



## **Homestay-Based Community Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Case Study of Grassroots Tourism Governance in India**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents a focused qualitative case study of community-managed homestay tourism in India, examining how grassroots tourism governance contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Across diverse ecological and socio-cultural contexts, homestay tourism has emerged as a key mechanism through which local communities directly engage with tourism markets while retaining control over resources, decision-making, and benefit distribution.

The study analyzes a set of homestay initiatives implemented between 2019 and 2024 in selected regions of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Kerala, Rajasthan, and the North-Eastern states of India. Supported by civil society organizations, women's self-help groups, cooperatives, and local governance institutions, these initiatives enabled households to participate in tourism through accommodation services, local guiding, cultural performances, and farm- and craft-based livelihood activities. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on program documents, policy reports, semi-structured village interviews, and field observations.

The findings indicate that community-managed homestays generate inclusive employment, diversify rural income sources, and enhance women's economic participation while promoting environmentally responsible tourism practices. Grassroots

governance mechanisms, including shared operational standards, participatory monitoring systems, locally agreed-upon pricing norms, and environmental guidelines, played a critical role in managing visitor behavior, waste, and resource use, while safeguarding cultural heritage. Importantly, participation in homestay governance strengthened community capacity to engage with tourism departments, local governments, and market intermediaries.

The study concludes that community-based homestay tourism, grounded in participatory governance and supported by civil society actors, represents a scalable and context-sensitive pathway for aligning tourism development with the SDGs in India. The findings underscore the potential of community ownership models to transform tourism from an extractive activity into an inclusive and sustainable development strategy.

**Keywords:** *Community-based tourism; Homestay tourism; Grassroots governance; Sustainable Development Goals; Rural development; India*

## 1. Introduction

Tourism has emerged as one of the most significant drivers of economic growth and employment generation globally, particularly in developing economies where it supports livelihoods, regional development, and cultural exchange. In India, tourism has played an increasingly important role in rural and peripheral regions by creating income opportunities beyond agriculture and traditional occupations. However, the expansion of conventional tourism models—often dominated by external investors, large-scale infrastructure, and standardized services—has also produced adverse outcomes such as environmental degradation, cultural commodification, resource overuse, and unequal distribution of economic benefits (Hall, 2011; Sharpley, 2020). These challenges have led policymakers and scholars to call for tourism models that are socially inclusive, environmentally responsible, and locally governed<sup>1</sup>.

Against this backdrop, homestay-based community tourism has gained prominence as an alternative development pathway. Homestays enable local households to host tourists within their homes, thereby integrating tourism into everyday social, cultural, and economic practices. Unlike hotel-centric tourism, homestays typically operate at a small scale, rely on local resources, and are embedded within community networks. In India, homestay tourism has expanded across diverse ecological and cultural contexts, including Himalayan regions, coastal villages, desert settlements, and the North-Eastern states, often supported by state tourism policies, civil society organizations, and community-based institutions (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; UNWTO, 2018)<sup>2</sup>.

Beyond their economic function, homestays represent an important site for examining grassroots tourism governance. Tourism governance refers to the formal and informal processes through which tourism activities are regulated, coordinated, and managed by multiple actors, including the state, market intermediaries, and local communities (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). In community-managed homestay systems, governance frequently takes a decentralized and participatory form, involving households, women's self-help groups, cooperatives, village councils, and local leaders. These grassroots arrangements shape critical aspects of tourism practice, including pricing norms, quality standards, environmental rules, visitor conduct, and benefit-sharing mechanisms. As such, governance plays a decisive role in determining whether tourism contributes to sustainable development or reproduces existing inequalities<sup>3</sup>.

