



The multifaceted role of tourism in less developed areas: A review

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Abstract

Tourism, one of the largest service industries in the world, is an important driver of economic development, employment generation, and investment attraction, particularly in well-developed areas of the world. However, studies dealing with its characteristics (such as benefits, challenges, and other aspects) in less-developed areas are not abundant. Even fewer are the studies synthesizing the findings of studies conducted in less-developed areas. Therefore, the present review work is an attempt to understand the multifaceted role of tourism, particularly in less-developed areas. In this work, we have attempted to review the economic, social, and developmental impacts of tourism in the earlier-mentioned areas, along with the challenges and opportunities it offers. This work is based on a comprehensive and systematic desk review of relevant studies conducted in different parts of the world. Subsequently, the emerging and repetitive themes were identified, which include tourism as a catalyst for regional development, spatial inequalities, livelihood diversification through rural and niche tourism, governance and community participation, resource-based tourism, innovation, and the obstacles to sustainable growth of tourism in such areas. These findings highlight the uneven distribution of tourism benefits, with well-developed destinations attracting the majority of investment and visitors, while marginal regions struggle to realize their potential. The work also highlights five recurring determinants for successful tourism development in less developed areas, which are stronger governance, effective and inclusive community participation, robust infrastructure, sustainability, and inclusion of innovation.

Keywords: Tourism, less developed areas, sustainable tourism drivers, challenges

Introduction

The United Nations is preparing for the International Year of Sustainable and Resilient Tourism in 2027, highlighting the significance of tourism. It is widely recognized as an important driver of economic development, employment generation, and investment attraction, especially in remote and marginalized areas. At the global level, the tourism and hospitality sector directly contribute approximately 3.5% to global GDP as of 2024^[49], while at the same time, its share of GDP in Europe was about 7.1% in 2024^[64], whereas tourism contributes about US \$ 71.5 billion to India's GDP (UN Tourism website). Further, in 2025^[65], G-20 countries dominated international tourist arrivals, accounting for 68.2% of the total, while the 27 European Union countries made up about 39%. In contrast, landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and the least developed countries (LDCs) received only about 3.9% and 2.0% of international tourist arrivals, respectively (UN Tourism website), which clearly demonstrates the highly uneven distribution of tourism benefits. With earnings of US\$1,332 billion out of the global total of US\$1,884 billion, G-20 countries again get the lion's share in international tourism receipts. In contrast, LLDCs and LDCs respectively received only meagre US\$21.6 billion and US\$20.6 billion during the same period.

Tourism presents significant opportunities to harness natural, traditional, and cultural resources to generate

sustainable economic benefits for local communities. Therefore, the development of tourism in less developed areas is considered very suitable for advancing them, as it fosters local economic growth and enhances the overall development of destination regions while preserving their traditional culture (Kaptan *et al*, 2020)^[1]. Further, the economic benefits of tourism have been largely concentrated in well-known destinations, leading to over-tourism and environmental strain in these areas. While the popular destinations experience high tourist footfall, in contrast, many less-explored regions, particularly in backward areas, remain underdeveloped and economically disadvantaged, despite having significant tourism potential. As a result, these areas face issues such as limited livelihood opportunities and migration of the local population to urban centres in search of employment. Undoubtedly, tourism can act as a catalyst for the economic growth of the region, but unplanned or mass tourism at the same time can also lead to severe negative consequences, such as environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, and cultural homogenization.

Therefore, it is imperative to explore and understand the sustainable tourism practices that, in addition to boosting the local economy, can also preserve the ecological balance and cultural identity of these regions. Studies dealing with tourism in well-developed areas are abundant; however, studies dealing with less-developed areas are relatively

scarce. Further, even fewer are the studies that synthesize the findings of studies conducted in less-developed areas, which can be utilized to understand the various aspects of tourism in such areas. Therefore, the present review work is an attempt to understand the multifaceted role of tourism, particularly in less-developed areas.

