Inclusive Tourism Development in the Post-Pandemic Era: Community Participation, Benefit Sharing and Institutional Barriers at Ikogosi Warm Springs, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive tourism development requires meaningful community participation, equitable benefit sharing, and transparent institutional arrangements. However, tourism destinations may generate economic opportunities without ensuring that host communities participate effectively in decision making or receive a fair share of tourism benefits. This study examined community participation, benefit sharing, and institutional barriers to inclusive tourism development at Ikogosi Warm Spring, Ekiti State, Nigeria, in the post-pandemic era. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, using data obtained from 100 respondents across four stakeholder groups: residents, tourism operators, government and tourism officials, and community leaders and NGO representatives. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and open-ended questions and analysed using descriptive statistics, chi-square analysis, and thematic analysis. The findings revealed a low perceived level of community engagement in tourism planning and decision-making, with an overall mean score of 2.36. Perceptions of fair benefit sharing were also low, with a mean score of 2.09, although respondents acknowledged tourism-related employment opportunities and benefits to local businesses, with mean scores of 3.43 and 3.69, respectively. Institutional challenges included power imbalances (mean = 3.95), external stakeholder dominance in decision-making (mean = 3.90), and inadequate transparency in benefit sharing (mean = 3.77). Respondents also reported that post-pandemic recovery efforts insufficiently addressed local needs, while the perceived inclusiveness of tourism after the pandemic received a mean score of 1.99. The qualitative findings further highlighted exclusion from decision-making, unequal revenue distribution, and limited accountability. The study concludes that the inclusive tourism potential of Ikogosi Warm Spring remains constrained by weak community representation and inadequate benefit-sharing arrangements. It recommends stronger community representation in tourism governance, transparent revenue sharing, local enterprise support, and participatory recovery planning. The findings underscore the importance of institutional accountability and community empowerment in promoting more equitable and sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Inclusive tourism, community participation, benefit sharing, tourism governance, institutional barriers, post-pandemic recovery, Ikogosi Warm Spring, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry has undergone one of the most severe crises in modern history due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic in early 2020. The pandemic triggered widespread lockdowns, border closures, and stringent public health measures that brought international and domestic travel to a near standstill (UNWTO, 2021). According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021), international tourist arrivals declined by 73% in 2020 compared to the previous year, resulting in a loss of over $1.3 trillion in export revenues, more than 11 times the loss experienced during the 2009 global financial crisis.

This unprecedented disruption not only affected airlines, hotels, and travel agencies but also had cascading effects on destination economies, particularly those reliant on tourism for employment and income generation. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the tourism value chain were disproportionately impacted, with many forced to close permanently or operate at reduced capacity (Gössling & Hall, 2021). In developing countries, where tourism often serves as a catalyst for rural development and poverty alleviation, the economic fallout was especially devastating.

In response to this crisis, the post-pandemic recovery phase has seen a growing emphasis on rebuilding tourism systems that are not only resilient to future shocks but also more sustainable and inclusive. There is increasing recognition that traditional tourism models, often characterized by mass tourism, environmental degradation, and socio-economic inequities, are no longer viable in a world grappling with climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality (Hall 2019). As such, there is a global push towards transformative approaches that prioritize sustainability, community empowerment, and equitable benefit distribution (Dredge, 2019).

Tourism development in Nigeria reflects governance challenges also reported in other African contexts, particularly the dominance of government and other powerful stakeholders in planning and decision-making, alongside limited opportunities for local communities to exercise meaningful influence over tourism development and benefit sharing (Adebayo & Butcher, 2022; Eyisi, Lee, & Trees, 2021). Despite its rich cultural heritage and diverse natural attractions, Nigeria's tourism sector remains underdeveloped and underutilized as a tool for inclusive growth. This is partly due to weak governance structures, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of coherent policy frameworks that integrate local populations into tourism planning and development processes (Eyisi et al., 2021)

