

Community Readiness as a Precursor to Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development: Integrating Community-Based Tourism and Community Empowerment Theory among the Orang Asli Community in Malaysia

**Nor Asikin Shaharuddin^{1*}, Mohd Adib Izzat Mohd Nor², Zurah Abu³, Noor Suriana Abu Bakar⁴,
Maizatul Saadiah Mohamad⁵, Siti Haidah Md Aziz⁶, Umar Natuna⁷**

^{1,2}Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kampus Bandaraya Melaka, Malaysia

^{3,4}Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kampus Jasin, Malaysia

⁵Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kampus Alor Gajah Melaka, Malaysia

⁶ Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kampus Bandaraya Melaka, Malaysia

⁷Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Natuna, Kepulauan Riau Indonesia

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100700755>

Received: 26 July 2026; Accepted: 31 July 2026; Published: 12 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD) is increasingly recognised as an effective strategy for empowering indigenous communities, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting inclusive socio-economic development. However, the long-term sustainability of indigenous tourism depends not only on the availability of tourism resources but also on the readiness of local communities to participate meaningfully in tourism planning and development. This study examines the level of community readiness for Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD) among the Orang Asli community in Tadam Hill, Selangor, Malaysia, through the Community Outreach Via Engagement (C.O.V.E.) 2026 programme implemented under the Service Learning Malaysia–University for Society (SULAM) initiative. Guided by the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Community Empowerment Theory (CET), the study conceptualises community readiness through four interrelated dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (PKSA). A quantitative approach was employed using a structured interviewer-administered questionnaire involving 22 Orang Asli participants. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, and paired-samples *t*-tests. The findings indicate a moderate-to-high level of community readiness, with attitudes and aspirations emerging as the strongest dimensions. Significant positive relationships among all PKSA dimensions further demonstrate that community readiness is a multidimensional construct. Participants also reported significant improvements in knowledge, practical skills, emotional well-being, self-development, and future aspirations following programme participation, suggesting that university-led community engagement can strengthen the foundational capacities required for sustainable tourism participation. Rather than representing a complete measure of long-term tourism success, the findings provide an empirical baseline for understanding how community readiness can support subsequent community empowerment and sustainable indigenous tourism development. The study contributes to the indigenous tourism literature by positioning community readiness as a precursor to sustainable tourism development while highlighting the role of SULAM as a platform for capacity building and university–community collaboration. The findings offer practical guidance for policymakers,

higher education institutions, and tourism practitioners in designing evidence-based initiatives that strengthen indigenous preparedness for sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Community readiness; Sustainable indigenous tourism; Community-Based Tourism; Community empowerment; Indigenous tourism; SULAM.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become an important catalyst for sustainable development because of its capacity to stimulate economic growth, create employment opportunities, preserve cultural heritage, and promote environmental stewardship. Recognising these contributions, UN Tourism (2024) identifies tourism as an important mechanism for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to poverty reduction, inclusive economic growth, sustainable communities, and responsible resource management. Increasingly, tourism development has shifted beyond a purely economic perspective towards more inclusive approaches that emphasise community participation, local ownership, capacity building, and long-term sustainability. Within this evolving paradigm, the readiness of local communities has become a fundamental prerequisite for ensuring that tourism initiatives generate lasting social, cultural, and economic benefits.

Indigenous tourism has emerged as an important strategy for improving community well-being while safeguarding indigenous cultures, traditions, and knowledge systems. Indigenous communities possess distinctive cultural heritage, traditional ecological knowledge, and unique lifestyles that enhance destination authenticity and create meaningful visitor experiences. Previous studies have demonstrated that when indigenous communities actively participate in tourism planning and management, tourism can diversify household income, strengthen cultural identity, stimulate entrepreneurship, and enhance community resilience (Butler & Hinch, 2007; Zeppel, 2006). Nevertheless, these benefits are not achieved automatically. Many indigenous communities continue to face structural challenges, including limited educational opportunities, inadequate entrepreneurial capacity, insufficient institutional support, and restricted involvement in tourism decision-making. These barriers often constrain meaningful participation and weaken the long-term sustainability of tourism initiatives.

The principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) advocate that local communities should play a central role in tourism planning, implementation, and benefit sharing. Numerous studies have confirmed that meaningful community participation is fundamental to sustainable tourism because local residents are both custodians of cultural and environmental resources and primary beneficiaries of tourism development (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). However, increasing evidence suggests that participation alone does not guarantee successful tourism development. Communities must also possess sufficient knowledge, practical competencies, positive attitudes, and future aspirations to engage effectively in tourism-related activities. In this regard, community readiness should be viewed not merely as a programme outcome but as a foundational condition that shapes the capacity of indigenous communities to participate in and sustain tourism development over time.

In Peninsular Malaysia, the Orang Asli communities represent an important component of the nation's indigenous heritage and possess considerable potential for sustainable tourism development. Their rich cultural traditions, handicraft skills, indigenous knowledge, and close relationship with the natural environment provide distinctive tourism experiences that contribute to destination competitiveness. Recognising this potential, government agencies such as the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) have introduced various initiatives to improve community welfare, entrepreneurship, and tourism participation. Despite these efforts, many Orang Asli communities continue to experience socio-economic disadvantages characterised by limited employment opportunities, relatively low educational attainment, and restricted participation in tourism enterprises. Existing studies have largely focused on tourism impacts, community participation, and cultural preservation, whereas comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding whether indigenous communities possess the necessary readiness to participate effectively before tourism initiatives are implemented.

This knowledge gap is particularly important because community readiness influences how communities respond to development interventions, collaborate with external stakeholders, and mobilise local resources to

achieve sustainable socio-economic outcomes. Although community readiness has been widely discussed within community development literature, empirical evidence remains limited in indigenous tourism research, particularly among the Orang Asli communities in Malaysia. More importantly, most existing studies evaluate the outcomes of tourism initiatives after implementation, whereas relatively few examine community preparedness as an antecedent of successful tourism development. Without a clear understanding of readiness, investments in tourism infrastructure, policy support, and community development programmes may not translate into meaningful participation or long-term community empowerment.

To address this gap, the present study examines community readiness within the context of the Service-Learning Malaysia–University for Society (SULAM) initiative through the Community Outreach Via Engagement (C.O.V.E.) 2026 programme. Unlike conventional tourism intervention programmes, SULAM integrates academic learning with community engagement and capacity-building, enabling university students and indigenous communities to collaborate in mutually beneficial learning experiences. Beyond evaluating immediate programme outcomes, the initiative provides an empirical platform for understanding how university–community partnerships contribute to strengthening the foundational capacities required for sustainable indigenous tourism development.