Methodology

A comprehensive systematic review was conducted to achieve the objective of the present study. For this purpose, the open-source scientific research database Dimensions AI was used to search for relevant studies. Keywords such as "tourism" and "less developed area" were used, and a word search was conducted in the titles and abstracts of all available documents. About 170 such studies were identified in the database. The works were further scrutinized, and only research articles were included: book chapters and other communication document types were excluded. Due to language limitations, only the articles written in the English language were considered. After manual observation, irrelevant works were also excluded. Subsequently, about 83 works were found to be relevant for our study and were used for analysis. After a comprehensive review of these works, their major findings/results were analyzed, and emerging themes were identified and described in detail.

Results

This review examines the multifaceted role of tourism in less developed areas, with particular attention to its impacts, opportunities, and persistent challenges. The findings from the reviewed works were analyzed, and the following themes emerged during the entire process.

Theme 1: Tourism as a catalyst for regional development

Throughout the world, tourism is considered an important catalyst for economic development, employment generation, and investment attraction. This is also true for less developed areas within both developed and developing countries. Tourism creates a chain of employment opportunities, helps in economic diversification, and contributes immensely to regional growth. Studies conducted in different parts of the world such as in China (Huang *et al.*, 2011; Xu, 2013), Norway (Hausner *et al.*, 2015)^[27, 30, 67], and Russia (Litvinenko, 2026) all reveal that tourism has a high potential to accelerate economic growth and development, provided sufficient resources, good quality governance, and a high degree of integration with local economies exist. Table 1 summarizes the major studies in which tourism has been considered a strong catalyst for regional development.

Table 1: Key Studies on Tourism as a Catalyst for Regional Development

Findings	Reference
Tourism can promotes economic growth at different scales e.g., national, regional, and local: sustainable planning is essential.	(Ioannides, 1995) ^[31]
Backpacker tourism may strengthen local economic linkages and reduces poverty.	(Hampton, 2013) ^[26]
It acts as alternative development pathway for less-developed countries.	(Leung, 2002) ^[42]
It may contribute in reducing regional disparities by stimulating developing in peripheral regions.	(Krakover, 2004) ^[39]
It contributes more strongly to growth in inland and less-developed regions.	(Li <i>et al.</i> , 2025)
Success depends on local resources, economic conditions, and institutional support.	(Xu, 2013, p. 19)
Infrastructure and planning are critical for tourism-led development.	(Gregorová, 2018) ^[23]

Theme 2. Spatial inequalities and regional disparities in tourism

Despite the potential benefits of tourism, the majority of less developed tourism destinations are characterized by their remote locations, insufficient infrastructure, poor and seasonal connectivity, and economic marginalization. As a result, the distribution of tourism benefits is highly uneven, with less developed areas facing distinct developmental challenges within the broader tourism market (Stamenković & Milanović, 2023; Volkova *et al.*, 2024)^[61, 64].

Many studies have reported that spatial inequalities are highly pronounced in tourism development, where established or well-developed tourist destinations attract the lion's share of investment and a very high number of tourists. At the same time, marginal and less developed locations struggle to access such benefits. For instance, according to the UN Tourism May 2026^[57] report, the European Union received a significant percentage of the total global tourist inflow. In contrast, LLDCs and LDCs received a very meagre share (UN Tourism website). Further studies have identified certain determinants of regional tourism success, including strong infrastructure, good accessibility, institutional capacity, and greater investment opportunities (Coppola & De Fabiis, 2023)^[11].

Scholars like Alampay & Gutierrez (2025) and Timothy (1999) have further reported that regional cooperation and cross-border tourism may reduce the degree of isolation, but to reduce disparities, targeted interventions such as improved connectivity and context-specific development strategies are required. Table 2 presents studies highlighting spatial inequalities and regional disparities in tourism.