The Ikogosi Warm Spring in Ekiti State, southwestern Nigeria, represents a distinctive natural attraction with considerable potential for tourism development. Located in Ikogosi-Ekiti in Ekiti West Local Government Area, the site is renowned for the unusual convergence of warm and cold springs, which flow alongside one another and meet while retaining distinct thermal characteristics (Oladipo et al., 2005; Ekiti State Government, 2012a). Beyond its geological uniqueness, the spring has cultural and spiritual significance for the local community, with traditional accounts describing its historical role as a place of worship and spiritual intercession (Ekiti State Government, 2012b). Its natural landscape, distinctive spring system, and cultural heritage have contributed to its recognition as an important tourism and ecotourism attraction in southwestern Nigeria.

Community participation in the management and development of Ikogosi Warm Spring remains an important issue in understanding the inclusiveness of tourism at the destination. Residents have opportunities to derive livelihoods from tourism-related activities, while the spring contributes to income generation and other socioeconomic benefits within the host community. However, evidence suggests that these benefits have not been distributed equally. Orimaye (2018) found that many residents perceived government and tourism staff, a substantial proportion of whom were non-indigenes, as benefiting more from the destination than local people. The study also reported concerns about restricted local access to natural resources and recommended greater involvement of indigenes in the daily management of the tourism centre. More recent research by Orimaye et al. (2025) similarly found that residents perceived their participation in ecotourism planning, stakeholder collaboration and revenue sharing as limited, highlighting the need for more substantive community involvement and equitable benefit distribution.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the livelihood vulnerabilities of people dependent on tourism at Ikogosi Warm Spring. Orimaye et al. (2022) reported that the pandemic disrupted ecotourism activities and affected local service providers. Their findings indicated that 91.67% of respondents reported unemployment associated with the pandemic, while 97.5% reported a reduction in income and 97.5% indicated that they had received no assistance. These findings demonstrate the vulnerability of tourism-dependent livelihoods to external shocks and reinforce the need for inclusive recovery measures that support local enterprises, strengthen community participation and improve the distribution of tourism benefits.These issues underscore the importance of examining how inclusive tourism principles such as participatory governance, equitable benefit-sharing, and cultural preservation are being implemented or undermined at Ikogosi Warm Spring in the post-pandemic era. Inclusive tourism, as defined by the UNWTO (2020), refers to a model that ensures all stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups and host communities, have equal access to opportunities and

benefits derived from tourism activities. It emphasizes transparency, accountability, and active participation in planning and decision-making processes.

Thus, the case of Ikogosi Warm Spring offers a valuable opportunity to explore the practical application of inclusive tourism principles in a post-pandemic context. By analyzing how the pandemic affected community engagement and benefit-sharing arrangements at the site, this study contributes to broader discussions on how tourism can be reimagined as a driver of inclusive and sustainable development in Nigeria and similar settings across Africa.

Study Area

The Ikogosi Warm Spring, locally known as "Oke-Ogun" among the Yoruba-speaking people, is a unique natural geothermal site located in Ikogosi-Ekiti town within Ekiti State, Southwest Nigeria. The Ikogosi Warm Spring is located in Ikogosi-Ekiti, Ekiti West Local Government Area of Ekiti State, southwestern Nigeria, at approximately latitude 7°35′N and longitude 5°00′E (Abraham et al., 2014). The Ikogosi Warm Spring is a distinctive natural geothermal feature located in Ikogosi-Ekiti, Ekiti West Local Government Area of Ekiti State, southwestern Nigeria (Abraham et al., 2014; Oladipo et al., 2005). It lies approximately 35 kilometers northeast of Ado-Ekiti, the state capital, and is easily accessible via the major road linking Ibadan and Akure. The warm spring is notable for its rare geological feature where a stream of naturally warm water flows parallel to a cold water stream without mixing, creating a distinctive ecological and aesthetic attraction that has drawn both local and international attention.

Geologically, the Ikogosi Warm Spring is associated with fractures and faults within the underlying quartzite and basement rocks, which provide pathways for groundwater to circulate underground and emerge at the surface at an elevated temperature. Published studies have recorded warm spring water temperatures of approximately 37°C to 38.5°C, although measurements vary among sources and sampling locations (Abraham et al., 2014; Oladipo et al., 2005).

