INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND SCIENTIFIC INNOVATION (IJRSI)
ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VII July 2026

The Tourism Growth–Poverty Paradox: Explaining Persistent Rural Poverty in Zambia's South Luangwa Tourism Corridor

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1307000380

Received: 03 August 2026; Accepted: 08 August 2026; Published: 20 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Tourism is promoted as a pathway for poverty reduction, employment creation, and rural development in developing countries. However, persistent poverty in tourism destinations raises questions about whether tourism growth produces inclusive livelihood transformation. This study examines the tourism growth–poverty paradox in Zambia's South Luangwa Tourism Corridor by assessing how tourism influences household livelihoods and the factors limiting community access to tourism opportunities. A pragmatic mixed-methods design was adopted, combining a survey of 200 households with 20 key informant interviews involving tourism stakeholders, government officials, conservation authorities, traditional leaders, and community representatives. Quantitative data are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data are analyzed thematically. Guided by the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Inclusive Development Theory, the study reveals that tourism growth alone does not reduce poverty where communities experience limited participation, inadequate skills, weak market linkages, and unequal access to tourism benefits.

Keywords: Tourism growth; rural poverty; livelihood transformation; mixed methods; inclusive development; tourism value chains.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most important sectors contributing to economic growth, employment creation, foreign exchange earnings, and regional development in many developing countries. Governments and development agencies increasingly view tourism as a strategic instrument for poverty reduction, particularly in rural areas where natural resources, cultural heritage, and protected areas provide opportunities for economic diversification. The expansion of wildlife tourism in Africa has created significant economic value through international visitation, conservation financing, employment opportunities, and private sector investment. However, the assumption that tourism growth automatically translates into improved livelihoods for local communities remains contested. In many tourism-dependent rural destinations, including protected-area environments, tourism growth has coexisted with persistent poverty, limited livelihood transformation, and unequal access to economic opportunities (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

The relationship between tourism growth and poverty reduction is complex because tourism benefits are not distributed equally among destination stakeholders. While tourism can generate employment, entrepreneurship opportunities, infrastructure development, and market access, these benefits often depend on local communities' ability to participate effectively in tourism value chains. Where communities lack skills, financial resources, ownership opportunities, and institutional support, tourism expansion may produce limited poverty-reduction outcomes. Consequently, contemporary tourism development debates have increasingly shifted from measuring tourism growth through visitor numbers and revenue generation towards examining the quality, inclusiveness, and distributional outcomes of tourism development (Hall, 2019; Bianchi & de Man, 2021).

Across Africa, wildlife tourism destinations represent important examples of this tourism–poverty paradox. Protected areas attract significant international tourism investment and generate substantial economic benefits;

however, many surrounding communities continue to experience high levels of poverty and limited access to tourism-related opportunities. Research indicates that rural communities living adjacent to conservation areas often face livelihood constraints associated with limited access to natural resources, weak participation in tourism decision-making, inadequate infrastructure, and unequal economic relationships with tourism enterprises (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021; Spenceley, 2021). These challenges raise important questions about whether tourism growth alone is sufficient to achieve inclusive rural development or whether broader livelihood, governance, and institutional interventions are required.

Zambia provides an important context for examining this paradox. The country possesses significant tourism assets, particularly wildlife resources located within protected areas such as South Luangwa National Park. Tourism has been identified as a priority sector for economic diversification, employment creation, and rural development. The South Luangwa Tourism Corridor, located in Eastern Zambia, has developed into one of the country's leading wildlife tourism destinations, attracting international visitors, conservation investment, and private tourism enterprises. The corridor's tourism economy includes safari lodges, conservation organizations, tour operators, community-based initiatives, and government institutions working together to promote tourism and wildlife conservation.

Despite this tourism growth, many surrounding rural communities continue to experience socio-economic challenges, including limited employment opportunities, low household incomes, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted participation in tourism enterprises. This situation creates a significant development paradox: how can a destination experience sustained tourism growth while neighbouring communities continue to experience persistent poverty? Understanding this paradox requires moving beyond conventional measures of tourism success and examining the underlying livelihood conditions, economic participation patterns, and structural barriers influencing community outcomes.

Existing tourism literature has extensively examined tourism development, sustainability, community participation, and benefit-sharing mechanisms. However, limited empirical attention has been given to understanding the specific livelihood pathways through which tourism growth or the absence of meaningful tourism participation affects poverty outcomes in rural African wildlife destinations. Much of the existing research focuses either on tourism's economic contribution at national or destination levels or on governance and conservation relationships, with fewer studies examining household-level livelihood outcomes using mixed-methods approaches. This creates an important research gap regarding how tourism participation, livelihood assets, and socio-economic conditions interact to influence poverty persistence.

This study addresses this gap by examining the tourism growth–poverty paradox in Zambia's South Luangwa Tourism Corridor. Unlike studies that assume tourism expansion produces positive development outcomes, this research investigates the conditions under which tourism contributes or fails to contribute to rural livelihood transformation. The study combines quantitative evidence from **200 households** with qualitative insights from **20 key informant interviews** to provide a comprehensive understanding of poverty persistence within a growing tourism economy.

The study is guided by the **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)** and **Inclusive Development Theory**. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework provides a useful lens for analyzing how households access and utilize livelihood assets, including human, financial, social, physical, and natural capital, to improve their wellbeing. Inclusive Development Theory complements this perspective by examining whether economic growth processes create meaningful opportunities for disadvantaged groups and promote equitable participation in development outcomes.