Table 2: Key Studies on Spatial Inequalities and Regional Disparities

Findings	Reference
Tourism development remains concentrated in established destinations.	(Volkova <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[64]
Significant tourism disparities exist among regions.	(Stamenković & Milanović, 2023) ^[61]
Tourism growth often occurs alongside persistent spatial inequalities.	(Zhang <i>et al.</i> , 2023)
Transport infrastructure can reduce or reinforce inequalities.	(Coppola & De Fabiis, 2023) ^[11]
Subsidies alone are insufficient to reduce regional disparities.	(Chrysanthi <i>et al.</i> , 2021)
Cross-border cooperation supports peripheral development.	(Azarkova <i>et al.</i> , 2023)
Regional development gaps persist despite integration efforts.	(OECD, 2013)

Theme 3: Rural, agro-tourism and niche tourism for livelihood diversification

Studies conducted by (Hampton, 2013; Hidayat *et al.*, 2023; Horvat, 2010; Klakocar & Pavic, 2024; Malhotra, 2024; Moon *et al.*, 2021; Pato *et al.*, 2021) ^[26, 28, 29, 37, 51, 55] have reported that rural and niche tourism—such as agro-tourism, wellness tourism, farm tourism, magical tourism, and gastronomic tourism—are providing alternative pathways for income diversification and employment in less developed areas, while also decreasing dependence on

traditional agricultural livelihoods. As a result, these forms of tourism, by diversifying the regional economy, also enhance the resilience of communities. They contribute to the preservation and promotion of local culture and identity. The sustainable, long-term success of these forms of tourism depends upon effective marketing, strong stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable practices. In contrast to mass tourism, which is less locally embedded, forms such as agro-tourism and other types of niche tourism yield greater benefits for local communities.

Table 3: Key Studies on Rural, Agritourism, and Niche Tourism for Livelihood Diversification

Findings	Reference
Wellness tourism promotes rural development and creates employment opportunities.	(Horvat, 2010) ^[29]
Wine tourism diversifies rural economies.	(Pato <i>et al.</i> , 2021) ^[55]
Rural tourism supports diversification and sustainable development.	(Petukhova <i>et al.</i> , 2023)
Information, education, and training are critical for success.	(Fairer-Wessels, 2016)
Product diversification and marketing strengthen rural tourism.	(Dai <i>et al.</i> , 2025)
Agrowellness tourism creates value-added opportunities.	(Klakocar & Pavic, 2024) ^[37]
Agritourism supports poverty reduction and rural development.	(Patterson & Aslam, 2024) ^[56]
Agritourism preserves rural identity and attracts new visitors.	(Vythoulka <i>et al.</i> , 2025) ^[65]
Sustainable farm tourism requires social and environmental integration.	(Đerčan <i>et al.</i> , 2023)

Theme 4: Governance, community participation, and institutional support

Studies like (Alvarez *et al.*, 2014) ^[2] have investigated the essential components for the success of tourism initiatives, especially in remote areas around the world. They have reported that effective governance, strong and sustained institutional support, and collaborative, meaningful community participation are prerequisites for success in tourism endeavours. Community participation in

governance and planning ensures active involvement (Edwin *et al.*, 2017) ^[18], improves planning processes and can make it more inclusive (Blancas *et al.*, 2011; Kontogeorgopoulos *et al.*, 2014) ^[7, 38], may strengthens heritage and cultural conservation (Kessel *et al.*, 2017) ^[36], and boosts community ownership of tourism initiatives (Sari *et al.*, 2026) ^[59]. These factors also promote entrepreneurship and social inclusion, particularly within marginalized populations.