This phenomenon is attributed to the region’s basement complex rock formations, which are common across parts of Southwest Nigeria. The mineral composition of the warm water has also been associated with therapeutic properties, contributing to the site's historical use for medicinal and spiritual purposes by indigenous communities.

Culturally, Ikogosi Warm Spring holds traditional and spiritual significance for the local community. Historical accounts indicate that the spring was traditionally regarded as sacred and served as a place of worship and spiritual intercession. Local folklore also explains the origin of the warm and cold springs through a story about two wives whose contrasting temperaments were transformed into the two springs. These cultural narratives contribute to the heritage value of the site, complementing its geological uniqueness and tourism appeal (Ekiti State Government, 2012a; Ogunsajo & Adejumo, 2024).

Ecologically, the spring is surrounded by evergreen trees and a landscape characterised by hills and natural vegetation, which enhance its potential for ecotourism and nature-based recreation. Research on the ecological characteristics of the Ikogosi Warm Spring watershed has documented diverse plant species, while landscape regeneration proposals have emphasised the importance of nature walks, walkways and the conservation of existing vegetation. These features provide opportunities to strengthen environmental education, nature appreciation and sustainable tourism development (Olujobi, 2019; Ogunsajo & Adejumo, 2024).

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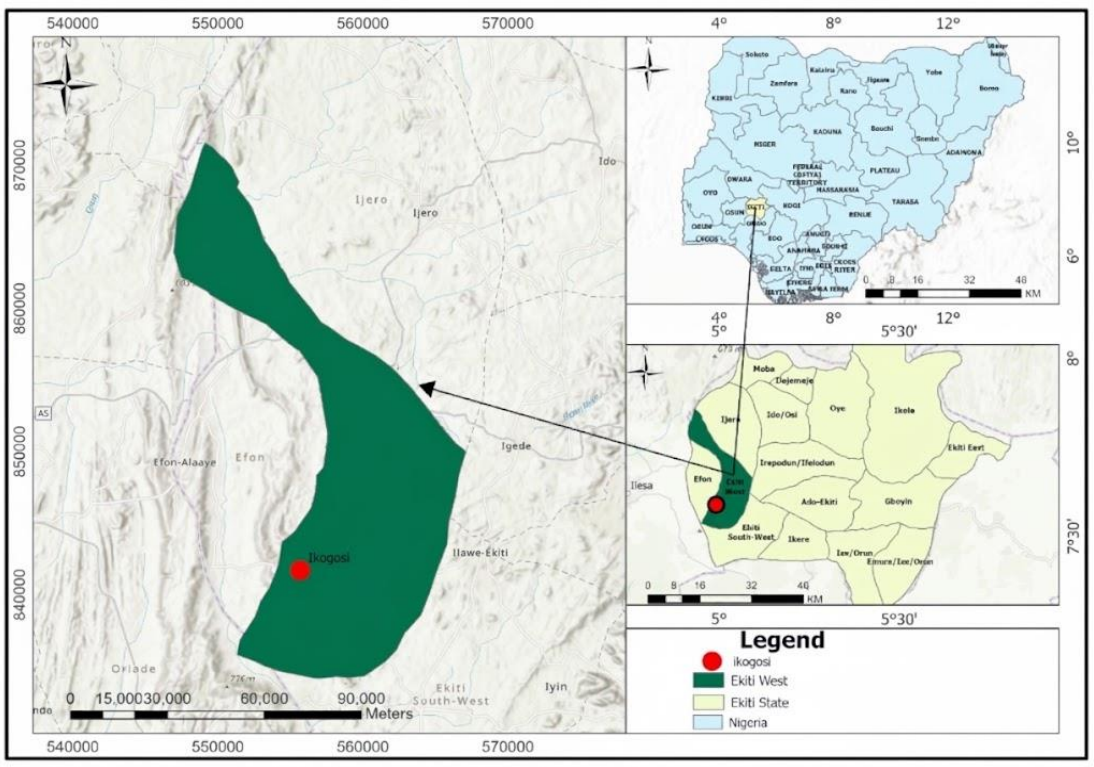


