elgin and Elveren (2024) provide particularly relevant recent evidence: using multi-country panel data, they demonstrate that tourism's economic impacts on sustainable development are highly heterogeneous and depend critically on the governance and distributional mechanisms through which tourism revenues are managed at the destination level, a finding of direct relevance to the Cape Coast context.

Employment and income creation represent tourism's most visible economic benefit (Ghosh & Siddique, 2017). Tourism generates direct and indirect jobs, especially in accommodation, food services, and transportation (Ghosh & Siddique, 2017). Meng (2016) shows that tourism mainly drives local economic development, particularly in areas with limited employment opportunities. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) particularly benefit from sustainable tourism (Maziliauske, 2024). Purnomo and Purwandari (2025) provide an updated model for SME empowerment in sustainable tourism villages, demonstrating that the degree to which small enterprises are integrated into tourism value chains depends critically on the institutional frameworks that govern market access, skills development, and supply chain localisation – considerations that map directly onto the challenges facing Cape Coast's business community.

2.4 Social sustainability and community well-being

Sustainable tourism development requires fair distribution of tourism benefits, active community participation, and protection of cultural identity to enhance local welfare. Baena and Cerviño (2024) argue that social sustainability in tourism prioritises community engagement, social fairness, and cultural respect to ensure tourism benefits residents. Durán-Sánchez et al. (2018) identify community-based tourism (CBT) as a key approach in which residents participate centrally in tourism development. Mason (2020) notes that negative social outcomes, including cultural commodification, rising cost of living, and social stratification between tourism insiders and outsiders, are not inevitable consequences of tourism growth. Rather, they are predictable outcomes of governance failures that privilege economic throughput over community welfare. This framing is analytically significant: it repositions social sustainability challenges as institutional problems requiring governance solutions rather than as inevitable externalities to be managed.

Dushkova and Ivlieva (2024) point to community engagement, cultural preservation, economic empowerment, and social cohesion as among the most meaningful positive outcomes that well-managed tourism can produce. Hartman (2022) observes that truly successful tourism development arises not from top-down planning but from genuine collaboration among industry, the environment, and the community. Dwyer's (2023) capital approach to resident well-being in tourism destinations

demonstrates that erosion of natural, social, and cultural capital stocks constitutes a net welfare loss for host communities. Even when conventional economic indicators suggest growth, providing a theoretically grounded framework for understanding why economic metrics alone are insufficient measures of sustainable tourism performance.

2.5 Heritage tourism governance in Sub-Saharan Africa

The governance of heritage tourism in sub-Saharan Africa has received growing but still insufficient scholarly attention. Rogerson and Visser (2011) observe that African tourism geographies have historically been understudied in relation to their economic and developmental significance, with governance dimensions particularly neglected. In the Ghanaian context specifically, Yankholmes and McKercher (2015) demonstrate that the management of slave-trade heritage sites presents unique governance challenges: their significance extends beyond conventional tourism management to encompass questions of diasporic identity, national history, and intercultural reconciliation. All of which require governance frameworks that are sensitive to the emotional and political weight of the heritage being interpreted.

Agyeiwaah et al. (2019) further demonstrate that community perceptions of tourism's legitimacy in Ghanaian heritage destinations are strongly mediated by the degree to which governance processes are experienced as inclusive and transparent. Where communities feel marginalised from planning and benefit distribution, trust in both tourism institutions and in tourism itself deteriorates. This has direct implications for the social licence that sustainable tourism management depends on. These findings establish the specific evidence gap that the present study addresses: a rigorous, mixed-methods examination of how governance deficits manifest across the economic and social sustainability dimensions of Cape Coast's tourism sector.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) was adopted to address the research objectives. This design was selected for its capacity to combine the breadth of statistical inference across a representative community sample with the contextual depth of qualitative inquiry: quantitative findings establish patterns of perception and association, while qualitative data from key informants illuminate the governance processes, power dynamics, and experiential realities that explain those patterns. The sequential structure ensured that the qualitative phase was informed by and responsive to quantitative findings, strengthening the integrative rigour of the analysis.