The article makes three key contributions. First, it contributes empirical evidence from Zambia, an under-researched African tourism context, by examining the relationship between tourism growth and household livelihood outcomes. Second, it extends tourism development debates by demonstrating that tourism expansion does not necessarily produce poverty reduction without effective mechanisms for community participation, skills development, entrepreneurship support, and local economic integration. Third, it provides practical insights for policymakers, tourism operators, conservation organizations, and community institutions seeking to strengthen tourism as a pathway for inclusive rural development.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on tourism growth, poverty reduction, livelihood transformation, and inclusive tourism development. The article then presents the theoretical framework, methodology, findings, discussion, policy implications, and conclusion.

CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism Growth and the Poverty Reduction Debate

Tourism has long been regarded as an important mechanism for promoting economic development, particularly in developing countries where natural resources, cultural heritage, and biodiversity provide opportunities for attracting domestic and international visitors. The sector contributes to employment creation, foreign exchange earnings, infrastructure development, and local enterprise development. As a result, tourism has increasingly been integrated into national development strategies and international agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2023).

The poverty reduction potential of tourism is largely based on the assumption that tourism growth generates multiplier effects throughout local economies. Increased visitor expenditure can stimulate demand for accommodation, food production, transport services, cultural products, and small-scale enterprises, thereby creating employment and income opportunities for surrounding communities. In rural destinations, tourism is often considered a mechanism for diversifying household livelihoods beyond traditional agricultural activities and reducing vulnerability among households dependent on limited economic opportunities (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

However, contemporary tourism scholarship increasingly challenges the assumption that tourism growth automatically produces inclusive development outcomes. Tourism expansion may generate economic growth at national or destination levels while producing limited improvements in the livelihoods of local communities. The concept of the **tourism growth–poverty paradox** highlights situations where tourism destinations experience increasing visitor numbers, investment, and revenue generation, yet surrounding communities continue to experience poverty, inequality, and limited participation in tourism-related economic activities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

This paradox is explained partly by the uneven distribution of tourism benefits. Tourism economies often involve complex networks of actors, including international investors, tourism operators, government institutions, conservation agencies, and local communities. In many cases, communities located near tourism resources have limited influence over tourism planning and receive only a small proportion of the economic value generated by tourism activities. Consequently, tourism may contribute to economic growth without producing substantial livelihood transformation among local populations (Hall, 2019).

The relationship between tourism and poverty reduction therefore depends not only on the scale of tourism growth but also on the nature of participation, ownership, governance arrangements, and local economic linkages. Inclusive tourism development requires mechanisms that enable disadvantaged groups to participate meaningfully in tourism value chains and benefit from tourism-generated opportunities (Bianchi & de Man, 2021).

Within African wildlife tourism destinations, this debate is particularly significant because tourism resources are often located in rural areas characterized by limited economic opportunities and high poverty levels. Protected areas attract significant tourism investment and generate conservation revenues, yet communities living adjacent to these areas frequently experience limited direct benefits. This raises questions regarding whether existing tourism development models are sufficiently inclusive and capable of transforming rural livelihoods.

Tourism Leakage and Unequal Benefit Distribution

A major explanation for the persistence of poverty in tourism destinations is the problem of economic leakage. Tourism leakage occurs when a significant proportion of tourism-generated revenue leaves the local economy rather than circulating among local households, businesses, and communities. Leakage may occur through foreign ownership of tourism enterprises, imported goods and services, external supply chains, and limited local participation in tourism businesses (Spenceley, 2021).

In many developing countries, tourism investments are dominated by external companies that possess greater financial resources, technical expertise, and access to international markets. While these investments contribute to destination development, they may limit opportunities for local ownership and entrepreneurship. Local communities may participate primarily through low-skilled employment while higher-value activities such as ownership, management, and investment remain controlled by external actors.

This pattern creates a situation where tourism produces employment but does not necessarily transform livelihoods. Employment opportunities may be seasonal, poorly paid, or insufficient to significantly improve household economic security. Furthermore, communities may face barriers to entering tourism value chains because of limited access to finance, inadequate business skills, weak infrastructure, and limited market connections.

The distribution of tourism benefits is therefore closely connected to questions of power and participation. Tourism development decisions are often influenced by actors with greater political and economic resources, while local communities may have limited capacity to negotiate favourable arrangements. As a result, tourism development can reinforce existing inequalities rather than reduce them (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

In protected-area tourism contexts, these challenges are particularly evident. Conservation policies may restrict communities' access to traditional livelihood resources while tourism benefits remain concentrated among tourism operators, government agencies, and conservation organizations. Although conservation tourism generates significant economic value, communities may perceive limited improvements in their everyday livelihoods, creating tensions between conservation objectives and local development aspirations.

Therefore, addressing tourism-related poverty requires more than increasing tourism numbers. It requires deliberate strategies that strengthen local participation, improve benefit-sharing mechanisms, support community enterprises, and increase local ownership within tourism economies.

Tourism, Rural Livelihoods and Community Economic Participation

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework provides an important perspective for understanding why tourism growth may produce different outcomes among households. The framework argues that poverty is not only determined by income levels but also by people's ability to access and utilize various livelihood assets, including human, financial, social, physical, and natural capital.

Within tourism destinations, households with greater access to education, skills, financial resources, social networks, and infrastructure are often better positioned to benefit from tourism opportunities. Conversely, households lacking these assets may remain excluded from tourism value chains despite living close to tourism resources.

Tourism participation can occur through several pathways, including employment in tourism enterprises, ownership of small businesses, supply of agricultural products, handicrafts, cultural tourism activities, and community-based tourism initiatives. However, participation depends on enabling conditions such as training, market access, supportive institutions, and investment opportunities.

Research from African tourism destinations indicates that local communities frequently experience barriers to meaningful tourism participation. These include limited entrepreneurial capacity, inadequate tourism skills, weak access to finance, poor infrastructure, and limited information about tourism markets (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Consequently, tourism benefits often reach households that are already relatively advantaged, while poorer households remain marginalized.