Fig. 1: Study Area Map of Ikogosi

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine community engagement and benefit sharing at Ikogosi Warm Spring. A total of 100 respondents were selected through stratified sampling, comprising 50 local residents, 30 tourism operators, 10 government and tourism officials, and 10 community leaders and NGO representatives. Simple random sampling was used to select resident households, while purposive sampling was applied to specialist stakeholder groups based on their relevant experience and involvement in tourism activities.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, field observations, and relevant secondary sources. The questionnaire covered respondents' demographic characteristics, community participation, perceived benefits, barriers to equitable benefit sharing and strategies for improving inclusive tourism. The instrument was pre-tested with 15 respondents, and its reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.82. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests and correlation analysis, while qualitative responses were examined thematically. The study acknowledged the limitations of purposive sampling and the absence of the original respondent-level dataset, which restricted independent verification of some inferential statistical results.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 100 respondents participated in the survey, selected from the community and from the warm spring resort: Ikogosi-Ekiti. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 4.1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 100)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	54	54.0

	Female	44	44.0
	Other	2	2.0
	Total	100	100.0
Age Group	18–25 years	21	21.0
	26–35 years	34	34.0
	36–45 years	25	25.0
	46–55 years	14	14.0
	56 years and above	6	6.0
	Total	100	100.0
Marital Status	Single	30	30.0
	Married	61	61.0
	Widowed	5	5.0
	Divorced/Separated	4	4.0
	Total	100	100.0
Educational Level	No formal education	9	9.0
	Primary	15	15.0
	Secondary	44	44.0
	Tertiary	28	28.0
	Other	4	4.0
	Total	100	100.0
Occupational Profile	Farmer	19	19.0
	Artisan	12	12.0
	Trader	24	24.0
	Tourism worker	20	20.0
	Student	16	16.0
	Other	9	9.0
	Total	100	100.0
Length of Residence	Less than 5 years	11	11.0

	5–10 years	20	20.0
	More than 10 years	69	69.0
	Total	100	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The demographic characteristics presented in Table 1 provide information on the gender, age, marital status, educational attainment, occupation, and length of residence of the 100 respondents who participated in the study at Ikogosi Warm Spring, Ekiti State.

The gender distribution shows that 54% of the respondents were male, while 44% were female and 2% identified as other. This indicates a slight male majority in the sample, although female respondents were also substantially represented. The inclusion of both male and female respondents provides perspectives from different gender groups on community engagement and benefit sharing in tourism development.

Regarding age, respondents aged 26 to 35 years constituted the largest proportion (34%), followed by those aged 36 to 45 years (25%) and 18 to 25 years (21%). Respondents aged 46 to 55 years accounted for 14%, while those aged 56 years and above represented 6%. Overall, the findings indicate that the sample was predominantly composed of young and middle-aged adults whose experiences can provide useful insights into tourism employment, livelihood opportunities, and community participation.

The marital status distribution reveals that 61% of the respondents were married, while 30% were single. Widowed respondents accounted for 5%, and 4% were divorced or separated. The predominance of married respondents suggests that household welfare and family livelihood considerations may be relevant to understanding perceptions of tourism benefits and their distribution within the community.

In terms of educational attainment, 44% of the respondents had secondary education, 28% had tertiary education, and 15% had primary education. Meanwhile, 9% had no formal education, while 4% reported other educational qualifications. The results show that most respondents had received at least some formal education. This educational background may influence their awareness of tourism development initiatives, their ability to engage with tourism management institutions, and their understanding of community benefit sharing.

The occupational distribution indicates that traders constituted the largest group, accounting for 24% of respondents, followed by tourism workers at 20%, farmers at 19%, students at 16%, artisans at 12%, and those in other occupations at 9%. The representation of tourism workers, traders, and artisans is particularly relevant because their livelihoods may be directly or indirectly connected to tourism activities. However, the occupational distribution alone does not establish the extent to which individual respondents benefit economically from the warm spring.