Table 4: Varied forms of Niche tourism

Tourism Type	Development Contribution	Reference
Backpacker Tourism	Strong local linkages and poverty reduction.	(M. P. Hampton, 2013) ^[26]
Wellness Tourism	Rural employment generation.	(Klakocar & Pavic, 2024) ^[37]
Film Tourism	Increased visibility and revenues.	(L. Liu <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[47]
Religious Tourism	Infrastructure and employment growth.	(Lin <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Malhotra, 2024) ^[44, 49]
Ecotourism (in its varied forms)	Conservation and diversification.	d’Hauteserre, 2016; Moon <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Munthe <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[12, 51, 64]
Agritourism	Rural value addition and employment	(Jęczyk <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Kerma & Gačnik, 2015; Patterson & Aslam, 2024; Valdivia & Barbieri, 2014; Vythoulka <i>et al.</i> , 2025) ^[35, 56, 63, 65]
Rural Wellbeing Tourism	Economic resilience and diversification.	(Aluculesei & Avram, 2020) ^[1]
Fishery Ecotourism	Livelihood diversification.	(Uddin <i>et al.</i> , 2021) ^[62]
Gastronomic/culinary Tourism	Destination branding and promotion of culture.	(Brien, 2014; Kerma & Gačnik, 2015; Pato <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Pavlović <i>et al.</i> , 2026; Wardoyo & Latif, 2018; M. Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[9, 35, 55, 57, 66, 68]
Medical Tourism	Economic benefits with regulatory requirements.	(Cajiao, 2023; George, 2022) ^[10, 20]

Theme 5: Cultural and natural resource-based tourism: Heritage, nature, and sustainability

In less developed areas, natural and cultural resources are considered the foundation of tourism development. Biodiversity, scenic beauty, picturesque and pristine landscapes, adventure trails, and cultural heritage such as fairs and festivals, religious occasions, traditional practices, gastronomy, and cultural landscapes all collectively create distinctive tourism attractions that appeal to a wide range of visitors worldwide. Tourism based on these resources can generate considerable economic, social, and environmental benefits. Cultural and heritage tourism, in particular, can provide a boost to the preservation of local identities and traditions, foster community engagement, and encourage

social innovation and regional integration (Edwin *et al.*, 2017; Gumbo *et al.*, 2025; Mitrică *et al.*, 2020; Nyaupane, 2019) ^[18, 24, 50, 54].

On the other hand, nature-based tourism—also known by various other names—can stimulate conservation efforts while achieving economic development and community welfare. In addition to generating employment and raising environmental awareness, these forms of tourism can contribute to incentivizing biodiversity conservation. Studies conducted in different areas have reported that, when managed effectively, tourism based on natural resources can lead to community welfare and support sustainable resource management (Fafouti *et al.*, 2023; Lei *et al.*, 2022; Mitrică *et al.*, 2020; Pavlović *et al.*, 2026; Zhuang, 2023) ^{[19, 41, 50, 57,}

^{70]}. Despite these advantages, the true potential of natural and cultural resource-based tourism is generally underutilized due to factors such as insufficient infrastructure, ineffective marketing, poor institutional support, and lack of good governance. Without environmental safeguards, equitable benefit-sharing, and active community participation, tourism may contribute to resource degradation, social conflicts, and erosion of local values—instead of development, it may lead to destruction and degradation (d’Hauteserre, 2016; Zhuang, 2023) ^[12, 70]. At the same time, specialized and niche tourism forms such as agritourism, wellness tourism, and gastronomic tourism are rapidly emerging as alternatives to mass tourism. These

models typically demonstrate stronger local engagement, lower environmental impacts or carbon footprints, and more optimal use of local resources, which in turn result in enhanced benefits to the community and more sustainable development. However, the success of these forms of tourism depends on investment in infrastructure, effective marketing, good governance, and a commitment to sustainability (Cajiao, 2023; Horvat, 2010; Malhotra, 2024) ^[10, 29, 49]. Integrated and comprehensive approaches that strategically invest in and manage both natural and cultural assets are required to promote sustainable local development, stimulate economic growth, and support the preservation of unique regional identities and ecosystems.