The growing relevance of homestay-based community tourism is closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015. Tourism has been recognized as a sector with the potential to contribute to multiple SDGs, particularly those related to employment, sustainable settlements, responsible consumption, and biodiversity conservation (UN, 2015). Community-managed homestays are especially relevant to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by generating local employment and entrepreneurship; SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by supporting cultural heritage preservation and strengthening community resilience; SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) through low-impact tourism practices; and SDG 15 (Life on Land) by promoting conservation-oriented livelihoods in ecologically sensitive regions (UNWTO, 2019)<sup>4</sup>. However, the realization of these contributions depends largely on how tourism is governed at the local level.

While existing literature on community-based tourism and homestays highlights their potential for livelihood diversification and cultural exchange, much of this research treats communities primarily as beneficiaries rather than active governance actors (Scheyvens, 1999; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). Empirical studies explicitly linking homestay tourism to grassroots governance mechanisms and SDG outcomes remain limited, particularly in the Indian context. Moreover, many studies focus on single locations or short-term interventions, offering limited insight into how community-managed homestays function across different socio-ecological settings and over extended periods. This creates a significant gap in understanding the governance processes through which homestay tourism contributes to sustainable development.

<sup>1</sup> Hall, C.M. (2011). *Policy learning and policy failure in sustainable tourism governance*. Tourism Management.

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin, H., & Santilli, R. (2009). *Community-based tourism: A success?* ICRT Occasional Paper.

<sup>3</sup> Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (2011). *Critical research on governance for sustainable tourism*. Journal of Sustainable Tourism.

<sup>4</sup> UNWTO (2019). *Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals*. World Tourism Organization.

Addressing this gap, the present study undertakes a qualitative multi-region case study of community-managed homestay initiatives implemented between 2019 and 2024 in selected regions of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Kerala, Rajasthan, and the North-Eastern states of India. Supported by civil society organizations, women's self-help groups, cooperatives, and local governance bodies, these initiatives enabled households to engage in tourism through accommodation services, local guiding, cultural activities, and farm- and craft-based livelihoods. By conceptualizing homestays as governance systems rather than merely tourism products, this study examines how participatory decision-making, locally negotiated rules, and community institutions shape economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

### 1.1 Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the role of community-managed homestays in promoting inclusive livelihood opportunities in rural and peripheral regions of India.
2. To analyze the grassroots tourism governance mechanisms operating within homestay initiatives.
3. To assess how homestay-based community tourism contributes to selected Sustainable Development Goals, namely SDG 8, SDG 11, SDG 12, and SDG 15.
4. To identify governance practices that enable sustainable, locally controlled, and scalable tourism development.

### 1.2 Research Questions

The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do community-managed homestays enable local participation in tourism markets?
2. What grassroots governance mechanisms regulate homestay tourism at the community level?
3. In what ways does homestay-based community tourism contribute to the achievement of SDG 8, SDG 11, SDG 12, and SDG 15?
4. What lessons can be drawn from these cases for sustainable tourism policy and practice in India?

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Community-Based Tourism and Homestays

Community-based tourism (CBT) has been widely discussed in development and tourism literature as an alternative model that prioritizes local ownership, participation, and benefit-sharing. Unlike conventional tourism, which is often controlled by external investors, CBT seeks to embed tourism activities within local social and economic systems, enabling communities to exercise control over resources and decision-making processes (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Scholars argue that CBT can enhance local livelihoods while simultaneously promoting cultural integrity and environmental conservation (Scheyvens, 1999)<sup>5</sup>.

Homestay tourism represents a specific and increasingly popular form of CBT, particularly in rural and ecologically sensitive regions. Homestays allow households to convert existing residential spaces into tourism assets, thereby reducing capital intensity and lowering environmental impact (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015)<sup>6</sup>. In the Indian context, homestays have emerged as a key rural tourism strategy promoted by both government agencies and civil society organizations to integrate tourism with local lifestyles rather than replacing them (Singh, 2018)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Scheyvens, R. (1999). Ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities. *Tourism Management*, 20(2), 245–249.