The length of residence indicates that 69% of respondents had lived in the community for more than ten years, while 20% had resided there for five to ten years. The remaining 11% had lived in the area for less than five years. The high proportion of long-term residents suggests that many respondents have substantial experience of the community and may be able to provide informed perspectives on changes in tourism management, community participation, and benefit sharing over time.

The demographic profile shows that the study included respondents from diverse social, educational, and occupational backgrounds, with a substantial proportion having long-standing connections to the community. This provides useful context for examining community engagement and benefit sharing at Ikogosi Warm Spring. Nevertheless, the demographic characteristics describe the respondents and should not, on their own, be interpreted as evidence that tourism benefits are equitably distributed or that community participation is effective. These issues require further analysis of the relevant survey findings.

Community Engagement in Tourism Planning and Decision-Making

To assess the extent of community participation, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with five statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Level of Agreement on Community Engagement Indicators (N = 100)

STATEMENT	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION	INTERPRETATION
1. Local residents are adequately involved in decisions about tourism development.	2.15	1.09	Disagree
2. Community members have representation in the management/committee of Ikogosi.	2.37	1.13	Disagree
3. Public meetings or consultations are held to inform the community.	2.79	1.22	Neutral
4. My voice/opinion is considered in tourism planning.	2.06	1.06	Disagree
5. Training and capacity-building opportunities are provided for community members.	2.43	1.19	Disagree

Source: Field survey, 2026

The overall mean score of 2.36 indicates a low level of perceived community engagement. Only 17% of respondents agreed that local residents are adequately involved in decision-making, while 65% strongly disagreed. This aligns with findings by Adeniran and Adegbite (2021), who documented similar exclusion in other Nigerian tourism sites.

Furthermore, only 13% of respondents confirmed that community members are represented in the Ikogosi Warm Spring Development Committee. The statement “My voice is considered in tourism planning” received the lowest mean score (2.06), highlighting a deep sense of marginalization. As one respondent noted in the open-ended section:

“We are not invited to meetings. Decisions are made in Ado-Ekiti, and we are told what has been decided.”

These findings reflect a top-down governance model, consistent with Arnstein’s (1969) “ladder of citizen participation,” where the current system operates at the level of *tokenism* rather than genuine empowerment.

Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms and Economic Impacts

This section evaluates the perceived fairness and effectiveness of benefit-sharing mechanisms at Ikogosi Warm Spring.

Table 3: Perceived Effectiveness of Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms (N = 100)

STATEMENT	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION	INTERPRETATION
1. Tourism provides job opportunities for local people.	3.43	1.06	Agree
2. Local businesses benefit from tourists.	3.69	0.99	Agree

3. Revenue from tourism is fairly distributed among stakeholders.	2.09	1.11	Disagree
4. Tourism contributes to community infrastructure development.	2.66	1.16	Neutral
5. Tourism has improved living standards.	2.93	1.21	Neutral

Source: Field survey, 2026

While respondents acknowledged that tourism creates jobs (mean = 3.43) and supports local businesses (mean = 3.69), there is strong disagreement that revenue is fairly shared (mean = 2.09). Only 15% believe benefits are distributed equitably. Chi-square tests revealed a statistically significant relationship between occupation and perceived benefit-sharing ($\chi^2 = 9.36$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that tourism workers and traders feel more included than farmers or students.

Moreover, only 29% observed improvements in infrastructure (roads, schools, clinics) linked to tourism. A trader remarked:

"We sell crafts and food, yes, but the money goes to the government. We see no new school, no clinic upgrade."

This suggests that tourism-generated revenue is not being reinvested in the host community, undermining the principles of inclusive tourism.

Institutional and Structural Factors Affecting Inclusivity

This section analyzes institutional support and structural barriers to inclusive tourism.