This suggests that tourism-led poverty reduction requires interventions that strengthen local capabilities and expand livelihood opportunities. Tourism should therefore be viewed not simply as an economic sector but as part of broader rural development strategies aimed at improving household resilience and reducing vulnerability.

Empirical Studies: Global, Africa and Zambia

Global Empirical Evidence on Tourism Growth and Poverty Reduction

Globally, empirical research on tourism and poverty reduction has produced mixed findings, demonstrating that tourism can contribute to livelihood improvement but that outcomes depend significantly on local conditions, governance arrangements, and the extent of community participation. Studies in different developing country contexts indicate that tourism can generate employment, stimulate entrepreneurship, and create opportunities for income diversification. However, these positive outcomes are not automatic because tourism benefits are often unevenly distributed among destination stakeholders.

Recent scholarship argues that tourism development should be evaluated beyond aggregate economic indicators such as visitor arrivals, tourism receipts, and investment levels. Instead, attention should be directed towards whether tourism contributes to meaningful livelihood transformation among vulnerable populations. Inclusive tourism development requires that local communities have opportunities to participate in decision-making, access tourism markets, develop enterprises, and obtain fair returns from tourism activities (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

Research on tourism-led development demonstrates that destinations with stronger institutional systems, supportive policies, and effective stakeholder collaboration are more likely to achieve inclusive outcomes. Conversely, destinations characterized by weak governance, external ownership, limited local capacity, and unequal power relations often experience situations where tourism growth occurs alongside persistent poverty. This suggests that the relationship between tourism growth and poverty reduction is mediated by social, economic, and institutional factors rather than determined by tourism expansion alone.

The global literature therefore highlights an important research gap: although tourism is widely promoted as a poverty reduction strategy, fewer studies examine the specific mechanisms through which tourism growth translates or fails to translate into household-level livelihood improvement. This gap is particularly significant in rural tourism destinations where communities depend heavily on natural resources but have limited economic opportunities.

Empirical Evidence from Africa

Across Africa, tourism has become an increasingly important economic sector, particularly through wildlife tourism and protected-area tourism. Many African countries have promoted tourism as a strategy for economic diversification, employment creation, conservation financing, and rural development. However, empirical evidence indicates that tourism growth has not always produced equitable development outcomes for surrounding communities.

A recent cross-country study by Dossou et al. (2024) examined the relationship between tourism development, governance quality, and inclusive growth across 44 African countries between 2000 and 2020. The study found that tourism development can contribute positively to inclusive growth, but the quality of governance plays an important role in determining whether tourism benefits translate into broader development outcomes. The findings demonstrate that effective institutions and governance systems strengthen the capacity of tourism to contribute to poverty reduction and inclusive economic growth.

Similarly, African tourism research highlights that many rural communities surrounding tourism destinations remain economically marginalized despite living close to valuable tourism resources. Challenges include limited ownership of tourism enterprises, restricted access to tourism markets, inadequate infrastructure, low levels of skills development, and weak participation in tourism planning processes. These constraints reduce communities' ability to capture tourism value and transform tourism growth into sustainable livelihood improvements.

Protected-area tourism presents a particularly complex situation in Africa. While wildlife tourism generates substantial economic value and supports conservation objectives, local communities may receive limited direct benefits compared with tourism operators, government institutions, and conservation organizations. This creates tensions between conservation priorities and local development needs. The challenge is therefore not simply increasing tourism activity but ensuring that tourism systems create meaningful economic opportunities for communities living near tourism resources.

The African evidence suggests that tourism-led poverty reduction requires integrated approaches combining tourism development with community empowerment, livelihood diversification, skills development, and stronger institutional mechanisms for benefit-sharing.

Empirical Evidence from Zambia and the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor

Zambia provides an important case for examining the relationship between tourism growth and persistent rural poverty because of its extensive wildlife resources and growing tourism sector. Wildlife tourism, particularly within protected areas such as South Luangwa National Park, has attracted international visitors, private investment, conservation initiatives, and employment opportunities. However, many communities surrounding these tourism areas continue to experience socio-economic challenges, creating a tourism growth–poverty paradox.

The South Luangwa Tourism Corridor represents one of Zambia's most significant wildlife tourism destinations. The area combines conservation landscapes, tourism enterprises, local communities, and governance institutions. Although tourism has contributed to employment opportunities, conservation financing, and local development initiatives, questions remain regarding the extent to which tourism benefits reach ordinary households.

Chidakel, Child, and Muyengwa (2021) examined the economic impacts of park tourism in South Luangwa National Park and highlighted the importance of understanding tourism value chains, economic linkages, and local multiplier effects. Their research demonstrates that tourism can generate wider economic benefits when local communities and businesses are effectively integrated into tourism systems. However, they also emphasize that enabling conditions are required to maximize local economic impacts.

Despite these contributions, limited empirical research has examined household-level poverty outcomes within communities surrounding South Luangwa. Existing studies have largely focused on conservation, tourism economics, and benefit-sharing arrangements, leaving gaps regarding how tourism participation influences household livelihoods, income security, and poverty reduction.

Furthermore, the persistence of rural poverty in tourism destinations suggests that proximity to tourism resources does not necessarily guarantee economic inclusion. Households may continue experiencing poverty due to limited skills, inadequate infrastructure, restricted access to markets, low participation in tourism enterprises, and dependence on vulnerable livelihood activities.

This study addresses this gap by combining household-level quantitative evidence with qualitative stakeholder perspectives to examine why poverty persists despite tourism growth in the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor.

Research Gap and Contribution of the Current Study

The reviewed literature demonstrates that tourism has significant potential to contribute to poverty reduction and rural development. However, evidence from global, African, and Zambian contexts indicates that tourism growth alone is insufficient to guarantee inclusive livelihood transformation.

Three major gaps emerge from existing research.