<sup>6</sup> Kontogeorgopoulos, N., Churyen, A., & Duangsaeng, V. (2015). *Homestay tourism and the commercialization of the rural home in Thailand*. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 20(1), 29–50.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). (2018). *Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals – Journey to 2030*. Madrid: UNWTO.

## 2.2 Homestay Tourism and Rural Livelihoods in India

Several studies highlight the livelihood potential of homestay tourism in India, especially in hill states, tribal areas, and remote rural regions. Homestays have been shown to supplement agricultural incomes, reduce seasonal migration, and create employment opportunities for women and youth (Bhat & Mishra, 2021)<sup>8</sup>. By linking tourism with local food systems, handicrafts, and cultural practices, homestays enable diversified income streams while strengthening rural economies.

Policy-oriented literature, including articles published in *Kurukshetra*, emphasizes homestays as instruments of inclusive rural development. A *Kurukshetra* article on rural tourism notes that homestays empower villagers to become tourism entrepreneurs without relinquishing ownership over land or cultural assets. The magazine repeatedly underscores the role of homestays in aligning tourism with Gandhian principles of self-reliance and decentralization, particularly in aspirational districts and border areas.

## 2.3 Grassroots Tourism Governance

Governance has emerged as a central analytical lens in tourism studies, referring to the formal and informal arrangements through which tourism activities are regulated, coordinated, and controlled (Bramwell & Lane, 2011)<sup>9</sup>. Grassroots governance emphasizes participatory decision-making, community norms, and locally negotiated rules rather than top-down regulation alone. In homestay tourism, governance often operates through community agreements on pricing, quality standards, visitor conduct, and environmental practices.

Indian studies highlight the role of women's self-help groups, cooperatives, and Panchayati Raj institutions in mediating tourism governance at the village level (Nair & Hamzah, 2015)<sup>10</sup>. *Kurukshetra* has documented several cases where SHGs manage homestay registration, rotational hosting systems, and revenue distribution, thereby ensuring equitable benefit-sharing and reducing internal conflicts<sup>11</sup>. Such decentralized governance mechanisms are crucial for sustaining trust and accountability within community-managed tourism models.

## 2.4 Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals

Tourism has been formally recognized by the United Nations as a sector capable of contributing to multiple Sustainable Development Goals. Scholars argue that community-based tourism models are particularly well positioned to advance SDG 8 through local employment, SDG 11 through heritage preservation, SDG 12 through low-impact consumption practices, and SDG 15 through conservation-linked livelihoods (UNWTO, 2018)<sup>12</sup>.

However, literature cautions that tourism's contribution to the SDGs is not automatic and depends heavily on governance arrangements and ownership structures (Moscardo, 2019)<sup>13</sup>. In India, *Kurukshetra* articles on sustainable tourism stress that without community control and environmental safeguards, rural tourism risks replicating the inequalities of mass tourism. This underscores the importance of studying homestays not merely as livelihood tools but as governance systems shaping sustainable development outcomes<sup>14</sup>.

## 2.5 Case Study Context: Continuously Growing Community Homestay Villages

The selection of case studies for this research focused on villages where community-managed homestay tourism has shown sustained growth and institutional stability between 2019 and 2024. Rather than isolated

<sup>8</sup> Bhat, M. S., & Mishra, R. (2021). *Rural tourism and livelihood diversification in India*. *Journal of Rural Development*, 40(2), 215–230.

<sup>9</sup> Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (2011). *Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability*. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(4–5), 411–421.

<sup>10</sup> Nair, V., & Hamzah, A. (2015). *Successful community-based tourism approaches for rural destinations*. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 7(5), 429–439.

<sup>11</sup> *Kurukshetra*. (2021). *Community participation in sustainable tourism*. *Kurukshetra* (Government of India), 69(4), 18–22.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). (2018). *Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals – Journey to 2030*. Madrid: UNWTO.

<sup>13</sup> Moscardo, G. (2019). *Tourism, governance and the Sustainable Development Goals*. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 27(8), 1179–1195.