Table 4: Perceptions of Institutional and Structural Factors (N = 100)

STATEMENT	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION	INTERPRETATION
1. Government policies support community involvement.	2.55	1.17	Neutral
2. External investors dominate decision-making.	3.90	1.03	Agree
3. Lack of transparency affects benefit-sharing.	3.77	1.09	Agree
4. Cultural values are respected in tourism management.	3.13	1.15	Neutral
5. Power imbalances limit inclusivity.	3.95	0.98	Agree

Source: Field survey, 2026

The high mean scores for statements 2, 3, and 5 confirm that power imbalances, lack of transparency, and external dominance are major barriers. Over 71% of respondents agreed that government and private investors make decisions without community input. Despite this, 57% of respondents agreed that cultural values are "somewhat respected," particularly in ritual aspects of the warm spring. However, younger participants expressed concern that commercialization is eroding spiritual significance.

Post-Pandemic Tourism Recovery and Inclusivity

The pandemic severely disrupted tourism at Ikogosi Warm Spring, with visitation declining by over 80% between 2020 and 2022 (Ekiti State Ministry of Tourism, 2023). The recovery phase has been uneven.

Table 5: Perceptions of Post-Pandemic Recovery (N = 100)

STATEMENT	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION	INTERPRETATION
1. The pandemic reduced tourism-related income.	4.57	0.73	Strongly Agree
2. Recovery efforts considered local needs.	2.39	1.20	Disagree
3. Support was provided to local tourism workers.	2.13	1.07	Disagree
4. Post-pandemic tourism is more inclusive.	1.99	1.02	Strongly Disagree

Source: Field survey, 2026

The data showed that the pandemic had a devastating economic impact, with 93% of tourism workers reporting job loss or income reduction. However, recovery initiatives such as infrastructure repairs and promotional campaigns were perceived as top-down and exclusionary. Only 17% believed local needs were considered in recovery planning.

One respondent stated:

“When the government reopened the site, they brought in contractors from outside. No training, no jobs for us.”

This contradicts the “building back better” agenda (Gössling et al., 2021), which calls for resilient and equitable recovery strategies.

Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

A total of 87 respondents provided answers to the open-ended questions. Three major themes emerged:

1. Perceived Benefits of Tourism

a) Job creation (especially for youth)

b) Income from craft and food sales

c) Improved visibility of the community

d) Cultural pride and preservation

2. Challenges to Inclusivity

a) Exclusion from decision-making

b) Unequal revenue distribution

c) Lack of transparency and accountability

d) Environmental degradation due to unregulated tourism

3. Suggestions for Improvement

a) Establish a community-led tourism cooperative

b) Implement a transparent revenue-sharing system

c) Provide capacity-building programs (e.g., tour guiding, hospitality)

d) Create a local advisory board with veto power on key decisions

One respondent emphasized:

“Let us manage our own spring. We know how to protect it and benefit from it.”

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate a clear gap between the principles of inclusive tourism and the experiences reported by respondents at Ikogosi Warm Spring. The overall mean score for community engagement was 2.36, while the mean score for the statement that respondents’ voices were considered in tourism planning was 2.06. These results indicate that participation was generally perceived as limited. The finding is consistent with Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation, which distinguishes consultation without meaningful influence from participation that gives citizens a genuine role in decision making. In the context of Ikogosi, the low ratings suggest that the existence of meetings or management structures does not necessarily translate into effective community influence.

The pattern also reflects wider challenges identified in Nigerian tourism research. Eyisi, Lee and Trees (2021) emphasise the importance of collaboration and community participation in tourism development, while the present findings show that respondents continue to perceive decision-making as dominated by government and external actors. In the Ikogosi survey, external dominance recorded a mean of 3.90 and power imbalance recorded a mean of 3.95. These scores, alongside the low rating for community voice, suggest that participation mechanisms require more than occasional consultation. They require clear representation, access to information and an identifiable role for community representatives in decisions affecting the destination.