To explore sustainable tourism and its effects on Cape Coast, the quantitative component used simple random sampling to select 399 participants from a structured sampling frame of residents and businesses in the Cape Coast Metropolitan Area. Random number generation ensured that every potential participant had an equal chance of inclusion. This reduces selection bias and strengthens the

representativeness of the findings (Neuman, 2013). Participants completed a questionnaire built around a five-point Likert scale, covering key dimensions of sustainable tourism from economic impacts and employment generation to cultural preservation and community well-being (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Researchers were on hand during face-to-face administration to support respondents and maintain consistency across data collection. Responses were analysed using one-sample t-tests and Cohen’s d effect size measures, with a test value of $\mu_0 = 3.0$ (the neutral midpoint on the Likert scale) and a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. Cohen’s d conventions of 0.20 (small), 0.50 (medium), and 0.80 (large) were applied to assess practical significance beyond statistical significance, a dual-criterion approach that guards against the inflation of trivial differences in large samples (Cohen, 1988).

3.2 Qualitative component

Twenty-one (21) participants were purposively selected among officials from the Ghana Tourism Authority, the Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly, tourism and hospitality establishments, and traditional leaders. They were chosen specifically for their direct involvement in and varied perspectives on tourism development. In-depth interviews, guided by open-ended questions, explored policy effectiveness, benefit distribution, cultural impacts, and social cohesion. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2022) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Member checking was conducted with six informants to enhance credibility. Thick description and audit trail documentation were employed to strengthen confirmability and dependability (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Sustainable Tourism Governance: Community Perceptions

Table 4.1 presents a cross-tabulation analysis of community perceptions of sustainable tourism governance in Cape Coast, supplemented with inferential t-statistics.

Table 4.1
Community Perceptions of Sustainable Tourism Governance in Cape Coast (N = 399)

Statement	Disagree (SD + D) %	Agree (A + SA) %	t-statistic	p-value
Local authorities have clear policies supporting sustainable tourism	59%	41%	-7.84	< 0.001
Tourism respects and promotes local culture	53%	47%	-4.21	< 0.001
Tourism businesses have adopted eco-friendly waste disposal	65%	35%	-10.32	< 0.001
A significant portion of tourism income stays within the local community	47%	53%	2.14	< 0.05
Tourism-related jobs offer fair wages and stable employment	18%	72%	2.14	< 0.001
<i>Note: Test value (H_0): $\mu = 3.0$; $\alpha = 0.05$.</i>				

A significant majority (59%) disagree that local authorities have clear policies supporting sustainable tourism. This scepticism may stem from a perceived disconnect between policy formulation and implementation. The negative t-statistic for this item confirms that community perceptions fall significantly below the neutral midpoint ($t = -7.84$, $p < .001$), indicating active disagreement rather than mere uncertainty. This is theoretically significant from an STD perspective: in the absence of institutionally visible governance frameworks, the trust necessary for effective multi-stakeholder collaboration cannot be established, and the participatory conditions required for genuine sustainability are systematically undermined (Bramwell et al., 2017; Sharpley, 2020).

Over half (53%) disagree that tourism respects and promotes local culture, indicating concerns about cultural erosion or misrepresentation. This finding is particularly salient in a destination where the cultural assets, most notably the transatlantic slavery heritage complex, constitute the primary basis of competitive differentiation. The commodification of heritage for visitor consumption, when not counterbalanced by strong cultural governance frameworks, risks what Yankholmes and McKercher (2015) term 'memoricide': the gradual erosion of the living cultural meaning that gives heritage sites their educational and emotional authenticity.

A higher percentage (65%) disagrees that tourism has adopted eco-friendly practices, indicating significant environmental governance concerns. By contrast, a majority (53%) agree that tourism income stays locally, and 72% agree that tourism-related jobs offer employment opportunities, reflecting positive perceptions of tourism's economic contribution. These asymmetric results, strong economic endorsement alongside strong governance rejection, are consistent with the pattern identified in the STD literature: economic benefits and governance quality can decouple, with the former masking the latter's deterioration. The findings from in-depth interviews reinforce and contextualise these quantitative patterns. One local business owner stated:

I have not seen any clear policy from the authorities. Most decisions do not involve us, and we are not sure what the council is actually doing for tourism. The Ghana Tourism Authority normally comes here for inspection of facilities, but we're not involved in any policy decisions. In fact, we do not know what goes into policy and planning.