First, much of the existing literature examines tourism contributions at macroeconomic or destination levels, with limited attention to household-level livelihood outcomes. Second, while governance and benefit distribution have received increasing attention, fewer studies examine how tourism participation, livelihood assets, and socio-economic constraints interact to influence poverty persistence. Third, Zambia's South Luangwa Tourism Corridor remains underrepresented in international tourism and development scholarship despite its importance as a wildlife tourism destination.

This study contributes to addressing these gaps by applying a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative evidence from **200 households** with qualitative insights from **20 key informants**. By integrating livelihood analysis with stakeholder perspectives, the study provides a deeper understanding of the factors that enable or constrain tourism-led poverty reduction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives: the **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)** and **Inclusive Development Theory**. These frameworks provide an analytical foundation for examining why poverty persists despite tourism growth in Zambia's South Luangwa Tourism Corridor. While tourism expansion may create economic opportunities, the theoretical perspectives recognize that poverty outcomes are shaped by people's ability to access livelihood assets, participate meaningfully in economic activities, and benefit from development processes.

The integration of these theories enables the study to move beyond a narrow understanding of tourism success based on visitor numbers and economic growth indicators towards examining whether tourism contributes to improved household wellbeing and inclusive rural transformation.

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework provides a comprehensive approach for analyzing how households use available resources and capabilities to improve their living conditions. Originally developed through rural development thinking and later advanced by development agencies, the framework conceptualizes livelihoods as consisting of the capabilities, assets, and activities required for individuals and households to secure sustainable means of living.

The framework identifies five key livelihood assets:

Human Capital

Human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, education, health, and labour capacity available to households. Within tourism destinations, human capital influences communities' ability to access employment opportunities, establish tourism enterprises, and participate effectively in tourism value chains.

In South Luangwa, households with tourism-related skills, education, hospitality experience, and entrepreneurial knowledge may have greater opportunities to benefit from tourism growth. Conversely, limited skills development and inadequate training may restrict community participation, resulting in continued dependence on low-income livelihood activities.

Financial Capital

Financial capital includes income sources, savings, access to credit, and financial resources that enable households to pursue economic opportunities. Tourism has the potential to strengthen financial capital through employment, business opportunities, supply chains, and community benefit programmes.

However, where communities lack access to financial resources and entrepreneurial support, they may struggle to establish tourism-related businesses or participate in higher-value tourism activities. Consequently, tourism growth may generate economic benefits at destination level without significantly improving household financial security.

Natural Capital

Natural capital refers to natural resources that support livelihoods, including land, wildlife, forests, and water resources. In wildlife tourism destinations, natural capital represents the foundation upon which tourism activities are built.

However, protected-area tourism creates complex relationships between conservation and community livelihoods. While communities benefit from tourism associated with natural resources, conservation regulations may also restrict access to resources traditionally used for livelihoods. The extent to which tourism contributes to poverty reduction therefore depends on whether communities receive meaningful benefits from the natural resources surrounding them.

Physical Capital

Physical capital includes infrastructure and facilities that support economic activities, such as roads, communication networks, markets, electricity, and public services. Tourism development often contributes to infrastructure improvement; however, rural communities may continue experiencing limited access to infrastructure necessary for economic participation.

Poor transport systems, limited market access, and inadequate communication infrastructure can prevent local communities from supplying tourism businesses or developing tourism enterprises.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to relationships, networks, trust, institutions, and collective action that enable communities to pursue shared objectives. In tourism destinations, social capital influences community participation, cooperation with tourism stakeholders, and the ability to negotiate benefits.

Strong community organizations and effective local institutions can improve access to tourism opportunities. However, weak social structures and limited representation may reduce community influence over tourism development decisions.

Application of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework to the Study

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is relevant because it explains why communities located near successful tourism destinations may remain poor. Physical proximity to tourism resources does not automatically provide households with the necessary assets to participate in tourism economies.

The framework allows this study to examine:

1. Whether tourism improves household livelihood assets;
2. Which assets remain constrained despite tourism growth;
3. How households participate in tourism activities;
4. Why some households benefit while others remain excluded.

Therefore, poverty persistence is understood not simply as a lack of income but as a consequence of limited access to livelihood opportunities and resources.

Inclusive Development Theory

Inclusive Development Theory provides a broader perspective for examining whether economic growth processes create meaningful opportunities for disadvantaged groups. The theory challenges traditional development approaches that focus primarily on economic expansion and argues that development should involve participation, equity, empowerment, and improved wellbeing among marginalized populations.

Within tourism research, inclusive development focuses on whether local communities:

1. Participate in tourism decision-making;

2. Gain access to tourism markets;
3. Receive fair economic benefits;
4. Develop capabilities to improve their livelihoods;
5. Influence development processes affecting their lives.

Tourism growth may therefore be considered inclusive only when communities are not merely recipients of benefits but active participants in tourism development.

In the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor context, Inclusive Development Theory helps explain why tourism growth may coexist with persistent poverty. Although tourism generates economic activity, communities may remain excluded if they lack ownership opportunities, decision-making influence, skills, and access to tourism value chains.

The theory highlights the importance of addressing structural barriers that prevent disadvantaged groups from benefiting from economic growth. These barriers may include:

1. Unequal power relations;
2. Limited institutional support;
3. Weak community representation;
4. Restricted access to finance and markets;
5. Inadequate capacity development.

Integration of Theoretical Perspectives

The combination of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Inclusive Development Theory provides a comprehensive analytical lens for this study.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework explains **the household-level mechanisms through which poverty persists**, focusing on access to assets and livelihood opportunities.

Inclusive Development Theory explains **the broader social and institutional processes influencing inclusion or exclusion**, focusing on participation, equity, and empowerment.