Against this background, the present study examines community readiness as a precursor to community empowerment and Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD) among the Orang Asli community in Tadam Hill, Selangor. Community readiness is assessed through four interrelated dimensions—knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (PKSA)—to determine how these dimensions influence indigenous participation in tourism development. Guided by Community Empowerment Theory (CET) and the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), the study proposes that community readiness strengthens community empowerment, which subsequently supports sustainable tourism development. While the present research captures the immediate outcomes of a university-led community engagement programme, it establishes an important empirical baseline for understanding how community readiness contributes to longer-term empowerment and sustainable indigenous tourism participation. The findings offer valuable theoretical and practical insights for policymakers, higher education institutions, tourism practitioners, and development agencies in designing evidence-based capacity-building initiatives that strengthen indigenous participation and support sustainable community development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

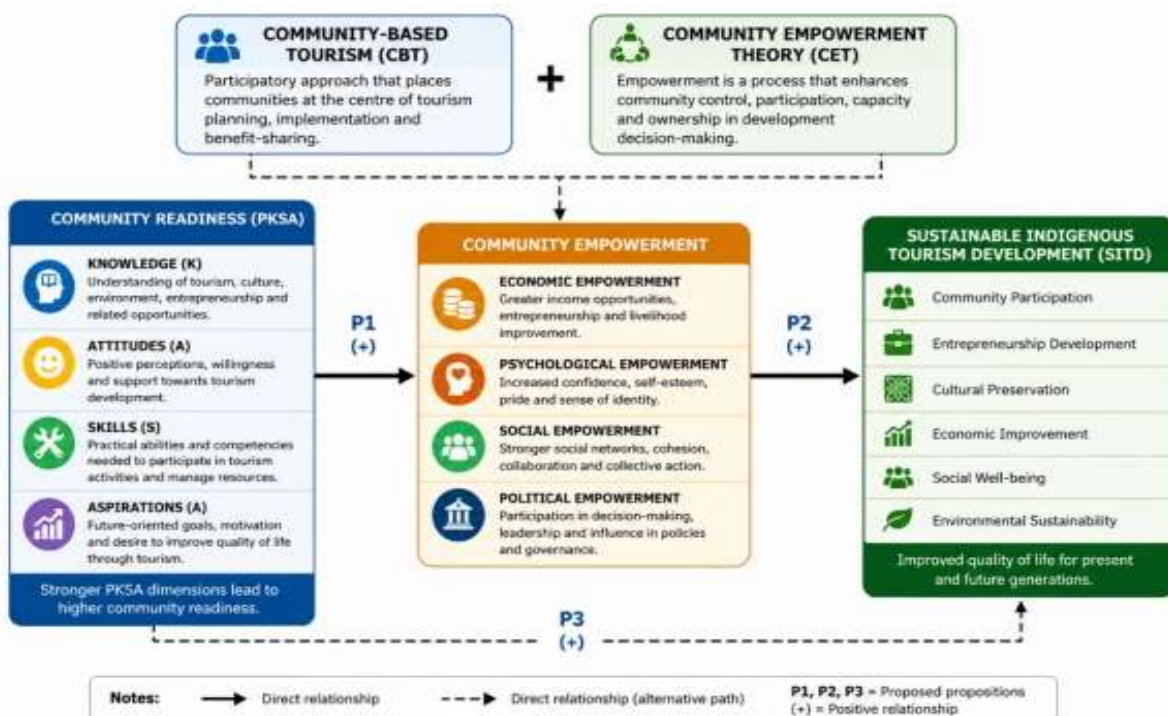


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework underpinning this study. The framework integrates the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Community Empowerment Theory (CET) to explain how community readiness contributes to Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD). Rather than assuming that tourism development is primarily driven by the availability of tourism resources, the framework recognises that sustainable tourism requires communities to possess the knowledge, capabilities, confidence, and motivation necessary to participate effectively in tourism planning, implementation, and management. Consequently, community readiness is conceptualised as a foundational condition that precedes and facilitates community empowerment.

Within the framework, community readiness is operationalised through four interrelated dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (PKSA). Collectively, these dimensions represent the cognitive, behavioural, practical, and motivational capacities that enable indigenous communities to engage meaningfully in tourism development. The framework assumes that improvements in these dimensions strengthen individuals' capacity to make informed decisions, collaborate with stakeholders, and participate in community-led tourism initiatives. In this context, readiness should not be interpreted as an end in itself but rather as an early developmental stage that supports subsequent empowerment and long-term community participation.

Drawing upon Community Empowerment Theory, the framework further proposes that empowered communities are better positioned to preserve cultural heritage, utilise local knowledge, develop tourism-related enterprises, strengthen community resilience, and enhance socio-economic well-being. Consistent with the principles of Community-Based Tourism, empowerment also encourages greater local ownership, shared decision-making, and collective responsibility for tourism resources, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving sustainable tourism outcomes.

Accordingly, the framework proposes three theoretical propositions. **P1** proposes that community readiness positively influences community empowerment. **P2** proposes that community empowerment positively influences Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development. Finally, **P3** proposes that community readiness exerts a direct positive influence on Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development. These propositions provide the conceptual basis for understanding community readiness as an antecedent of empowerment and sustainable tourism development. Although the present study primarily evaluates community readiness within the context of a university–community engagement programme, the framework offers a broader theoretical explanation of how readiness may contribute to sustained indigenous tourism participation over time. Future longitudinal research is recommended to validate these proposed relationships across different indigenous communities and tourism settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-Based Tourism and Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has become one of the most influential approaches for achieving sustainable tourism development, particularly within rural and indigenous communities where tourism resources are closely associated with local culture, heritage, and natural environments. Unlike conventional tourism models, which are often driven by external investors and commercial interests, CBT promotes a participatory approach that positions local communities as active stakeholders in tourism planning, implementation, management, and benefit-sharing. Its central premise is that tourism should improve community well-being while simultaneously preserving cultural heritage, protecting environmental resources, and ensuring an equitable distribution of economic benefits among local residents (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Consequently, CBT has increasingly been recognised as a practical mechanism for balancing economic, socio-cultural, and environmental objectives within the broader agenda of sustainable development.

Within the context of indigenous tourism, CBT provides communities with opportunities to transform traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, and locally available resources into authentic tourism experiences while maintaining local ownership and control over tourism development. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that active community participation contributes to employment creation, entrepreneurship development, cultural revitalisation, and improved household livelihoods (Butler & Hinch, 2007; Zeppel, 2006). Beyond its economic

contributions, CBT reinforces indigenous identity by encouraging communities to preserve traditional customs, handicrafts, languages, and ecological knowledge that distinguish indigenous destinations from mainstream tourism products. Tourism therefore functions not only as a source of income but also as a mechanism for strengthening cultural continuity, safeguarding indigenous identity, and facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Despite these recognised benefits, the implementation of CBT has produced mixed outcomes across many indigenous communities. Previous research indicates that numerous community-based tourism initiatives experience limited success because of inadequate community participation, weak local leadership, insufficient tourism knowledge, limited entrepreneurial capability, and inadequate institutional support (Chand & Sharpley, 2018; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). These challenges frequently reduce community ownership of tourism initiatives and increase dependence on external agencies, thereby compromising the long-term sustainability of tourism development. Such evidence suggests that the availability of tourism resources alone is insufficient to ensure successful tourism outcomes; equally important is the capacity of local communities to participate effectively in tourism planning, management, and decision-making.