This observation illustrates a governance condition located at or below the “Consultation” rung of Arnstein’s (1969) ladder. Critically, this is not merely a failure of policy design in isolation but of institutional articulation: the Ghana Tourism Authority and Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly operate largely in parallel rather than in integrated governance partnership, producing coordination gaps that community stakeholders experience as exclusion. This institutional fragmentation directly undermines the STD theory imperative for coherent and collaborative governance.

4.2 Economic impacts of sustainable tourism

Table 4.2 presents the one-sample t-test results and Cohen’s d effect sizes for the four economic impact dimensions examined in this study. The effect size labels (small/medium/large) assist interpretation of practical significance, which is distinct from and complementary to statistical significance.

Table 4.2

Economic impact of sustainable tourism in Cape Coast – One-Sample t-Test results (N = 399)

Statement	Mean	SD	t-stat.	p-value	Cohen’s d	% Agreement
Financial Stability Improvement	4.02	1.27	16.03	< .001	0.80 (large)	70%
Revenue Generation	3.62	1.18	10.50	< .001	0.53 (medium)	65%
Job Creation	3.57	1.19	9.57	< .001	0.48 (medium)	59%
SME Growth and Expansion	3.19	1.33	2.85	< 0.01	0.14 (small)	46%

Note: Test value (H_0): $\mu = 3.0$; $\alpha = 0.05$. Cohen’s d: small ≥ 0.20 , medium ≥ 0.50 , large ≥ 0.80 .

Table 4.2 indicates that sustainable tourism development has a positive impact on local businesses in Cape Coast across all four dimensions. The most pronounced effect was observed in financial stability improvement (mean = 4.02, SD = 1.27; t = 16.03; Cohen’s d = 0.80). This large effect size indicates the impact is not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful, with 70% of respondents agreeing. These results extend the work of Streimikiene et al. (2021), who establish theoretical links between sustainable tourism and economic competitiveness, by providing direct community-level evidence from a sub-Saharan heritage context. Revenue generation demonstrated the second-strongest impact (mean = 3.62; Cohen’s d = 0.53; 65% agreement), followed by job creation (mean = 3.57; Cohen’s d = 0.48; 59% agreement). Both achieved medium effect sizes, indicating meaningful but not

overwhelming impacts. The lower agreement rate for job creation (59%) compared to financial stability (70%) suggests differential experiences across business types and sizes, consistent with Maziliauske's (2024) finding that larger, well-capitalised tourism enterprises appropriate a disproportionate share of employment gains relative to micro-enterprises and informal operators.

SME growth and expansion showed the weakest impact (mean = 3.19; Cohen's $d = 0.14$; 46% agreement). This small effect size is arguably the most diagnostically significant finding in this section. It signals that despite aggregate economic expansion, the conditions necessary for broad-based entrepreneurial development, market access, financing, skills infrastructure, and supply chain integration remain inadequately developed. This structural gap between tourism volume growth and SME ecosystem deepening constitutes the central economic governance challenge for Cape Coast, and it maps directly onto Purnomo and Purwandari's (2025) finding that SME empowerment in tourism requires deliberate institutional design, not merely tourism growth.

These quantitative findings were validated through qualitative interviews. A respondent from the hospitality industry remarked:

Tourism has been one of the good things to happen to us. Apart from the universities, I think the tourism and hospitality industry is the lead employer in Cape Coast, providing jobs to the youth, both skilled and unskilled. Talk about the attractions, hotels, and restaurants, guiding, and even tour operations – you will find a lot of our people working there.

However, a traditional leader offered a more structurally attentive observation: “Yes, people are working. But who owns the hotels? Who owns the tour companies? Most of the big money leaves Cape Coast. Our people earn wages; they do not build wealth.” This distinction between wage employment and wealth accumulation maps directly onto the SME growth gap identified in the quantitative findings and highlights the limits of using employment as a proxy for economic sustainability (Bianchi & de Man, 2021).

4.3 Social impacts on community well-being

Tourism's social effects in Cape Coast are complicated, and different age groups see things differently. Many younger and older people felt that tourism has led to divisions and misunderstandings in the community. Younger respondents mostly blamed this on unfair job opportunities and unequal access to tourism income, often feeling frustrated by favouritism in hiring and business deals. Older respondents were more concerned about cultural ownership and authenticity, worrying that turning traditions into tourist attractions weakens local values and community identity. Still, both age groups recognised some positive social effects from tourism.