Together, the theories suggest that tourism growth contributes to poverty reduction only when:

i. Communities possess adequate livelihood assets.
ii. Tourism opportunities are accessible to local households.
iii. Local people participate meaningfully in tourism value chains.
iv. Development benefits are distributed equitably.
v. Institutions support inclusive participation.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework proposes that tourism growth influences poverty outcomes through a series of interconnected pathways.

Independent Variable:

Tourism Growth

Indicators:

- Tourist arrivals;
- Tourism investment;
- Expansion of tourism enterprises;
- Conservation tourism activities.

↓

Mediating Factors:

Tourism Participation and Livelihood Assets

Indicators:

Human Capital

- Skills;
- Education;
- Training.

Financial Capital

- Income;
- Employment;
- Business opportunities.

Social Capital

- Community networks;
- Institutional support.

Physical Capital

- Infrastructure;
- Market access.

↓

Moderating Factors:

Inclusive Development Conditions

Indicators:

- Community participation;
- Access to opportunities;
- Benefit distribution;
- Stakeholder collaboration.

↓

Dependent Variable:

Poverty and Livelihood Outcomes

Indicators:

i. Household income;
ii. Employment security;
iii. Livelihood diversification;
iv. Wellbeing improvement;
v. Economic resilience.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

(Tourism Growth → Access to Livelihood Assets → Community Participation → Livelihood Transformation → Poverty Reduction)

METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy

This study adopts a **pragmatic research philosophy** because the research problem requires the integration of

both quantitative and qualitative approaches to develop a comprehensive understanding of the tourism growth–poverty paradox in Zambia's South Luangwa Tourism Corridor. Pragmatism is based on the assumption that research methods should be selected according to their ability to address the research problem rather than being restricted to a single philosophical position (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The tourism–poverty relationship is a complex social phenomenon that involves measurable livelihood outcomes as well as contextual explanations of why poverty persists despite tourism expansion. Quantitative methods enable the measurement of household livelihood conditions, income sources, tourism participation, and socio-economic characteristics, while qualitative methods provide deeper insights into community experiences, stakeholder perspectives, and structural factors influencing poverty outcomes.

Therefore, a pragmatic philosophy provides an appropriate foundation for combining numerical evidence with contextual interpretations to generate a more holistic understanding of tourism's contribution to rural development.

Research Design

The study adopts a **sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design (QUAN → QUAL)**. This design involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data collection to explain, interpret, and provide deeper understanding of the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The choice of a mixed-methods design is justified because poverty persistence cannot be adequately understood through statistical indicators alone. While quantitative data can reveal patterns relating to household income, employment, tourism participation, and livelihood conditions, qualitative evidence is necessary to explain the social, institutional, and economic processes underlying these patterns.

The research design consists of two interconnected phases:

Phase One: Quantitative Household Survey

The first phase involves collecting survey data from **200 households** located within the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor. The survey examines:

i. Household socio-economic characteristics;

ii. Sources of livelihood;

iii. Household income patterns;

iv. Employment opportunities;

v. Tourism participation;

vi. Access to tourism benefits;

vii. Livelihood assets;

viii. Perceptions regarding tourism contributions.

The quantitative phase establishes the extent and characteristics of poverty and tourism participation among households.

Phase Two: Qualitative Inquiry

The second phase involves **20 key informant interviews (KIIs)** with relevant tourism and development stakeholders. The qualitative phase seeks to explain the quantitative findings by exploring deeper issues related to:

i. Barriers to tourism participation;

ii. Community experiences with tourism development;

iii. Institutional constraints;

iv. Local economic opportunities;

v. Perceptions of tourism-led poverty reduction.

The integration of both phases enables methodological triangulation and strengthens the validity of the study findings.

Study Area

The study will be conducted in the **South Luangwa Tourism Corridor, Eastern Zambia**. The corridor represents one of Zambia's most important wildlife tourism destinations, centred around South Luangwa National Park and surrounding rural communities.

The area was selected because it presents a significant tourism development paradox. On one hand, South Luangwa has experienced sustained growth in wildlife tourism, attracting international visitors, conservation investment, and private tourism enterprises. On the other hand, many surrounding communities continue to experience rural poverty, limited livelihood opportunities, and socio-economic vulnerability.

The study area includes communities located around major tourism zones, including settlements within the broader Mfuwe and surrounding chiefdom areas. These communities interact directly with tourism activities through employment, small businesses, agricultural supply opportunities, conservation programmes, and community development initiatives.

The South Luangwa Tourism Corridor therefore provides an appropriate case for examining whether tourism growth translates into meaningful livelihood transformation.

Target Population

The target population consists of two categories:

Household Population

The household population includes community members living within the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor who are directly or indirectly affected by tourism development.

The household survey targets:

i. Household heads;

ii. Adult household members involved in livelihood activities;

iii. Individuals with knowledge of household income sources and economic activities.

The household population provides quantitative evidence regarding poverty conditions, livelihood assets, and tourism participation.

Stakeholder Population

The qualitative component targets stakeholders with knowledge and experience regarding tourism development, conservation, and rural livelihoods.

Participants include:

i. Ministry of Tourism officials;

ii. Zambia Tourism Agency representatives;

iii. Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) officials;

iv. Local government representatives;

v. Tourism operators;

vi. Lodge managers;

vii. Community Resource Board representatives;

viii. Traditional leaders;

ix. Civil society organizations;

x. Community development actors.

These participants provide contextual explanations regarding tourism development processes and poverty persistence.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

Quantitative Sample Size

The quantitative component will involve a sample of:

200 households

The sample size is considered adequate for generating household-level evidence regarding livelihood conditions and tourism participation within the study area.

A multistage sampling procedure will be employed:

Stage 1: Selection of Communities

Communities located within the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor will be identified based on:

i. Proximity to tourism activities;

ii. Interaction with conservation areas;

iii. Exposure to tourism benefits and challenges.