<sup>14</sup> *Kurukshetra*. (2022). *Tourism as a tool for inclusive rural growth*. *Kurukshetra* (Government of India), 70(6), 30–35.

pilot projects, these villages represent locations where homestays have become embedded within local governance structures and rural livelihoods.

Key cases include Sarmoli village in Uttarakhand, Bir and Sidhbari in Himachal Pradesh, Kumarakom in Kerala, Bishnoi villages near Jodhpur in Rajasthan, and Mawlynnong and Dzuleke in the North-Eastern region. These villages have experienced consistent increases in homestay participation, visitor inflows, and community involvement, supported by women's self-help groups, cooperatives, and village-level institutions.

These cases were selected because they demonstrate

- (i) community ownership of tourism enterprises,
- (ii) locally negotiated governance mechanisms such as pricing norms and hosting rotation, and
- (iii) alignment with state and national rural tourism and livelihood policies. The diversity of ecological and cultural settings across these villages allows for analytical comparison while strengthening the general relevance of the findings.

## 2.6 Research Gap

While existing literature acknowledges the economic and social benefits of homestay tourism, there is a noticeable gap in empirical studies that systematically examine homestays as grassroots governance institutions contributing to the SDGs across multiple regions in India. Most studies are either location-specific or focus narrowly on income generation, overlooking governance practices, environmental regulation, and community agency. This study addresses this gap by adopting a multi-region qualitative case study approach to analyze how community-managed homestay tourism operates as a governance-driven pathway toward sustainable development.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, multiple case study research design to examine community-managed homestay tourism as a form of grassroots tourism governance in India. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for understanding governance processes, community participation, and locally embedded practices that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone. Case study research allows for an in-depth exploration of social, institutional, and environmental dynamics within real-life contexts, especially where boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined.

The study focuses on homestay tourism initiatives as governance systems rather than merely as accommodation enterprises, enabling an analysis of how local decision-making, collective norms, and participatory institutions shape sustainable development outcomes.

### 3.2 Case Selection and Study Area

The research analyzes a set of community-managed homestay initiatives implemented between 2019 and 2024 across selected regions of India, namely Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Kerala, Rajasthan, and the North-Eastern states. These regions were purposively selected to reflect India's ecological, cultural, and socio-economic diversity, including Himalayan landscapes, coastal and forest regions, desert ecosystems, and tribal areas.

The selected cases share three defining characteristics:

1. Homestays are owned and operated by local households.
2. Tourism activities are supported or facilitated by civil society organizations, women's self-help groups (SHGs), cooperatives, or local governance institutions.
3. Governance mechanisms exist at the community level, such as shared standards, rotational hosting systems, pricing norms, or environmental guidelines.

This purposive sampling strategy aligns with qualitative research principles, emphasizing analytical depth and contextual richness over statistical generalization.

### 3.3 Data Sources

The study draws on **multiple qualitative data sources** to ensure triangulation and analytical rigor:

1. **Program Documents and Reports**-Project documents, operational guidelines, and monitoring reports prepared by civil society organizations, cooperatives, and government-supported rural tourism programs were reviewed to understand institutional structures and governance arrangements.
2. **Policy and Secondary Literature**-National and state-level tourism policies, rural development reports, and published academic literature on community-based tourism and homestays were analyzed to situate the case studies within broader policy and scholarly debates.<sup>8</sup>
3. **Village-Level Interviews**-Semi-structured interviews were conducted with homestay owners, SHG members, local coordinators, and community leaders to capture lived experiences, governance practices, and perceptions of tourism-related change. Interview questions focused on participation, benefit-sharing, decision-making processes, and environmental management.
4. **Field Observations**-Direct field observations were undertaken in selected villages to document homestay operations, visitor interactions, waste management practices, and community meetings. Observational data provided contextual insights into how governance rules operate in practice.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, following systematic coding and categorization of qualitative material. Initial codes were developed inductively from interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, focusing on themes such as livelihood generation, women's participation, governance mechanisms, environmental practices, and cultural preservation.