Recent tourism scholarship has therefore shifted attention from evaluating tourism outcomes towards understanding the internal capacities that enable communities to participate meaningfully in tourism development. Rather than viewing participation as an automatic consequence of tourism initiatives, researchers increasingly argue that successful CBT depends on the knowledge, confidence, competencies, leadership, and motivation of local communities (Moscardo, 2015; Sharpley, 2020). Communities with stronger internal capacities are generally better positioned to recognise tourism opportunities, manage local resources responsibly, collaborate effectively with multiple stakeholders, and sustain tourism benefits over time. Conversely, inadequate preparedness often constrains participation, limits local ownership, and reduces the effectiveness of community-based tourism initiatives.

More importantly, recent studies suggest that sustainable indigenous tourism should be understood as a **long-term developmental process** rather than a series of isolated tourism interventions. While capacity-building programmes can improve community preparedness in the short term, the sustainability of tourism development depends on continuous learning, institutional support, leadership development, and sustained community participation. Community readiness should therefore be regarded as an important **foundational condition** that enables indigenous communities to progressively strengthen their capabilities before assuming more active roles in tourism planning and management. Assessing readiness at this early stage provides valuable empirical evidence for understanding how indigenous communities begin their journey towards long-term empowerment and sustainable tourism participation.

Although CBT has been widely examined within the sustainable tourism literature, comparatively few studies have investigated community readiness prior to tourism implementation, particularly among indigenous communities. Existing research has predominantly focused on evaluating tourism impacts after development, including improvements in employment, income generation, community participation, and cultural preservation. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding whether communities possess the necessary knowledge, attitudes, practical skills, and future aspirations that enable them to participate effectively before tourism development begins. This omission is particularly significant because insufficient preparedness may limit indigenous communities' capacity to benefit fully from tourism opportunities despite substantial investments in infrastructure, policy support, and community development programmes.

Building upon this gap, the present study argues that community readiness represents a critical prerequisite for empowerment Community-Based Tourism and Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development. Consistent with the principles of CBT, meaningful participation requires more than access to tourism resources; it also depends on the preparedness of local communities to engage confidently in tourism planning, entrepreneurship, resource management, and collective decision-making. Accordingly, this study positions community readiness as the foundation upon which community empowerment and sustainable indigenous tourism development can be progressively achieved. Rather than viewing readiness as the final outcome of a single intervention, the study conceptualises it as an early developmental stage that supports longer-term community empowerment and tourism participation. By integrating Community-Based Tourism with community readiness, this study extends

the existing indigenous tourism literature and provides a more comprehensive explanation of how indigenous communities can strengthen their participation, resilience, and sustainability through tourism development.

Community Readiness and the PKSA Framework

Community readiness has emerged as a fundamental concept in community development and sustainable tourism research because it reflects the extent to which individuals and communities possess the capacity to respond effectively to development opportunities. Unlike conventional evaluation approaches that assess programme outcomes after implementation, community readiness focuses on the preparedness of communities prior to or during the early stages of development, recognising that successful interventions depend on existing capacities as much as on external support. The concept was initially introduced through the Community Readiness Model (CRM), which proposes that communities progress through different stages of preparedness before they are capable of successfully implementing development initiatives (Edwards et al., 2000; Plested et al., 2006). Rather than assuming that all communities possess equal capacities for change, the CRM acknowledges that successful interventions depend upon community awareness, leadership, available resources, collective commitment, and the willingness to embrace change (Oetting et al., 2014). Consequently, assessing community readiness enables development agencies to identify existing strengths, recognise potential barriers, and design interventions that are appropriate to the community's stage of development.

Within the tourism context, indigenous community readiness has become increasingly important because the success of sustainable tourism depends not only on the availability of tourism resources but also on the preparedness of local communities to participate meaningfully in tourism planning, governance, and enterprise development. Recent tourism studies argue that communities demonstrating higher levels of readiness are better able to identify tourism opportunities, mobilise local resources, adapt to changing market conditions, and sustain tourism benefits over the long term (Moscardo, 2015; Sharpley, 2020; Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). Conversely, communities with limited readiness often experience lower participation, weaker local ownership, and greater dependence on external agencies, thereby reducing the sustainability of tourism initiatives. This perspective reflects an important shift in sustainable tourism research, where community readiness is increasingly recognised as a prerequisite for empowerment that supports long-term sustainable community development rather than merely an immediate outcome of tourism interventions.

Drawing upon the principles of the Community Readiness Model, the present study operationalises community readiness through four interrelated dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (PKSA). While the original CRM evaluates readiness across multiple dimensions of community change, the PKSA framework translates these principles into measurable constructs that are particularly relevant to indigenous tourism development. Collectively, the four dimensions represent the cognitive, behavioural, practical, and motivational capacities that influence an indigenous community's preparedness to participate in tourism development. Rather than functioning independently, these dimensions interact to shape communities' overall readiness and establish the foundation upon which community empowerment and sustainable tourism participation can progressively develop.

The **knowledge** dimension reflects the extent to which community members understand sustainable tourism principles, cultural heritage conservation, environmental stewardship, entrepreneurship, and the opportunities and challenges associated with tourism development. Consistent with the Community Readiness Model, knowledge serves as the cognitive foundation that enables communities to recognise development opportunities and make informed decisions regarding tourism participation (Edwards et al., 2000). Communities possessing greater tourism knowledge are generally better equipped to participate confidently in tourism planning and support sustainable resource management.

The **attitudes** dimension represents residents' perceptions, beliefs, and willingness to support tourism development and participate in collective community initiatives. Within the Community Readiness Model, positive community attitudes signify a higher level of collective commitment towards change (Plested et al., 2006). In indigenous tourism, favourable attitudes encourage collaboration among community members, strengthen trust in development initiatives, and promote a balanced approach that supports tourism development while safeguarding cultural identity and traditional values.

The **skills** dimension refers to the practical competencies required to participate effectively in tourism-related activities, including entrepreneurship, hospitality, communication, handicraft production, leadership, and environmental management. Practical skills enhance the capacity of indigenous communities to transform local resources into marketable tourism products and services while reducing dependence on external operators. Previous studies consistently identify capacity-building and skills development as critical prerequisites for successful Community-Based Tourism because they enhance local confidence, improve service quality, and strengthen community participation (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022).