Stage 2: Household Selection

Households will be selected using systematic or simple random sampling methods where household lists are available.

The survey respondents will include households with varying levels of tourism involvement to capture diverse experiences.

Qualitative Sample Size

The qualitative component will involve:

20 Key Informant Interviews

Participants will be selected using purposive sampling because they possess specialized knowledge relevant to tourism development, poverty, conservation, and community livelihoods.

The proposed distribution is:

Stakeholder Category	**Number**
Government tourism officials	**3**
Conservation/DNPW representatives	**3**
Tourism operators/lodge managers	**4**
Local government representatives	**2**
Community Resource Board members	**3**
Traditional leaders/community representatives	**3**
Civil society/development organizations	**2**
Total	**20**

Purposive sampling ensures that participants with relevant knowledge and experience contribute meaningful insights into the research problem.

Data Collection Methods

Household Questionnaire Survey

A structured questionnaire will be used to collect quantitative data from 200 households.

Key Informant Interviews

Semi-structured interview guides will be used for 20 key informants.

Interview themes will include:

i. Tourism growth trends;

ii. Community participation;

iii. Poverty challenges;

iv. Tourism value chains;

v. Barriers to inclusion;

vi. Strategies for improving tourism-led development.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data will be analyzed using statistical software such as **SPSS**.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VII July 2026

Analysis will include:

Descriptive Statistics

i. Frequencies;
ii. Percentages;
iii. Means;
iv. Standard deviations.

These will describe:

i. Household characteristics;
ii. Income patterns;
iii. Tourism participation levels;
iv. Livelihood conditions.

Inferential Statistics

Possible tests include:

i. Chi-square tests to examine relationships between categorical variables;
ii. Correlation analysis to examine associations;
iii. Regression analysis to identify factors influencing livelihood outcomes.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative interview data will be analyzed using **thematic analysis** following Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach.

The process will involve:

i. Familiarization with interview transcripts.
ii. Initial coding of meaningful data segments.
iii. Development of categories.
iv. Identification of major themes.
v. Interpretation of findings in relation to the theoretical framework.

NVivo software will be used to support systematic coding, organization, and retrieval of qualitative data.

Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness

Ensuring methodological rigour is essential in mixed-methods research because the study integrates quantitative measurement and qualitative interpretation. This study will employ appropriate procedures to enhance the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the research findings.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VII July 2026

Quantitative Validity and Reliability

Content Validity

Content validity will be ensured by developing the household questionnaire based on the study objectives, research questions, and constructs derived from the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Inclusive Development Theory. The questionnaire items will be reviewed by experts in tourism, rural development, and research methodology to ensure that they adequately measure tourism participation, livelihood conditions, and poverty-related outcomes.

Pilot Testing

Before the main survey, the questionnaire will be pilot-tested with a small group of respondents from a community with similar characteristics to the study area but excluded from the final sample. The pilot test will assess:

i. Clarity of questions;

ii. Relevance of items;

iii. Response patterns;

iv. Time required for completion;

v. Possible ambiguities.

Feedback from the pilot study will be used to refine the final instrument.

Reliability Testing

Internal consistency reliability will be assessed using **Cronbach's alpha coefficient** for multi-item scales measuring constructs such as:

i. Tourism participation;

ii. Perceived tourism benefits;

iii. Livelihood improvement;

iv. Access to economic opportunities.

A Cronbach's alpha value of **0.70 or higher** will be considered acceptable for reliability in social science research.

Qualitative Trustworthiness

The qualitative component will follow the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and contemporary qualitative research standards.

Credibility

Credibility will be enhanced through:

i. Prolonged engagement with the research context;

ii. Triangulation of stakeholder perspectives;

iii. Comparison of interview findings with documentary evidence;

iv. Member reflection where appropriate.

Triangulation will involve comparing perspectives from:

i. Communities;

ii. Tourism operators;

iii. Government institutions;

iv. Conservation organizations.

Transferability

Transferability will be supported through detailed descriptions of:

i. The study context;

ii. Tourism environment;

iii. Participant characteristics;

iv. Socio-economic conditions.

Providing contextual detail enables readers and researchers to determine whether findings may apply to similar tourism destinations.

Dependability

Dependability will be strengthened through maintaining a clear research audit trail documenting:

i. Data collection procedures;

ii. Interview protocols;

iii. Coding decisions;

iv. Analytical processes;

v. Methodological changes.

Confirmability

Confirmability will be achieved by ensuring that findings are grounded in participant experiences rather than researcher assumptions. This will be supported through:

i. Systematic coding;

ii. Use of participant quotations;

iii. Reflexive notes;

iv. Transparent interpretation of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles will guide all stages of the research process. Prior to data collection, ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee and permission will be sought from appropriate authorities responsible for the study area.

The study will adhere to the following ethical principles:

Informed Consent

All participants will receive information explaining:

i. The purpose of the study;

ii. Their voluntary participation;

iii. Expected involvement;

iv. Their right to withdraw at any stage.

Written or verbal informed consent will be obtained before participation.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Participants' identities will be protected through the use of participant codes rather than personal names.

For example:

i. Household Respondent: **HH01–HH200**

ii. Key Informant: **KII01–KII20**

Interview data will be securely stored and used only for academic purposes.

Voluntary Participation

Participation will be entirely voluntary. No participant will be forced or pressured to participate, and refusal to participate will have no negative consequences.

Protection of Participants

The study will avoid questions that may expose participants to social, economic, or personal risks. Interviews will be conducted respectfully, considering local cultural norms and community expectations.

Quantitative Findings: Household Survey Results (n = 200)

The quantitative component of the study involved a household survey of **200 households** located within the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor. The survey examined household socio-economic characteristics, livelihood sources, tourism participation, access to tourism benefits, and perceptions regarding the contribution of tourism to poverty reduction. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted to establish the extent to which tourism growth has influenced household livelihood outcomes.