Subsequently, these themes were mapped against an SDG-aligned analytical framework, specifically examining linkages with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). This approach enabled the study to assess not only outcomes but also the governance processes through which these outcomes were achieved.

## 4. Findings

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the qualitative analysis of community-managed homestay initiatives implemented between 2019 and 2024 across selected regions of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Kerala, Rajasthan, and the North-Eastern states of India. The findings are organized thematically and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) examined in this study. The emphasis is on observable outcomes and governance practices, with interpretive analysis reserved for the discussion section.

### 4.1 Employment Generation and Income Diversification (SDG 8)

One of the most significant findings across all case study regions is the role of homestay tourism in generating decent and locally embedded employment. Homestays provided supplementary income to rural households that were otherwise dependent on agriculture, wage labor, or seasonal migration. In several hill and tribal regions, homestay earnings accounted for a substantial proportion of annual household income, particularly during peak tourist seasons.

Women and youth emerged as primary beneficiaries, with women taking lead roles in accommodation management, food preparation, and guest coordination. Youth were commonly engaged as local guides, drivers, and digital intermediaries handling bookings and online platforms. These employment opportunities were largely informal but locally controlled, reducing dependency on external tourism operators.

**Table 1: Employment and Income Outcomes from Community-Managed Homestays (2019–2024)**

| <i>Indicator</i>                                        | <i>Observed Range (Across Cases)</i> |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Average number of homestays per village</i>          | 12–35                                |
| <i>Average annual income per homestay household (₹)</i> | 80,000 – 2,50,000                    |
| <i>Share of women-led homestays (%)</i>                 | 45–70                                |

|                                                           |       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| <i>Local jobs created per village (direct + indirect)</i> | 25–90 |
| <i>Reduction in seasonal migration (%)</i>                | 20–40 |

Source: Compiled from project reports, village interviews, and field observations

4.2 Women’s Economic Participation and Social Empowerment

Across regions, women’s participation was a defining feature of homestay tourism governance. Women’s self-help groups (SHGs) played a central role in managing guest rotation systems, maintaining service standards, and overseeing collective decision-making. Participation in homestay operations enhanced women’s control over household income and increased their visibility in village-level economic activities.

In several cases, women reported increased confidence in interacting with tourists, government officials, and civil society organizations. Homestay income enabled women to contribute to household expenses, children’s education, and health-related expenditures. These outcomes align with broader rural development objectives and reinforce tourism’s role in advancing inclusive economic growth.

4.3 Grassroots Governance Mechanisms in Homestay Tourism

A core finding of the study relates to the presence of locally evolved governance mechanisms that regulated homestay operations. Rather than relying solely on external regulation, communities developed shared norms and rules to manage tourism activities. These included locally agreed-upon pricing structures, minimum service standards, visitor codes of conduct, and rotational hosting systems to ensure equitable distribution of benefits.

Village-level committees or SHG federations often functioned as monitoring bodies, resolving disputes, and ensuring compliance with environmental and social norms. Importantly, governance arrangements were flexible and context-specific, allowing communities to adapt rules in response to seasonal fluctuations and ecological constraints.

Table 2: Common Grassroots Governance Practices Identified Across Case Studies

| <i>Governance Practice</i>                    | <i>Presence Across Cases (%)</i> |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Shared pricing norms</i>                   | 80                               |
| <i>Community-level service standards</i>      | 75                               |
| <i>Rotational hosting systems</i>             | 60                               |
| <i>Participatory monitoring committees</i>    | 70                               |
| <i>Environmental rules (waste, water use)</i> | 85                               |

Source: Field interviews, SHG records, and program documentation

4.4 Responsible Tourism Practices and Environmental Stewardship (SDGs 12 & 15)

Environmental responsibility emerged as a key outcome of community-managed homestay tourism. Unlike mass tourism enterprises, homestays operated at a scale that encouraged resource-efficient practices. Communities introduced waste segregation, restrictions on plastic use, water conservation measures, and locally sourced food systems.