Table 5: Key Studies on Cultural Heritage and Nature-Based Tourism

Major Contribution	Reference
Cultural routes may support conservation and development of heritage.	(Fafouti <i>et al.</i> , 2023) ^[19]
Heritage tourism may leads to village revitalization.	(Lei <i>et al.</i> , 2022) ^[41]
Gastronomic festivals strengthen destination image.	(Pavlović <i>et al.</i> , 2026) ^[57]
Religious tourism stimulates local employment and infrastructure.	(Malhotra, 2024) ^[49]
Film tourism increases destination visibility and revenues.	(L. Liu <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[47]
Cultural tourism potential remains underutilized due to weak promotion and infrastructure.	(Mitrică <i>et al.</i> , 2020) ^[50]
Protected areas generate tourism opportunities but also local concerns.	(Spenceley & Snyman, 2017) ^[60]
Tourism supports development in biodiversity-rich regions.	(Huang <i>et al.</i> , 2011) ^[30]
Ecotourism diversifies economies but requires infrastructure.	(Basyir <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[5]
Ecotourism supports employment and conservation.	(Batyrbekova <i>et al.</i> , 2025) ^[6]
Protected areas provide conservation and livelihood benefits.	(Ghosh-Harihar <i>et al.</i> , 2019) ^[21]
Fishery-based ecotourism enhances resilience and livelihoods.	Uddin <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Tourism may create land-use conflicts around protected areas.	(Hausner <i>et al.</i> , 2015) ^[27]
Bird watching and wildlife-based tourism can help in spreading awareness about biodiversity and encourage conservation efforts	(Basnet <i>et al.</i> , 2021) ^[4]

Theme 6: Innovation, competitiveness, and destination development

Innovation and emerging technology are becoming increasingly important for the development of tourism, particularly in less wealthy areas that are otherwise characterized by limited market access and competitiveness. Modern information technologies are capable of creating new opportunities for the promotion of tourism and associated activities, effective management of visitors and resources, and improved decision-making and transparent resource sharing (Alves *et al.*, 2025; L. Liu *et al.*, 2024) ^[3, 47].

Many studies, such as Danese *et al.* (2025), Habib *et al.* (2024), and Yang *et al.* (2025) ^[13, 25, 69], have reported that innovation and digitization can enhance tourism competitiveness and destination performance. Furthermore, they have also reported that technologies like digital marketing platforms, artificial intelligence, and blockchain significantly improve visibility, management, and coordination. These technological innovations are especially valuable for remote areas seeking to overcome geographical disadvantages and expand their market reach. The use of digital tools is an important mechanism for boosting tourism in less developed regions.

Table 6: Key Studies on Innovation, Competitiveness, and Destination Development

Major Contribution	Reference
Digital technology improves marketing and branding.	(L. Liu <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[47]
Events provide low-cost destination promotion.	(Lingeberzins, 2024) ^[45]
Innovation is essential for competitiveness.	(Godlewski, 2020) ^[22]
Blockchain improves transparency and sustainability.	(Porcaro <i>et al.</i> , 2025) ^[58]
Digital tools enhances tourism planning.	(Danese <i>et al.</i> , 2025) ^[13]
AI improves governance and management efficiency.	(Alves <i>et al.</i> , 2025) ^[3]

Theme 7: Barriers and challenges to sustainable tourism development

Despite all the earlier-mentioned advantages, tourism in less developed areas also faces several institutional, structural, and practical challenges. These hurdles limit the capacity of destinations to attract visitors, utilize their resources optimally, gain positive economic returns, and achieve intended results (Liu, 2003) ^[48]. Primary constraints to the development of tourism in less developed areas include insufficient infrastructure, limited and often seasonal accessibility, limited institutional support, meager

investment, inadequate and ineffective marketing, and a shortage of skilled persons. Additionally, destinations in less developed areas often face investment challenges, market isolation, and very limited diversification of products to attract tourists. Environmental fragility and climate-related hazards further complicate these challenges. Overcoming these multiple and interrelated hurdles requires very effective and integrated planning, such as, clear and sound policy framework, focused investment, continuous capacity building, and effective implementation strategy the development of tourism in ecologically sensitive areas also

creates sustainability challenges, as it may put strain on natural resources, disturb their ecosystem, pose a threat to the culture and social fabric of local communities, along with the increasing threat of deculturization and detraditionalization.