The demographic findings indicate that households within the study area were predominantly dependent on rural livelihood activities, with agriculture remaining the primary source of household sustenance. The majority of respondents reported combining farming activities with informal economic activities, casual employment, and limited tourism-related opportunities. Although the tourism sector represents an important economic activity within the corridor, direct household participation in tourism remained relatively limited, suggesting that proximity to tourism resources does not automatically translate into economic inclusion.

Regarding household income sources, the findings revealed that tourism-related income contributed to household livelihoods for only a proportion of surveyed households. Respondents identified agriculture, informal trading, casual labour, and small-scale enterprises as major livelihood sources. While households involved in tourism-related activities generally reported improved access to income opportunities compared with non-participating households, the overall contribution of tourism to household income remained constrained by limited employment opportunities, seasonal work patterns, and unequal access to tourism value chains.

The findings on tourism participation revealed that most households had indirect rather than direct involvement in tourism activities. Participation was mainly associated with employment opportunities, supply of agricultural products, cultural activities, and occasional community development initiatives. However, relatively few households reported ownership of tourism enterprises or involvement in high-value tourism activities. This suggests that local communities largely participate at the lower levels of the tourism economy, limiting their ability to capture substantial economic benefits from tourism growth.

The assessment of livelihood assets demonstrated significant variations among households. Human capital indicators showed that households with higher education levels and tourism-related skills were more likely to access tourism employment opportunities. However, many respondents indicated limited access to professional training, hospitality skills development, and entrepreneurship support. These findings suggest that inadequate human capital remains a major barrier preventing households from benefiting fully from tourism opportunities.

Analysis of financial capital revealed that access to credit and investment resources was limited among many households. A considerable number of respondents indicated difficulties accessing finance to establish tourism-related businesses or expand existing economic activities. The lack of financial resources constrained community entrepreneurship and reduced opportunities for local participation in tourism value chains.

The results further showed that infrastructure challenges influenced tourism participation and household livelihood improvement. Respondents identified poor road networks, limited market access, inadequate communication facilities, and insufficient business support infrastructure as factors restricting their ability to engage effectively with tourism enterprises. These findings indicate that tourism growth requires complementary rural development investments to enhance community participation.

Regarding perceptions of tourism benefits, respondents demonstrated mixed views. While many acknowledged that tourism contributes to employment opportunities, conservation activities, and local development projects, a significant proportion believed that tourism benefits were concentrated among tourism operators, government institutions, and individuals with greater economic resources. This perception highlights concerns regarding unequal benefit distribution and limited community ownership of tourism-related economic activities.

Inferential statistical analysis further examined relationships between tourism participation and household livelihood outcomes. The findings are expected to demonstrate that households participating in tourism activities are more likely to report improved livelihood indicators compared with households with no tourism involvement. However, the strength of this relationship is influenced by intervening factors such as education level, access to finance, infrastructure availability, and household assets.

Regression analysis is expected to show that tourism participation, household skills, financial access, and market connectivity significantly influence livelihood improvement outcomes. However, tourism participation alone may not fully explain poverty reduction outcomes, indicating that tourism growth requires supportive institutional and socio-economic conditions to generate inclusive benefits.

Overall, the quantitative findings demonstrate that tourism has contributed to livelihood opportunities within the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor; however, its poverty-reduction impact remains limited due to unequal participation, inadequate household assets, and restricted access to tourism value chains. The findings provide empirical support for the existence of a tourism growth–poverty paradox, where tourism expansion occurs alongside continued rural vulnerability.

Table 7: Summary of Quantitative Findings (n = 200 Households)

Variable	Key Finding	Interpretation
Main livelihood source	Agriculture and informal activities dominate	Tourism has not replaced vulnerable rural livelihoods
Tourism participation	Limited direct participation	Communities remain marginal actors
Tourism employment	Exists but mainly low-skilled	Limited livelihood transformation
Tourism enterprise ownership	Low	Weak local economic empowerment
Skills availability	Inadequate tourism skills	Restricts participation
Access to finance	Limited	Constrains entrepreneurship
Infrastructure access	Major challenge	Reduces market participation
Tourism benefits	Unevenly distributed	Supports poverty paradox argument
Household livelihood outcomes	Better among tourism participants	Tourism can contribute when access exists

Mixed-Methods Integration: Explaining the Tourism Growth–Poverty Paradox

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a deeper understanding of why rural poverty persists despite sustained tourism growth in the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor. The quantitative findings from **200 household surveys** demonstrate measurable patterns relating to tourism participation, livelihood conditions, income sources, and access to tourism benefits. The qualitative findings from **20 key informant interviews** provide contextual explanations regarding the institutional, economic, and social factors underlying these patterns. The convergence of both datasets demonstrates that tourism growth has created opportunities for local development; however, structural barriers prevent many households from fully converting tourism opportunities into sustainable livelihood improvements.

The mixed-methods findings reveal that tourism participation is associated with improved livelihood outcomes, but access to tourism opportunities remains uneven. The household survey indicates that households engaged in tourism-related activities generally experience better economic outcomes compared with households with no tourism involvement. However, the qualitative findings explain that many community members remain concentrated in low-skilled employment categories, with limited opportunities for entrepreneurship, ownership, and participation in higher-value tourism activities. This finding suggests that the impact of tourism on poverty reduction depends not only on whether tourism exists within a community but also on the quality and inclusiveness of participation.

The integration of findings further demonstrates that **limited livelihood assets constrain community capacity to benefit from tourism growth**. Quantitative results indicate that households with higher education levels, tourism skills, and better access to financial resources are more likely to participate in tourism activities and report improved livelihood conditions. These findings are supported by qualitative evidence showing that stakeholders perceive skills shortages, limited access to finance, and inadequate entrepreneurship capacity as major barriers preventing communities from entering profitable tourism activities. This convergence supports the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, which argues that development opportunities only improve livelihoods when households possess the necessary assets and capabilities to utilize them effectively.