In ecologically sensitive regions, such as forested and Himalayan areas, homestay income reduced pressure on natural resources by offering alternatives to extractive livelihoods. Community guidelines limited tourist numbers during peak seasons and regulated access to fragile ecosystems, contributing directly to biodiversity conservation efforts.

Table 3: Environmental Practices Adopted by Homestay Communities

| <i>Practice</i>                         | <i>Adoption Rate (%)</i> |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Waste segregation and composting</i> | 70                       |

|                                          |    |
|------------------------------------------|----|
| <i>Plastic-use restrictions</i>          | 65 |
| <i>Use of local food and materials</i>   | 80 |
| <i>Visitor limits during peak season</i> | 55 |
| <i>Awareness activities for guests</i>   | 60 |

Source: Field observations and village-level records

#### 4.5 Cultural Preservation and Community Cohesion (SDG 11)

Homestay tourism also contributed to the preservation of local culture and heritage. Cultural performances, traditional cuisine, vernacular architecture, and storytelling formed integral parts of the tourist experience. Rather than commodifying culture, communities exercised control over how traditions were represented, often limiting performances to culturally appropriate contexts.

Participation in homestay governance strengthened social cohesion by fostering collective decision-making and shared responsibility. Revenue-sharing mechanisms reduced intra-community competition and reinforced trust among households. These outcomes highlight the role of homestays in supporting sustainable and resilient rural communities.

#### 4.6 Village-Level Case Studies of Booming Homestay Tourism

To contextualize the aggregate findings, this section highlights selected villages where community-managed homestay tourism has demonstrated **continuous and stable growth**, reinforcing the role of grassroots governance in sustaining tourism-led development.

##### 4.6.1 Sarmoli (Uttarakhand): Women-Led Governance and Ecological Stewardship

Sarmoli village presents a strong example of women-led homestay governance, where local women's groups play a central role in managing guest allocation, service standards, and environmental norms. Homestay income supplements agricultural livelihoods and has reduced seasonal male migration. Community rules regulating waste disposal, water use, and visitor behavior reflect a governance system rooted in ecological sensitivity and collective decision-making.

##### 4.6.2 Bir and Sidhbari (Himachal Pradesh): Community Regulation in a High-Growth Tourism Zone

In Bir and Sidhbari, rapid tourism growth linked to adventure and wellness tourism posed risks of commercialization. However, community-managed homestays moderated these pressures through shared pricing norms, limits on expansion, and coordination with local Panchayats. Homestays enabled households to participate in tourism markets without relinquishing land ownership or cultural identity.

##### 4.6.3 Kumarakom (Kerala): Institutionalized Community Participation

Kumarakom illustrates how community homestays can be integrated into a formal **Responsible Tourism framework**. Panchayat institutions and community groups coordinate homestay operations with environmental conservation initiatives linked to the backwater ecosystem. Local sourcing of food and services has strengthened backward linkages with agriculture and fisheries, enhancing community-wide economic benefits.

##### 4.6.4 Bishnoi Villages near Jodhpur (Rajasthan): Conservation-Oriented Tourism

Homestays in Bishnoi villages operate within a strong cultural ethic of wildlife and environmental conservation. Tourism activities are governed by community norms that restrict resource exploitation and regulate tourist interaction with local ecosystems. Homestay income supports conservation-friendly livelihoods, reinforcing alignment with environmental sustainability goals.