The fourth dimension, **aspirations**, reflects community members' motivation, future expectations, and commitment to improving their quality of life through tourism development. Aspirations represent the motivational component of community readiness because they influence individuals' willingness to invest time, effort, and resources in long-term community development despite existing socio-economic constraints. Communities with stronger aspirations are generally more receptive to innovation, entrepreneurship, and collaborative development initiatives while remaining committed to preserving their cultural heritage for future generations. This motivational capacity reflects the progression towards higher levels of community readiness proposed by Oetting et al. (2014), where community commitment and confidence become increasingly important drivers of sustainable change.

The PKSA framework also complements the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which emphasise that sustainable tourism can only be achieved when local communities possess sufficient capacity to participate meaningfully in tourism planning, governance, and benefit-sharing. Recent studies further argue that empowerment is strengthened when communities possess adequate knowledge, positive attitudes, practical competencies, and strong developmental aspirations, enabling them to collaborate effectively with external stakeholders and exercise greater control over tourism resources (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). Consequently, community readiness should be understood not merely as an individual characteristic but as a collective community capability that creates the conditions necessary for empowerment and sustainable tourism development. Importantly, improvements in PKSA should be viewed as indicators of early-stage capacity development, providing the foundation for subsequent community empowerment and longer-term tourism participation.

Although previous studies have examined individual aspects of tourism knowledge, community attitudes, technical competencies, or entrepreneurial motivation, relatively few have integrated these dimensions into a unified framework for assessing indigenous community readiness before tourism development. Existing tourism research has predominantly evaluated the socio-economic impacts of tourism after implementation, whereas comparatively less attention has been devoted to assessing whether indigenous communities possess the foundational capacities required prior to tourism participation. This gap is particularly evident among the Orang Asli communities in Malaysia, where empirical evidence on community readiness remains limited despite increasing policy emphasis on indigenous participation in sustainable tourism.

Accordingly, this study adopts the PKSA framework as a multidimensional operationalisation of community readiness within the context of Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development. By integrating the theoretical foundations of the Community Readiness Model (Edwards et al., 2000; Plested et al., 2006; Oetting et al., 2014) with the participatory principles of Community-Based Tourism and contemporary perspectives on community empowerment (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022), the framework provides a comprehensive approach for assessing indigenous preparedness before tourism development occurs. Rather than positioning readiness as the final outcome of a community intervention, the present study conceptualises it as the initial developmental capability that enables community empowerment and supports the long-term sustainability of indigenous tourism development. In doing so, the study extends the indigenous tourism literature by providing an empirical foundation for understanding how indigenous communities prepare for sustainable tourism before broader socio-economic outcomes can be realised.

Community Empowerment Theory

Community Empowerment Theory (CET) provides a fundamental theoretical perspective for understanding how local communities acquire the capacity to influence development processes, utilise local resources, and improve

their socio-economic well-being. Within tourism research, empowerment extends beyond community participation by emphasising the ability of local residents to exercise greater control over tourism planning, decision-making, and resource management. Rather than functioning as passive beneficiaries of externally driven development, empowered communities become active partners capable of shaping tourism according to their own priorities, cultural values, and long-term aspirations. Consequently, empowerment has become a central principle of sustainable tourism because it strengthens local ownership while reducing dependency on external organisations and institutions.

The concept of community empowerment was comprehensively articulated by Scheyvens (1999), who proposed that empowerment is a multidimensional process encompassing economic, psychological, social, and political empowerment. Economic empowerment refers to tourism's ability to create employment opportunities, diversify household incomes, and improve local livelihoods. Psychological empowerment reflects increased self-confidence, community pride, and a stronger sense of identity resulting from active participation in development initiatives. Social empowerment enhances community cohesion, collective action, and mutual trust, thereby strengthening residents' capacity to work collaboratively towards shared development goals. Political empowerment enables communities to participate meaningfully in planning, governance, and decision-making, ensuring that local perspectives are incorporated into tourism policies and development programmes. Collectively, these dimensions demonstrate that empowerment is not merely an economic outcome but a continuous developmental process that strengthens community resilience and long-term adaptive capacity.

Within indigenous tourism, empowerment is particularly important because indigenous communities possess valuable cultural heritage, traditional ecological knowledge, and locally embedded practices that contribute significantly to destination authenticity. However, the presence of these resources alone does not guarantee sustainable tourism development. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that indigenous communities derive greater benefits from tourism when they possess sufficient authority to manage local resources, negotiate with external stakeholders, and retain control over tourism-related decisions (Butler & Hinch, 2007; Scheyvens, 1999). Empowerment therefore enables indigenous communities to balance economic development with cultural preservation while ensuring that tourism remains consistent with local values, community aspirations, and intergenerational sustainability.

Although empowerment is widely recognised as a key objective of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), recent tourism research suggests that empowerment should also be understood as an incremental developmental process rather than an immediate outcome of tourism participation (Moscardo, 2015; Chand & Sharpley, 2018). Communities may participate in tourism activities without necessarily experiencing meaningful improvements in leadership, self-reliance, or decision-making capacity. Sustainable empowerment develops progressively through continuous learning, institutional support, collaborative governance, and repeated opportunities for community engagement. Consequently, tourism interventions should be viewed as facilitating the early stages of empowerment, rather than representing its completion.

Drawing upon this perspective, the present study positions community readiness as a precursor to community empowerment. The four dimensions of the PKSA framework—knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations—represent the internal capacities that enable indigenous communities to participate meaningfully in tourism development. Collectively, these dimensions strengthen confidence, improve decision-making capability, encourage collaborative engagement, and enhance communities' ability to transform local cultural and natural resources into sustainable tourism opportunities. Community readiness therefore provides the essential foundation upon which community empowerment can progressively develop.

Grounded in Community Empowerment Theory, this study further proposes that empowerment functions as the mechanism linking community readiness to Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD). Communities that are empowered are better able to preserve cultural heritage, foster local entrepreneurship, strengthen socio-economic well-being, and manage tourism resources responsibly. Consequently, empowerment represents the developmental process through which internal community capacities are translated into sustainable tourism outcomes. By integrating CET with the principles of Community-Based Tourism, this study extends existing indigenous tourism literature by highlighting that sustainable tourism is achieved not only

through community participation but also through strengthening the readiness and empowerment of indigenous communities before tourism development is fully implemented.

Proposed Conceptual Framework and Propositions Development

Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD) is increasingly recognised as a holistic approach to tourism development that balances economic prosperity with cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and community well-being. Unlike conventional tourism models that primarily measure success through visitor arrivals and economic returns, SITD emphasises the long-term capacity of indigenous communities to preserve their cultural heritage, participate actively in tourism governance, and achieve sustainable socio-economic benefits. Consequently, tourism should not only generate economic opportunities but also strengthen indigenous identity, enhance community resilience, and safeguard cultural and environmental resources for future generations (Butler & Hinch, 2007; Sharpley, 2020).