In addition to these, Tourism has become a serious challenge to environmental sustainability, especially in protected areas (such as wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, etc.) that require comprehensive planning, minimal disturbance, and strong government regulations in order to ensure conservation while gaining economic benefits (Gumbo *et al.*, 2025)^[24].

Table 7: Major Constraints Identified Across the Literature

Constraint	References
Weak infrastructure	(Basyir <i>et al.</i> , 2024; Gregorová, 2018; Mitrică <i>et al.</i> , 2020) ^[5, 23, 50]
Limited accessibility	(Coppola & De Fabiis, 2023; Volkova <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[11, 64]
Weak marketing and branding	(Pato <i>et al.</i> , 2021) ^[55]
Limited institutional capacity	(Cárdenas-García, 2024; Xu, 2013)
Insufficient stakeholder cooperation	(Moric, 2013) ^[52]
Spatial inequalities	(Stamenković & Milanović, 2023; Zhang <i>et al.</i> , 2023) ^[61]
Pressure on environmental sustainability	(Dudek <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[14]
Governance limitations	(Alvarez <i>et al.</i> , 2014) ^[2]
Socio-cultural pressures	(Dudek <i>et al.</i> , 2024) ^[14]
Increased carbon emissions and pollution	(Zhuang, 2023) ^[70]

Theme 8: Integrated synthesis of most crucial determinants for success of tourism in less developed areas

Throughout all the earlier mentioned themes, certain crucial determinants have emerged repeatedly for the success of tourism in the less developed areas throughout the world. These recurring determinants combinely can ensure the success of tourism operations. Firstly, there should be a very clear and effective policy framework, good governance, and strong institutions to implement policies effectively (Edgell, 2015; Junevičius & Albrektas, 2017)^[16, 34]. Secondly, there should be active participation of the community, and the government should ensure that this participation is inclusive (Edwin *et al.*, 2017; Jaafar *et al.*, 2017)^[18]. Thirdly, robust infrastructure is required for improved and year-round accessibility alongwith sufficient amenities to cater to the needs of the tourists (Echeverri *et al.*, 2022)^[15]. Fourthly, tourism operation must be committed to the sustainability principles (Blancas *et al.*, 2011; Hidayat *et al.*, 2023; Spenceley & Snyman, 2017)^[7, 28, 60] and conservation of nature and resources (Basnet *et al.*, 2021; Gumbo *et al.*, 2025; Kessel *et al.*, 2017)^[4, 24, 36]. And finally, for integration with the market, diversification of products, conservation of nature, etc., operators and governments may rely upon innovation (Alves *et al.*, 2025; Edwards *et al.*, 2008; Godlewski, 2020; Lebe & Milfelner, 2006^[3, 17, 22, 40]; X. Li, 2022).

Conclusions

This review work reflects that tourism holds significant potential for advancing economic development, employment, and poverty alleviation in less developed areas. However, realizing these benefits remains constrained

by structural weaknesses, infrastructural shortages, and governance challenges. Success in leveraging tourism for sustainable and inclusive growth depends on a combination of effective governance, strong community engagement, strategic investment in infrastructure, and a commitment to sustainability and innovation at the level of both the community and government levels. Addressing spatial disparities and implementing context-specific approaches are crucial for maximizing tourism's positive impacts while minimizing environmental and cultural risks. Ultimately, a holistic, multi-dimensional strategy is required to transform tourism into a true driver of development, resilience, and cultural preservation in less developed regions.

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