The benefit sharing results reveal a similarly uneven pattern. Respondents recognised that tourism creates job opportunities (mean = 3.43) and supports local businesses (mean = 3.69), but disagreed that tourism revenue is fairly distributed (mean = 2.09). Only 15% considered benefits to be distributed equitably, and only 29% observed tourism related improvements in community infrastructure. The reported chi square result ($\chi^2 = 9.36$, $p < 0.05$) indicates an association between occupation and perceived benefit sharing in the original analysis. The direction described in the source research suggests that tourism workers and traders felt more included than farmers and students. Since the underlying cross tabulation and respondent level data are unavailable, the degrees of freedom, exact p value and effect size cannot be confirmed and no further statistical interpretation is made.

The Ikogosi findings can be considered alongside African experience with tourism revenue sharing and community based enterprises. Spenceley, Snyman and Rylance (2019), in their examination of revenue sharing in terrestrial protected areas in Africa, show the importance of formal arrangements that connect tourism income with conservation and community benefits. The relevance to Ikogosi is institutional: tourism activity and visitor spending do not automatically produce fair local benefits unless responsibilities, allocation rules and accountability procedures are clearly established. Research on community based tourism enterprises in Kenya also identifies the potential of tourism to diversify rural livelihoods, while highlighting the need for supportive institutional arrangements and effective local participation (Manyara & Jones, 2022). These comparisons do not imply that the settings are identical; rather, they demonstrate that local ownership, enterprise access and transparent benefit allocation are recurring conditions for inclusive outcomes.

The findings on institutional barriers reinforce this interpretation. Respondents agreed that external investors dominate decision making (mean = 3.90), that lack of transparency affects benefit sharing (mean = 3.77), and that power imbalances limit inclusivity (mean = 3.95). These perceptions suggest that the central challenge is not simply the absence of economic activity but the way authority and benefits are organised. The moderate score for respect for cultural values (mean = 3.13) also indicates that cultural recognition may coexist with limited influence over management. This distinction is important because acknowledging local heritage does not, by itself, guarantee community control or equitable economic participation.

The international experience of community integration in tourism provides a further point of comparison. Mitchell and Reid’s (2001) study of island tourism in Peru examined the relationship between tourism

development and community integration, highlighting the importance of linking local participation with the organisation of tourism activity. Although the geographical and institutional setting differs from Ikogosi, the comparison reinforces the argument that destination development should be assessed not only by visitor activity or business performance but also by the extent to which host communities are integrated into decision making and local economic opportunities. In this respect, the low participation and benefit sharing scores at Ikogosi point to a need for stronger formal mechanisms connecting the destination's management with the surrounding community.

The post-pandemic findings show that the shock was widely felt by tourism-dependent respondents. The statement that the pandemic reduced tourism-related income recorded a mean of 4.57, while recovery efforts considering local needs recorded 2.39 and support for local tourism workers recorded 2.13. The perceived inclusiveness of post-pandemic tourism was particularly low, with a mean of 1.99. These results are consistent with the wider assessment by Gössling, Scott and Hall (2021), which identifies the pandemic as a major disruption to tourism systems and livelihoods. At Ikogosi, the low ratings for local support and participation indicate that recovery cannot be assessed only through reopening, infrastructure repair or renewed promotion. It should also be assessed through the restoration of local livelihoods and the extent to which residents participate in recovery decisions.

The open-ended responses provide further context for the numerical findings. Respondents identified employment, craft and food sales, community visibility and cultural pride as benefits, but also raised exclusion from decision-making, unequal revenue distribution, limited transparency and environmental concerns. Their suggestions included a community-led cooperative, transparent revenue sharing, skills development and a local advisory structure. These priorities are consistent with the empowerment perspective discussed by Sofield (2003), which places community agency and control at the centre of sustainable tourism development. Taken together, the findings indicate that Ikogosi has a foundation for more inclusive tourism, but this requires institutional reform, transparent financial arrangements and practical opportunities for

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine community engagement and benefit-sharing practices at Ikogosi Warm Spring in the post-pandemic era using a 100-respondent questionnaire. The findings confirm that, despite its potential, tourism development at the site remains exclusionary and inequitable. Power is concentrated in the hands of external stakeholders, while local communities, despite their cultural and historical ties to the site, receive minimal benefits and have little say in decision-making.