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for achieving these objectives by positioning local communities as the primary beneficiaries, decision-makers, and custodians of tourism resources. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that tourism initiatives are more sustainable when communities participate actively in planning, entrepreneurship, resource management, and collaborative governance (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). However, participation alone does not automatically result in empowerment or sustainable tourism outcomes. Indigenous communities differ considerably in their ability to recognise tourism opportunities, mobilise local resources, adapt to changing development contexts, and collaborate effectively with external stakeholders. These differences suggest that sustainable tourism begins not with participation itself, but with the readiness of communities to engage meaningfully in tourism development.

Accordingly, this study conceptualises community readiness as the antecedent of Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development. Community readiness is operationalised through four interrelated dimensions—knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (PKSA)—which collectively represent the cognitive, behavioural, practical, and motivational capacities required for effective participation in tourism. Rather than functioning independently, these dimensions interact to determine the overall preparedness of indigenous communities to participate in tourism planning, entrepreneurship, and community development.

Drawing upon Community Empowerment Theory (CET) (Scheyvens, 1999), the proposed framework argues that community readiness strengthens community empowerment by enhancing confidence, leadership capacity, collective decision-making, and local control over tourism resources. Indigenous communities equipped with adequate knowledge, positive attitudes, practical competencies, and future-oriented aspirations are better positioned to collaborate with government agencies, participate in tourism governance, develop tourism enterprises, and manage tourism resources according to local priorities. Empowered communities are subsequently more capable of preserving cultural heritage, diversifying local livelihoods, improving socio-economic well-being, and promoting environmental sustainability. Community empowerment therefore functions as the mechanism through which community readiness is translated into Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development, consistent with the principles of Community-Based Tourism that emphasise local ownership, inclusive participation, and equitable benefit-sharing.

Within this theoretical perspective, Service-Learning Malaysia–University for Society (SULAM) provides an important contextual mechanism for strengthening community readiness and empowerment. Service-learning has increasingly been recognised as an effective educational approach that integrates academic learning with meaningful community engagement, enabling students and local communities to co-create knowledge while addressing real-world societal challenges (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Jacoby, 2015). In the context of tourism education, the Community Outreach Via Engagement (C.O.V.E.) 2026 programme demonstrates how SULAM can strengthen community awareness, practical competencies, collaborative engagement, and future aspirations through experiential learning and university–community partnerships. Rather than representing an end point of community development, the programme provides an empirical context for examining the early stages of community readiness, which may subsequently contribute to longer-term community empowerment and sustainable tourism participation.

Accordingly, this study integrates Community-Based Tourism (CBT), Community Empowerment Theory (CET), and the SULAM approach into a unified conceptual framework. The framework positions community readiness as the antecedent, community empowerment as the enabling mechanism, and Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD) as the intended long-term outcome. Although the present study empirically focuses on assessing community readiness, the framework provides a broader theoretical explanation of how indigenous communities may progressively strengthen their participation in tourism through enhanced preparedness and empowerment. In doing so, the study contributes to indigenous tourism literature by positioning community readiness as the foundational developmental capability that supports subsequent community empowerment and long-term sustainable tourism development, while providing a conceptual basis for future longitudinal and comparative research.

Based on this theoretical framework, the following propositions are advanced to explain the expected relationships among the study constructs:

P1: Community readiness positively influences community empowerment.

P2: Community empowerment positively influences Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development.

P3: Community readiness positively influences Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development.

Although the present study empirically assesses community readiness within the context of the C.O.V.E. 2026 programme, these propositions represent the broader theoretical relationships underpinning Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development. The findings therefore provide an empirical baseline for understanding the early stages of indigenous community readiness, while future longitudinal and comparative studies are recommended to examine how these relationships evolve over time and contribute to sustained community empowerment and tourism participation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative case study design to examine the readiness of the Orang Asli community for Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD) in Tadam Hill, Selangor, Malaysia. A case study approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth investigation of community readiness within a specific indigenous tourism context while capturing the socio-cultural characteristics of a community with recognised tourism potential. The quantitative approach facilitated the systematic measurement of community readiness and provided empirical evidence of the community's initial developmental capacity to participate in sustainable tourism initiatives through objective statistical analysis.

The study was conducted during the Community Outreach Via Engagement (C.O.V.E.) 2026 programme, implemented in January 2026 under the Service-Learning Malaysia–University for Society (SULAM) initiative for the Sustainable Tourism course. The programme served as an experiential learning platform integrating academic knowledge, community engagement, and capacity-building activities. Beyond providing students with practical learning experiences, the programme created an opportunity to assess the baseline readiness of the Orang Asli community and to examine how a university-led community engagement initiative could strengthen the foundational capacities required for sustainable indigenous tourism development. The present assessment therefore represents an early-stage evaluation of community readiness, providing an empirical baseline for future studies examining longer-term community empowerment and tourism participation.

The research was guided by the Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, and Aspirations (PKSA) framework, which conceptualises community readiness as a multidimensional construct representing the cognitive, behavioural, practical, and motivational capacities required for participation in tourism development. Given the relatively small size of the participating Orang Asli community, a purposive census sampling approach was adopted whereby all eligible adult participants involved in the C.O.V.E. 2026 programme were invited to participate. Consequently, data were successfully collected from 22 Orang Asli respondents, representing the entire target population engaged in the programme and yielding a 100% response rate.

Data were collected using a structured interviewer-administered questionnaire. Face-to-face interviews were employed to accommodate respondents' varying educational backgrounds and literacy levels while ensuring that each participant clearly understood the questionnaire items. Five trained enumerators conducted the interviews, providing explanations whenever necessary and accurately recording respondents' responses. This interviewer-assisted approach reduced potential response bias, enhanced response accuracy, and improved the completeness and reliability of the collected data.

The questionnaire was developed through an extensive review of literature relating to Community-Based Tourism (CBT), Community Empowerment Theory (CET), community readiness, and Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD). Prior to data collection, the instrument was reviewed by academic experts in tourism management to establish content validity and ensure the clarity and relevance of all measurement items. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section collected respondents' demographic information, including gender, age, educational attainment, employment status, and income level. The second section measured community readiness using the four dimensions of the PKSA framework: knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations. These dimensions assessed respondents' understanding of sustainable tourism, perceptions towards tourism development, practical competencies, and future aspirations to participate in tourism-related activities. All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). In addition, multiple-response questions were included to identify respondents' preferred tourism-related economic and entrepreneurial activities within the community.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous, treated confidentially, and used solely for academic research purposes. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process to ensure respect for participants' rights, privacy, and cultural sensitivities.

The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were employed to describe respondents' demographic characteristics and determine the level of community readiness across the four PKSA dimensions. The internal consistency of the measurement scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, while Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among the PKSA dimensions. To assess changes associated with participation in the C.O.V.E. 2026 programme, paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare respondents' perceptions before and after programme participation. These analytical procedures enabled the study to establish an empirical baseline of indigenous community readiness and evaluate the contribution of the C.O.V.E. 2026 programme to strengthening the foundational capacities that support community empowerment and Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development. The analyses should therefore be interpreted as evidence of short-term developmental changes following the intervention rather than confirmation of long-term tourism outcomes, which warrant future longitudinal investigation.