##### 4.6.5 Mawlynnong and Dzuleke (North-Eastern India): Village Council-Led Tourism Governance

In Mawlynnong and Dzuleke, traditional village councils play a central governance role in regulating homestays, visitor numbers, and environmental conduct. Community ownership of tourism assets and

collective monitoring mechanisms have helped manage tourism growth while preserving forest ecosystems and social cohesion.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of this study provide important insights into how community-managed homestay tourism, when embedded within grassroots governance structures, can function as a practical mechanism for advancing sustainable development objectives in India. Rather than treating homestays solely as income-generating activities, the analysis highlights their role as locally governed institutions that shape economic, social, and environmental outcomes. This section situates the empirical findings within existing literature on community-based tourism, governance, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

### **5.1 Homestay Tourism and Decent Work (SDG 8)**

The evidence from the case studies supports existing scholarship that positions community-based tourism as an effective strategy for inclusive employment generation and livelihood diversification. However, this study extends prior work by demonstrating that the quality and sustainability of employment outcomes are closely linked to local governance arrangements. The prevalence of women-led homestays and locally retained income indicates that governance mechanisms such as shared pricing norms and rotational hosting systems help prevent elite capture and uneven benefit distribution.

Unlike externally owned tourism enterprises, community-managed homestays enable households to retain control over labor conditions, working hours, and revenue allocation. This aligns with the emphasis of SDG 8 on productive employment and local entrepreneurship rather than precarious wage labor. The reduction in seasonal migration observed across regions further suggests that homestays contribute to economic stability, particularly in environmentally constrained rural settings.

### **5.2 Governance as a Driver of Women's Economic Participation**

A significant contribution of this study lies in highlighting the governance-mediated empowerment of women within homestay tourism. While earlier studies acknowledge women's involvement in rural tourism, this research shows that participation in collective governance structures-such as SHGs and village committees-enhances women's bargaining power and decision-making capacity beyond household-level economic gains.

The findings resonate with Scheyvens' empowerment framework, which emphasizes social and political empowerment alongside economic benefits. Women's engagement in rule-setting, monitoring, and negotiations with external agencies indicates a shift from passive participation to active governance. This governance-based empowerment strengthens the sustainability of tourism initiatives by embedding leadership and accountability within the community.

### **5.3 Grassroots Governance and Sustainable Tourism Management**

The study's findings reinforce governance-oriented tourism literature that stresses the importance of local rule-making and participatory monitoring in achieving sustainability outcomes. The presence of community-defined standards, environmental guidelines, and conflict-resolution mechanisms suggests that sustainability is not imposed externally but emerges through context-sensitive governance practices.

These findings challenge technocratic tourism models that rely heavily on centralized regulation. Instead, they support the argument that decentralized governance allows communities to respond flexibly to ecological limits, seasonal demand, and cultural sensitivities. The adaptability of governance rules observed across regions highlights the value of institutional diversity in tourism planning, particularly in a country as ecologically and socially varied as India.

### **5.4 Responsible Consumption, Conservation, and SDGs 12 and 15**

The alignment between community-managed homestays and responsible consumption and environmental conservation is a key insight of this study. Consistent with UNWTO's sustainability framework, the findings show that small-scale, community-owned tourism enterprises are better positioned to adopt low-impact practices such as waste segregation, plastic reduction, and resource-efficient food systems.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that environmental responsibility is reinforced through governance rather than individual behavior alone. Locally enforced visitor limits, codes of conduct, and community monitoring mechanisms enabled villages to manage tourism pressure on fragile ecosystems. This governance-based approach supports SDG 12 and SDG 15 by integrating conservation objectives with livelihood strategies, reducing dependence on extractive resource use.

### 5.5 Cultural Sustainability and Community Resilience (SDG 11)

The discussion of cultural preservation contributes to debates on whether tourism commodifies or sustains local culture. While critics argue that tourism often erodes cultural authenticity,<sup>10</sup> the findings suggest that community ownership and control can mitigate these risks. By regulating the form and frequency of cultural performances and maintaining authority over representation, communities retained agency over their cultural assets.

Furthermore, collective governance practices strengthened social cohesion and trust among households, contributing to community resilience. This supports the broader SDG 11 objective of building sustainable and inclusive communities. The governance dimension is critical here, as cultural sustainability depended not merely on tourism demand but on the community's ability to negotiate boundaries and shared values.