The pandemic exposed and deepened these structural inequalities, revealing the vulnerability of tourism-dependent livelihoods in the absence of inclusive governance. While tourism creates some economic opportunities, its transformative potential remains unrealized due to weak institutional frameworks and lack of transparency.

Nonetheless, the community's resilience, cultural attachment to the site, and clear demands for inclusion provide a roadmap for reform. The case of Ikogosi Warm Spring illustrates that inclusive tourism is not merely a policy goal but a necessity for sustainable and equitable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, an operational framework is proposed to strengthen community participation, accountability and local economic benefits at Ikogosi Warm Spring. The proposed arrangements should be discussed and agreed by the Ekiti State Government, the site management, the host community and other relevant stakeholders before implementation.

1. Establish a Local Joint Tourism Management Board: The existing tourism management structure should be reviewed to provide formal representation for residents, tourism workers, traders, artisans, community leaders, women and youth, alongside government and site management representatives. A target of at least 50% community representation is proposed for stakeholder negotiation. Membership should be

selected through an open and documented community process, with published eligibility criteria, fixed terms of office and provision for periodic replacement. The board should meet at least quarterly and publish minutes and decisions in accessible formats.

2. Define the board's responsibilities. The board should participate in annual tourism planning, review proposed projects, advise on visitor management and cultural and environmental protection, identify local training needs, and monitor community benefit commitments. Its terms of reference should clearly distinguish advisory responsibilities from statutory powers retained by government and the site operator. Decisions affecting community land, cultural practices, or agreed community benefits should require documented consultation before approval.

3. Create a Community Tourism Trust Fund: Subject to legal and financial feasibility assessment, a ring-fenced fund should be established to receive an agreed share of eligible tourism revenue. The proposed allocation of 30% of gate receipts may be used as a starting point for negotiation, rather than treated as an established entitlement or a percentage validated by this survey. The final percentage, eligible revenue streams and permitted expenditures should be documented in a public agreement approved by the relevant authorities and community representatives.

4. Put transparent financial controls in place. All receipts due to the fund should be paid into a dedicated bank account. The account should require at least two authorised signatories, including one community representative and one government or independently appointed financial representative. Monthly statements should be reconciled against ticketing and revenue records. An annual independent audit should be published, and a simple quarterly public report should show opening balance, receipts, expenditure, outstanding commitments and closing balance.

5. Introduce participatory budgeting and project selection. Each year, the board should invite project proposals from community groups and hold open meetings to identify priorities. Proposed projects should be assessed against published criteria, including number of beneficiaries, relevance to local needs, support for women and young people, livelihood impact, environmental sustainability and cost. The board should publish the shortlisted projects, reasons for selection, approved budgets, implementation timelines and responsible organisations. Community members should be able to submit complaints or request clarification through a documented grievance procedure.

6. Direct investment towards local livelihoods and shared infrastructure. Priority areas should include training and certification for tour guides, hospitality and customer service; support for local craft, food and cultural enterprises; transparent local procurement opportunities; and small grants or carefully administered revolving finance for viable community businesses. Community infrastructure proposals, including improvements to access roads, sanitation and public facilities, should be selected through the same participatory budgeting process.

7. Monitor performance and report publicly. The board should publish an annual inclusive tourism report covering community representation, local employment, procurement from local businesses, training participation, revenue transferred to the trust fund, projects completed, complaints received and resolved, and community satisfaction. Baseline values should be established during the first year, and targets should be reviewed annually with community participation. This will allow the proposed framework to be evaluated rather than assumed to be effective.

8. Prepare an inclusive tourism recovery and resilience plan. The plan should identify support for tourism workers and small businesses during future disruptions, including access to timely information, business continuity training, emergency support criteria and channels for community consultation. Women, young people, informal workers and households whose livelihoods depend on visitor spending should be explicitly considered in the design of recovery measures.

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