FINDINGS

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1. Demographic Analysis of the respondents (N=22)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	11	50.0
	Female	11	50.0
Age	21–30 years	2	9.1
	31–40 years	5	22.7
	41–50 years	9	40.9
	Above 50 years	6	27.3
Employment Status	Employed	8	36.4
	Housewife	8	36.4
	Unemployed	6	27.3

Educational Level	Primary School	10	45.5
	Secondary School	11	50.0
	Certificate	1	4.5
Length of Residence	More than 10 years	22	100.0
Monthly Income	No Income	7	31.8
	Below RM1,000	Majority of respondents	-
Average Monthly Income	Mean	RM865.91	-

Source: Adapted from the Community Outreach Via Engagement (C.O.V.E.) 2026 Survey, Tadam Hill, Selangor.

Respondents' Demographic Profile

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the 22 Orang Asli respondents. The sample comprised an equal proportion of male and female participants (50.0% each), with most respondents aged 41–50 years (40.9%), followed by those above 50 years (27.3%). These findings indicate that the respondents possessed substantial community experience and long-term familiarity with local cultural traditions.

Most respondents had completed either primary (45.5%) or secondary education (50.0%), while only one respondent possessed a certificate-level qualification. In terms of employment, 36.4% were employed, 36.4% were homemakers, and 27.3% were unemployed. All respondents had resided in Tadam Hill for more than ten years, reflecting strong community attachment and local knowledge. The average monthly household income was RM865.91, with approximately one-third reporting no regular income, indicating modest socio-economic conditions within the community.

Overall, the demographic profile suggests that the respondents represent a mature, well-established indigenous community with a long-term attachment to the study area. Their relatively modest educational attainment and household income further justify the need for community capacity-building initiatives to strengthen participation in sustainable tourism development.

Reliability of the PKSA Measurement Instrument

Table 2. Reliability Analysis of the PKSA Measurement Instrument

Construct	Items	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Interpretation
Knowledge	6	0.912	Excellent
Attitudes	6	0.974	Excellent
Skills	4	0.846	Good
Aspirations	5	0.951	Excellent
Overall Community Readiness (PKSA)	21	0.946 (if calculated)	Excellent

Source: Authors' analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29 (2026).

The reliability of the measurement instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. As presented in Table 2, all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022), with alpha values ranging from **0.846 to 0.974**. The overall PKSA framework also demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.946$), confirming that the instrument consistently measured community readiness.

These findings indicate that the measurement scales were suitable for subsequent descriptive and inferential analyses. These results confirm that all constructs exceed the minimum threshold of 0.70 recommended by Hair et al. (2022), indicating satisfactory internal consistency and supporting the suitability of the instrument for subsequent statistical analyses.

Level of Community Readiness for Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development

Table 3. Level of Community Readiness for Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development

Community Readiness Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Knowledge	2.39	1.52	Moderate–High
Attitudes	2.37	1.65	High
Skills	2.66	1.59	Moderate
Aspirations	2.58	1.56	High
Overall Community Readiness	2.48	1.58	Moderate–High

Source: Authors' analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29 (2026).

Table 3 indicates that the Orang Asli community demonstrated an overall **moderate-to-high level of community readiness** ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.58$). Among the four dimensions, **attitudes** recorded the highest readiness level, followed by **knowledge** and **aspirations**, suggesting positive perceptions towards tourism participation and community development. **Skills** recorded the lowest readiness level, indicating a need to further enhance tourism-related competencies.

Overall, these findings suggest that although the Orang Asli community demonstrates encouraging levels of readiness, future interventions should prioritise practical skills development alongside continuous community engagement. Strengthening these competencies through targeted training, entrepreneurship programmes, and experiential learning initiatives such as the **Service Learning Malaysia–University for Society (SULAM)** programme would further enhance community empowerment and improve the long-term sustainability of indigenous tourism development.

Preferred Community-Based Tourism and Entrepreneurship Opportunities Table 4. Preferred Tourism and Entrepreneurship Opportunities among the Orang Asli Community (N = 22)

Entrepreneurial Activity	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Handicrafts and Souvenir Production	10	45.5
Small Business Activities	5	22.7
Homestay Services	2	9.1
Agro-tourism and Agriculture	1	4.5
Tailoring	1	4.5
Information Technology (IT) Services	1	4.5
Financial Management Services	1	4.5
Other Activities	1	4.5

Handicraft and souvenir production emerged as the most preferred tourism-related enterprise (45.5%), followed by small-scale businesses (22.7%) and homestay services (9.1%) (Table 4). Other activities included agro-tourism, tailoring, IT services, and financial management. These findings suggest that respondents recognise the economic potential of indigenous cultural heritage and local resources. The results also indicate opportunities for developing community-based entrepreneurship through targeted training, product development, and business support.

The strong preference for handicraft production suggests that respondents perceive indigenous cultural assets as their most marketable tourism resource. This indicates considerable potential for developing community-based tourism products centred on local craftsmanship and cultural heritage.

Relationships among the PKSA Dimensions

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Matrix among the PKSA Dimensions (N=22)

Variables	Knowledge	Attitudes	Skills	Aspirations
Knowledge	1.000	0.918**	0.745**	0.845**
Attitudes	0.918**	1.000	0.819**	0.894**
Skills	0.745**	0.819**	1.000	0.879**
Aspirations	0.845**	0.894**	0.879**	1.000

Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among all four PKSA dimensions ($p < .01$), supporting the multidimensional nature of community readiness (Table 5). The strongest association was observed between **knowledge and attitudes** ($r = .918$), followed by **attitudes and aspirations** ($r = .894$). Skills also demonstrated strong positive relationships with aspirations ($r = .879$). Overall, the findings indicate that higher levels of one readiness dimension are associated with higher levels of the others, providing empirical support for the proposed PKSA framework.

Changes in Community Readiness Following Participation in the SULAM-Based C.O.V.E. 2026 Programme

Table 6. Paired-Samples *t*-Test Results for the Impact of the C.O.V.E. 2026 Programme on Community Readiness (N = 22)

Dimension	Before (Mean)	After (Mean)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Interpretation
Knowledge	2.95	3.82	2.610	0.016	Significant Improvement
Skills	2.64	3.73	3.032	0.006	Significant Improvement
Emotional Well-being	3.05	3.86	3.145	0.005	Significant Improvement
Self-Development	3.09	3.73	2.536	0.019	Significant Improvement
Community Support and Aspirations	3.05	3.91	2.988	0.007	Significant Improvement

Note. Differences are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Paired-samples *t*-tests revealed significant improvements across all assessed dimensions following participation in the C.O.V.E. 2026 programme (Table 6). Significant gains were observed in knowledge, skills, emotional well-being, self-development, and community support and aspirations ($p < .05$). The largest improvement was recorded in skills, indicating that the observed improvement in practical competencies suggests that the C.O.V.E. 2026 programme contributed to strengthening participants' initial capacity for tourism participation. These findings represent early evidence of community readiness rather than confirmation of long-term tourism outcomes.