### 5.6 Policy Implications and Scalability

From a policy perspective, the findings indicate that homestay tourism can serve as a scalable development model when supported by enabling governance frameworks. Government programs that recognize and strengthen community institutions, rather than bypassing them, are more likely to achieve long-term sustainability. *Kurukshetra's* policy-oriented analyses similarly emphasize that rural tourism succeeds when communities retain ownership and decision-making authority.

However, scalability should not imply uniformity. The study underscores the need for context-specific governance models that respect ecological limits and social structures. Replication efforts must prioritize capacity-building, participatory planning, and institutional support rather than rapid commercialization.

### 5.7. Government Policies and Rural Development Programmes

The success of community-managed homestays in villages such as Sarmoli, Kumarakom, and Dzuleke demonstrates the effectiveness of government policies when aligned with local governance institutions. National initiatives such as the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, PRASHAD, and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) have provided enabling infrastructure, capacity-building, and institutional support, while state-level homestay policies in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand have facilitated household participation in tourism.

Rather than direct state control, these policies functioned most effectively when communities retained decision-making authority over tourism operations. This suggests that future tourism policy should prioritize strengthening grassroots governance capacities rather than promoting rapid commercialization, thereby enhancing the contribution of homestay tourism to sustainable and inclusive development.

## 6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine community-managed homestay tourism in India as a form of grassroots tourism governance and to assess its contribution to selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing on qualitative case studies from diverse ecological and socio-cultural regions between 2019 and 2024, the research demonstrates that homestay-based community tourism can function as an effective and inclusive development pathway when grounded in participatory governance and local ownership.

The findings indicate that community-managed homestays contribute meaningfully to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by generating locally embedded employment, diversifying rural incomes, and reducing dependence on seasonal migration. Importantly, these economic outcomes are shaped not merely by tourism demand but by community-level governance mechanisms that regulate pricing, hosting rotation, and benefit distribution. Such arrangements help prevent elite capture and ensure more equitable access to tourism benefits.

The study also highlights the role of homestay tourism in advancing SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities) through the preservation of cultural heritage, strengthening of social cohesion, and reinforcement of community resilience. By retaining control over how cultural practices are represented and shared with visitors, communities were able to negotiate the boundaries between cultural continuity and tourism engagement. These outcomes underscore the importance of community agency in determining the social sustainability of tourism development.

With respect to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), the research shows that small-scale, community-owned homestay models are better positioned to adopt environmentally responsible practices than large-scale commercial tourism enterprises. Locally enforced environmental guidelines, visitor codes of conduct, and participatory monitoring enabled communities to manage waste, regulate resource use, and limit tourism pressure on fragile ecosystems. The integration of conservation objectives with livelihood strategies reduced reliance on extractive resource use and aligned tourism with long-term ecological sustainability.

A key contribution of this study lies in reframing homestay tourism as a governance-driven development model rather than a peripheral or informal tourism activity. By emphasizing grassroots institutions such as women's self-help groups, cooperatives, and village committees, the research demonstrates how governance structures mediate the relationship between tourism and sustainable development outcomes. This perspective addresses a significant gap in existing tourism literature, which often overlooks the institutional dimensions of community-based tourism.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that tourism development strategies should prioritize strengthening local governance capacities rather than focusing solely on infrastructure expansion or market integration. Supportive policies, capacity-building initiatives, and flexible regulatory frameworks can enhance the scalability of community-managed homestays without undermining local autonomy.

While the study is limited by its qualitative design and purposive case selection, it offers valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. Future research could build on this work through longitudinal studies, comparative analyses with other countries, or mixed-methods approaches to further assess the long-term sustainability impacts of community-based homestay tourism. Overall, the study affirms the potential of community-owned and governed tourism models to transform tourism from an extractive economic activity into an inclusive and sustainable tool for development.

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