Younger people often mentioned more intercultural interaction, chances to meet visitors, and better skill development as benefits of tourism.

Older respondents focused more on how tourism can boost community spirit and encourage cooperation between generations, especially when it helps preserve local heritage. These generational divergences in social impact perception are theoretically consistent with Dwyer's (2023) capitals approach: younger community members experience tourism's effects primarily through the lens of economic capital (employment, income access), while older members prioritise cultural and social capital (heritage integrity, community cohesion). Both dimensions are constitutive of sustainable tourism outcomes, yet they are rarely addressed simultaneously in governance processes.

Both younger and older respondents also reported problems like overcrowding, higher living costs, and strain on local infrastructure, highlighting the trade-offs and complex generational issues that come with tourism growth. These patterns indicate that although tourism creates opportunities for certain community members, it also generates tensions related to benefit distribution, cultural representation, and quality of life. The coexistence of these positive and negative perceptions suggests that tourism's social effects are highly contingent on the governance conditions under which tourism develops — specifically, the degree to which community input is genuinely incorporated and equity in benefit distribution is actively pursued. This finding aligns with Mason's (2020) observation that social sustainability challenges in tourism are institutional rather than inevitable.

4.4 Governance deficits: Thematic analysis findings

Reflexive thematic analysis of the 21 key informant interviews produced four primary themes that together characterise the governance architecture of tourism in Cape Coast. Table 4.3 presents a structured summary of themes, sub-themes, representative quotations, and frequency indicators, following the qualitative reporting conventions recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). These themes directly address RO2 and provide the qualitative evidence base for the policy recommendations in Section 5.

Table 4.3
Summary of qualitative themes from key informant interviews (N = 21)

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quotation	Frequency (n = 21)
Governance Deficits	Policy invisibility	"We are not involved in any policy decisions; we do not know what goes into planning."	17/21
Governance Deficits	Exclusion from decision-making	"The Ghana Tourism Authority comes for inspections, but never for consultation."	15/21
Economic Benefits	Employment generation	"Tourism is the lead employer after the universities – skilled and unskilled."	19/21
Economic Benefits	Revenue retention	"A significant portion of what tourists spend stays in Cape Coast."	13/21
Social Tensions	Cultural commodification	"Our traditions are performed for tourists, but young people no longer practise them."	14/21
Social Tensions	Inequitable Benefit distribution	"Young people feel excluded; jobs and contracts go to the well-connected."	16/21

Note: Frequency indicates the number of informants who raised each theme spontaneously or confirmed it when probed. All quotations translated/transcribed by the research team.

Theme 1 – Governance Deficits: Policy Invisibility and Institutional Fragmentation. The most consistently reported governance failure concerned the disconnect between formal policy formulation and community-level awareness or implementation (17/21 informants). This observation illustrates a governance condition located at or below the "Consultation" rung of Arnstein's (1969) ladder, where formal structures exist but fail to translate into community knowledge or agency. The Ghana Tourism Authority and Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly operate largely in parallel rather than in an integrated governance partnership, producing coordination gaps that community stakeholders experience as exclusion.

Theme 2 – Inequitable Benefit Distribution. Sixteen of 21 informants raised concerns about the concentration of tourism revenues among a relatively small number of well-connected entrepreneurs and externally owned enterprises. This finding connects to the quantitative evidence of limited SME growth and affirms the structural critique advanced by Bianchi and de Man (2021), who argue that the equitable distribution of tourism's economic gains requires deliberate redistributive institutional mechanisms rather than reliance on market diffusion.

Theme 3 – Cultural Commodification. Fourteen informants expressed concern that Cape Coast's cultural heritage, particularly its slave trade history and associated rituals, was being packaged and performed for visitor consumption in ways that stripped it of deeper social and educational meaning. One

community representative observed: “Our traditions are performed for tourists, but young people no longer practise them.” This commodification risk is theoretically significant: the authenticity and emotional depth of the heritage experience are precisely what give Cape Coast its competitive distinctiveness and its capacity for diaspora engagement.