Among the assessed dimensions, skills demonstrated the greatest improvement following programme participation, indicating that they were particularly effective in enhancing participants' practical competencies. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the SULAM-based Community Outreach Via Engagement (C.O.V.E.) 2026 programme in strengthening community readiness.

Overall, the findings indicate that the Orang Asli community demonstrated a favourable level of readiness for Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development, characterised by positive attitudes, strong developmental aspirations, and measurable improvements across the PKSA dimensions following participation in the SULAM-based C.O.V.E. 2026 programme. Collectively, these findings provide empirical evidence that community readiness is a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive, behavioural, practical, and motivational capacities that support indigenous participation in tourism development. Importantly, the findings should be

interpreted as reflecting the community's initial developmental readiness rather than long-term tourism outcomes. As such, the study establishes an empirical baseline for understanding how university–community engagement initiatives can strengthen the foundational capacities that may contribute to subsequent community empowerment and sustainable indigenous tourism development.

DISCUSSION

Community Readiness as the Foundation for Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development

The findings demonstrate that the Orang Asli community in Tadam Hill possesses a moderate-to-high level of community readiness for Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD), suggesting that the community has established the foundational capacities necessary to participate in future tourism initiatives. Rather than indicating that the community is fully prepared for tourism implementation, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of early-stage developmental readiness, characterised by encouraging levels of knowledge, positive attitudes, emerging practical skills, and strong aspirations towards community development. This distinction is important because sustainable indigenous tourism is a gradual developmental process that depends not only on tourism resources but also on the continuous strengthening of community capabilities over time.

These findings reinforce the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which emphasise that successful tourism development is fundamentally dependent upon the ability of local communities to participate actively in planning, decision-making, and benefit-sharing (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018). While previous studies have generally focused on the outcomes of community participation after tourism development, the present study contributes a different perspective by demonstrating that community readiness itself represents a prerequisite for meaningful participation. In other words, communities are unlikely to achieve sustainable tourism outcomes unless they first possess the knowledge, confidence, practical competencies, and motivation necessary to engage effectively in tourism-related activities.

These findings are also consistent with Dolezal and Novelli (2022), who argue that successful Community-Based Tourism depends on strengthening local capacities, collaborative partnerships, and community empowerment rather than relying solely on tourism resources. Similarly, Moscardo (2015) emphasises that community capacity building is a prerequisite for sustainable tourism development because communities require adequate knowledge, competencies, and collective capability before meaningful participation can occur. Extending these perspectives, the present study suggests that community readiness should not be viewed as a one-off programme outcome but as a developmental foundation that enables indigenous communities to progressively strengthen their participation, resilience, and long-term sustainability. Consequently, assessing community readiness at the early stages of tourism planning provides an important evidence base for designing capacity-building initiatives that are better aligned with local community needs and aspirations.

Despite the encouraging level of readiness observed, the findings also indicate that tourism-related skills remain the least developed dimension of the PKSA framework. Although respondents possess valuable indigenous knowledge, cultural assets, and traditional skills, competencies related to entrepreneurship, hospitality, marketing, visitor management, and digital engagement remain comparatively limited. This finding supports Scheyvens' (1999) proposition that meaningful empowerment requires more than participation alone; it requires sustained investment in human capital, leadership, and practical capability development. Accordingly, future tourism initiatives should prioritise structured skills development alongside infrastructure and destination marketing to ensure that indigenous communities are able to participate competitively and sustainably within the tourism economy.

Community Readiness, Community Empowerment and Capacity Building

Another important finding of this study is that community readiness is not a static condition but a developmental capability that can be strengthened through targeted capacity-building interventions. The significant improvements observed following participation in the Community Outreach Via Engagement (C.O.V.E.) 2026 programme suggest that appropriately designed university–community engagement initiatives can enhance knowledge, practical competencies, emotional well-being, self-development, and future aspirations. However,

these improvements should be interpreted as evidence of initial capacity development, rather than confirmation of long-term community transformation. Sustainable empowerment requires continued engagement, repeated learning opportunities, institutional support, and ongoing community participation beyond a single intervention.

These findings provide empirical support for Community Empowerment Theory (Scheyvens, 1999), which conceptualises empowerment as a progressive process through which communities acquire greater confidence, capabilities, and decision-making capacity. Rather than occurring immediately, empowerment develops incrementally as individuals accumulate knowledge, strengthen practical competencies, and become increasingly confident in managing local resources and participating in community affairs. The present findings therefore reinforce the proposition that community readiness functions as an important precursor to empowerment by establishing the internal capacities necessary for long-term community development.

An equally important finding concerns the strong positive relationships observed among the four PKSA dimensions. The significant correlations among knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations demonstrate that community readiness is a multidimensional and interconnected construct rather than a collection of independent attributes. Communities possessing greater tourism knowledge were also more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes, stronger competencies, and higher aspirations towards future tourism participation. This finding suggests that investments in one aspect of readiness may generate broader developmental benefits across multiple dimensions of community capacity, thereby supporting a more integrated approach to indigenous capacity-building.

The findings further indicate that respondents identified handicraft and souvenir production, small-scale businesses, and homestay services as the most promising tourism-related livelihood opportunities. These preferences demonstrate that the community recognises the economic value of its indigenous cultural heritage while expressing an interest in participating in community-based entrepreneurship. However, given that Tadom Hill remains at an early stage of tourism development, translating these aspirations into sustainable livelihoods will require continued mentoring, entrepreneurship training, digital marketing support, product innovation, and collaborative partnerships involving universities, government agencies, and industry practitioners.

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

This study contributes to indigenous tourism literature in several important ways. First, it extends the application of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Community Empowerment Theory (CET) by positioning community readiness as the foundational capability that precedes community empowerment and Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development. Whereas previous tourism studies have predominantly examined tourism impacts after implementation, the present study shifts scholarly attention towards the conditions that enable successful tourism participation before development occurs. In doing so, the study broadens current understanding of sustainable tourism by demonstrating that readiness is not simply an outcome of development but a prerequisite for empowerment that shapes the effectiveness of future tourism initiatives.

Second, the study strengthens the conceptual application of the PKSA framework by integrating knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations into a multidimensional assessment of indigenous community readiness. Rather than examining these constructs independently, the study demonstrates that they function collectively to represent the cognitive, behavioural, practical, and motivational capacities required for sustainable tourism participation. The strong internal reliability of the measurement instrument and the significant interrelationships among the PKSA dimensions further support the usefulness of the framework for assessing community readiness within indigenous tourism settings.

Third, the study contributes to the growing literature on service-learning and university–community engagement by demonstrating that the SULAM initiative extends beyond student-centred educational outcomes. The findings illustrate how structured university–community partnerships can contribute to strengthening indigenous community readiness through experiential learning, collaborative engagement, and capacity-building activities. Although the present study evaluates the initial outcomes of a single intervention, it establishes an empirical foundation for future longitudinal research examining how university-led engagement contributes to sustained community empowerment and indigenous tourism participation over time.

Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical implications for tourism policymakers, higher education institutions, and community development agencies. First, tourism planning should incorporate community readiness assessments during the early stages of project development to identify local strengths, capacity gaps, and priority training needs before substantial investments are made in tourism infrastructure or destination promotion. Such assessments enable policymakers to design interventions that are better aligned with community capabilities and development priorities.

Second, community empowerment initiatives should extend beyond tourism awareness campaigns by incorporating structured programmes in entrepreneurship development, leadership training, hospitality, digital marketing, financial literacy, and product innovation. Continuous mentoring and institutional support are particularly important for indigenous communities at the early stages of tourism development, where practical competencies often remain limited despite strong community aspirations.

Finally, the findings suggest that successful indigenous tourism development requires a balanced approach that integrates community readiness, empowerment, and cultural preservation. Rather than focusing exclusively on physical infrastructure or visitor growth, tourism policies should prioritise long-term investment in local human capital and community capability. By positioning community readiness as the starting point of tourism planning, this study provides a practical framework for designing more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable tourism initiatives that empower indigenous communities, safeguard cultural heritage, and strengthen community participation over time.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the readiness of the Orang Asli community in Tadam Hill, Selangor, for Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development (SITD) by integrating the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), Community Empowerment Theory (CET), and the Service-Learning Malaysia–University for Society (SULAM) approach. The findings demonstrate that the community possesses a moderate-to-high level of readiness, with positive attitudes and strong aspirations representing the community's greatest strengths, while practical tourism-related skills remain an important area for further development. Significant improvements observed following participation in the Community Outreach Via Engagement (C.O.V.E.) 2026 programme indicate that university-led community engagement can strengthen the cognitive, behavioural, practical, and motivational capacities that underpin indigenous participation in tourism development. These findings should be interpreted as evidence of early-stage community readiness, providing an empirical baseline rather than confirmation of long-term tourism outcomes.

The study contributes to the indigenous tourism literature by positioning community readiness as a foundational capability that precedes community empowerment and Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Development. Through the application of the PKSA framework, the study demonstrates that knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations collectively represent the essential capacities required for indigenous communities to participate meaningfully in tourism development. By integrating these dimensions within the context of a SULAM-based community engagement initiative, the study extends current understanding of how higher education institutions can contribute to indigenous capacity-building while strengthening university–community partnerships for sustainable development.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that tourism development strategies should move beyond infrastructure provision and destination promotion by placing greater emphasis on community readiness assessment, continuous capacity-building, and long-term community engagement. Government agencies, tourism practitioners, and higher education institutions should work collaboratively to provide sustained support in entrepreneurship, leadership development, tourism skills, digital marketing, and community governance so that indigenous communities are better positioned to participate actively in future tourism initiatives. Such collaborative approaches are likely to strengthen local ownership, enhance community resilience, and improve the sustainability of tourism development over time.

This study is not without limitations. The findings are based on a relatively small sample from a single Orang Asli community and capture community readiness immediately following participation in a university-led engagement programme. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the context of an exploratory case study that examines the initial stages of community capacity development. Future research should involve larger and more diverse indigenous communities, employ longitudinal research designs to examine the sustainability of readiness over time, and incorporate mixed-methods approaches to provide deeper insights into how community readiness evolves into community empowerment and sustained tourism participation.

Ultimately, sustainable indigenous tourism begins not with infrastructure or tourism products, but with prepared communities. By demonstrating the importance of community readiness as the foundation for empowerment, this study provides both a practical and theoretical basis for designing more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable tourism development strategies that enable indigenous communities to shape and benefit from their own tourism futures.

REFERENCES

1. Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T)
2. Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1995). A service-learning curriculum for faculty. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 2, 112–122.
3. Butler, R., & Hinch, T. (2007). *Tourism and Indigenous Peoples: Issues and Implications* (2nd ed.). Butterworth-Heinemann.
4. Chand, S., & Sharpley, R. (2018). Community development and tourism. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 17(2), 123–138.
5. Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
6. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). Sage.
7. Dangi, T. B., & Jamal, T. (2016). An integrated approach to “sustainable community-based tourism”. *Sustainability*, 8(5), 475. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su8050475>
8. Dolezal, C., & Novelli, M. (2022). Power in community-based tourism: Empowerment and partnership in Bali. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 30(10), 2352–2370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2021.1990777>
9. Edwards, R. W., Jumper-Thurman, P., Plested, B. A., Oetting, E. R., & Swanson, L. (2000). Community readiness: Research to practice. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(3), 291–307. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1520-6629\(200005\)28:3<291::AID-JCOP5>3.0.CO;2-9](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1520-6629(200005)28:3<291::AID-JCOP5>3.0.CO;2-9)
10. Giampiccoli, A., & Saayman, M. (2018). Community-based tourism development model. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 7(4), 1–25.
11. Goodwin, H., & Santilli, R. (2009). Community-based tourism: A success? ICRT Occasional Paper No. 11.
12. Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2022). *Multivariate Data Analysis* (9th ed.). Cengage Learning.
13. Kontogeorgopoulos, N., Churyen, A., & Duangsaeng, V. (2014). Success factors in community-based tourism. *Tourism Management*, 45, 108–122.
14. Moscardo, G. (2015). Community capacity building: An emerging challenge for tourism development. In G. Moscardo & P. Benckendorff (Eds.), *Building community capacity for tourism development* (pp. 1–15). CABI.
15. Oetting, E. R., Plested, B. A., Edwards, R. W., Thurman, P. J., Kelly, K. J., Beauvais, F., & Stanley, L. R. (2014). Community readiness for community change. In B. A. Jason & D. S. Glenwick (Eds.), *Handbook of methodological approaches to community-based research* (pp. 349–362). Oxford University Press.
16. Plested, B. A., Edwards, R. W., & Jumper-Thurman, P. (2006). *Community readiness: A handbook for successful change*. Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research, Colorado State University.
17. Scheyvens, R. (1999). Ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities. *Tourism Management*, 20(2), 245–249.
18. Sharpley, R. (2020). Tourism, sustainable development and the theoretical divide: 20 years on. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 28(11), 1932–1946.



19. UN Tourism. (2024). Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024. UN Tourism.
20. Zeppel, H. (2006). Indigenous ecotourism: Sustainable development and management. *CABI*.