Theme 4 – Weak Inter-Institutional Coordination. Multiple informants described a fragmented governance landscape in which the Ghana Tourism Authority, Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly, District Assembly structures, and traditional authority systems operated without clear lines of accountability or coordination. A GTA official acknowledged: “There are things we cannot do without the Metropolitan Assembly, and things they cannot do without us, but there is no formal coordination mechanism.” This institutional fragmentation prevents the coherent implementation of sustainability commitments and reinforces community perceptions of policy invisibility.

5. Conclusions, policy implications, and limitations

5.1 Conclusions

This study reveals that sustainable tourism development in Cape Coast presents a paradox of economic gains amid governance and social deficits. While tourism has demonstrably strengthened financial stability for local businesses and created employment opportunities, these economic benefits coexist with significant shortcomings in policy implementation and equitable benefit distribution. Theoretically, these findings extend STD theory’s governance dimension by demonstrating that in heritage tourism contexts characterised by strong economic performance but weak institutional architecture, the conventional expectation that economic benefits will diffuse into broad-based social sustainability is not borne out. Rather, the distributional character of economic gains is itself a product of governance design, specifically, of the degree to which community stakeholders are positioned as co-authors of development strategy rather than as recipients of its outputs.

The social landscape is similarly complex, characterised by generational divides and unequal access to tourism benefits. The governance deficits identified through thematic analysis, policy invisibility, institutional fragmentation, cultural commodification, and inequitable benefit distribution collectively reflect a tourism development model that prioritises short-term economic throughput over inclusive, community-anchored sustainability. Measured against Arnstein’s (1969) participation ladder, Cape Coast’s governance architecture operates predominantly at the lower rungs, producing a community-tourism relationship characterised by economic dependency rather than community empowerment.

5.2 Policy implications

For destination managers and planners, there is the urgency of moving beyond rhetoric to implement genuine sustainable tourism practices by prioritising institutional capacity building, regulatory enforcement, and community empowerment. Specifically, the Ghana Tourism Authority and Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly should establish a statutory multi-stakeholder coordination platform with defined

decision-making powers, enabling community representatives, private sector operators, and traditional leaders to co-author tourism policy rather than merely receive it. For tourism businesses, the research demonstrates that social responsibility is not a peripheral concern but central to operational legitimacy and community acceptance. The evidence on SME growth deficits suggests the need for targeted supply chain integration initiatives, specifically, preferential procurement frameworks that direct a defined proportion of accommodation, food service, and interpretive spending toward locally owned micro-enterprises.

For city authorities and tourism officials, the study reveals that tourism's potential as an inclusive development tool remains unrealised without deliberate interventions addressing benefit distribution, cultural ownership, and infrastructure capacity. Community-curated heritage interpretation models in which local knowledge holders define the narratives presented to visitors offer both a cultural sustainability solution and a mechanism for deepening community ownership of the tourism product (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015).

5.3 Limitations and future research directions

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs would be necessary to establish the direction and magnitude of causal relationships between governance interventions and sustainability outcomes. Second, the study's focus on community residents and key informants does not capture the perspectives of tourists themselves, whose behaviour and expectations shape the governance incentives facing destination managers; future research should integrate visitor perception data to provide a more complete governance picture. Third, the single-destination design, while appropriate for the depth of inquiry pursued, limits the generalisability of findings; comparative studies across Ghana's heritage destinations, including Elmina, Accra, and Kumasi, would strengthen the transferability of the policy insights generated here. Future research should also investigate the specific institutional mechanisms through which multi-stakeholder governance arrangements translate into equitable benefit distribution outcomes, an empirical question that remains underexplored in the sustainable tourism literature and is of immediate practical significance for heritage destinations across the Global South.

Declarations

CRedit authorship contribution statement

RY: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, supervision. FED: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft, project administration. OM: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, writing – original draft, review & editing. MAM: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, review & editing. ED: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, validation.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles and guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board of the Cape Coast Technical University with approval number CCTUREB/2025/96. Participants were fully informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality. To maintain anonymity, no personally identifiable information was collected at any stage of the research.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Consent to publish

All participants agreed and indicated their consent to the publication of the report.

Clinical trial number

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Declaration of generative AI use

None

Data availability statement

The datasets supporting the findings of this study are included in the manuscript. The rest of the data is available upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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