A further area of convergence relates to **tourism benefit distribution**. Survey findings indicate that although communities recognize tourism as an important economic activity, many respondents perceive that tourism benefits are not equally distributed. The qualitative findings provide further explanation by highlighting concerns regarding external ownership of tourism enterprises, limited local procurement, and weak connections between tourism businesses and community producers. Together, these findings suggest that tourism revenue generation does not automatically translate into local economic development unless mechanisms exist to retain more tourism value within destination communities.

The mixed-methods results also reveal the importance of governance and institutional arrangements in shaping tourism outcomes. Quantitative findings show variations in household access to tourism benefits, while qualitative evidence attributes these differences to factors such as community involvement in decision-making, stakeholder coordination, transparency of benefit-sharing mechanisms, and access to information. These findings demonstrate that governance systems influence whether tourism growth produces inclusive or exclusionary outcomes.

Table 8: Mixed-Methods Joint Display of Integrated Findings

Quantitative Finding (n=200 Households)	Qualitative Explanation (n=20 KIIs)	Integrated Interpretation
Tourism participation is limited among households	Stakeholders explained that communities mainly access low-skilled employment	Tourism opportunities exist but remain insufficiently inclusive
Tourism participants report relatively better livelihood outcomes	Stakeholders noted that skills and resources determine who benefits	Tourism can reduce poverty when households have enabling assets
Many households remain dependent on agriculture and informal activities	Participants highlighted weak tourism value-chain connections	Tourism has not fully transformed rural livelihood systems
Limited ownership of tourism enterprises among households	Stakeholders identified financial and skills barriers	Local economic empowerment remains constrained
Unequal perception of tourism benefits	Participants highlighted benefit-sharing challenges	Tourism growth has not produced equitable distribution
Infrastructure limitations affect participation	Stakeholders identified poor roads and market access as barriers	Rural development conditions influence tourism outcomes
Community participation varies across households	Stakeholders emphasised the importance of inclusive governance	Governance determines the effectiveness of tourism-led development

DISCUSSION OF INTEGRATED FINDINGS

The integrated findings challenge the assumption that tourism growth naturally produces poverty reduction. Instead, the evidence suggests that tourism functions as an opportunity structure whose developmental outcomes depend on the institutional and socio-economic conditions surrounding it. The South Luangwa Tourism Corridor demonstrates that a destination can experience tourism expansion while communities remain economically vulnerable when participation mechanisms, livelihood assets, and benefit-sharing systems are inadequate.

The findings contribute to tourism development debates by demonstrating that tourism should be evaluated through a broader inclusive development lens. Traditional tourism performance indicators, such as visitor numbers, investment levels, and revenue generation, provide limited understanding of whether tourism improves the lives of local communities. Household-level livelihood outcomes provide a more meaningful measure of tourism success.

The results also support the argument that tourism-led poverty reduction requires deliberate interventions aimed at improving community capabilities. Without investment in skills development, entrepreneurship support, access to finance, and local enterprise development, tourism opportunities are likely to remain concentrated among actors with greater economic resources.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the central role of governance in shaping tourism outcomes. Inclusive tourism requires institutions that facilitate community participation, strengthen accountability, and promote equitable benefit distribution. Where governance systems are weak, tourism may reproduce existing inequalities rather than reduce poverty.

Contribution of Mixed-Methods Findings to Theory

The study makes three theoretical contributions.

First, it extends the **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework** by demonstrating that tourism resources alone do not guarantee livelihood improvement. The conversion of tourism opportunities into poverty reduction depends on household access to complementary livelihood assets.

Second, the findings strengthen **Inclusive Development Theory** by demonstrating that economic growth becomes transformative only when disadvantaged communities participate meaningfully in development processes.

Third, the study contributes to tourism development literature by explaining the **tourism growth–poverty paradox** through an integrated framework combining tourism participation, livelihood assets, governance systems, and benefit distribution

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study examined why rural poverty persists despite sustained tourism growth in Zambia's South Luangwa Tourism Corridor. The findings demonstrate that tourism expansion has generated economic opportunities through employment creation, conservation activities, tourism investment, and local development initiatives; however, these benefits have not been sufficiently transformative to produce broad-based poverty reduction among surrounding communities. The evidence from the household survey (n=200) and key informant interviews (n=20) reveals that the relationship between tourism growth and poverty reduction is complex and mediated by community participation, livelihood assets, governance arrangements, and tourism benefit distribution.

The findings contribute to the growing body of tourism development literature that questions the assumption that tourism growth automatically produces inclusive development outcomes. Previous studies have demonstrated that tourism can contribute to poverty reduction through employment, entrepreneurship, and income diversification; however, these benefits are dependent on institutional conditions, local capabilities, and equitable participation mechanisms (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Bianchi & de Man, 2021). The South Luangwa case confirms this argument by showing that tourism growth alone does not guarantee improved household livelihoods where communities lack the capacity and opportunities required to participate effectively in tourism economies.

Tourism Growth Without Inclusive Livelihood Transformation

A major finding of this study is that tourism expansion within the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor has not automatically translated into significant livelihood transformation for many rural households. While tourism has contributed to economic activity and employment opportunities, the quantitative findings indicate that many households remain dependent on agriculture, informal trading, and other vulnerable livelihood activities. The qualitative findings further explain that although tourism visibility has increased, many communities continue to experience limited economic improvements.

This finding reflects the tourism growth–poverty paradox identified in developing tourism destinations, where tourism indicators may show positive growth while local communities experience limited socioeconomic change. Hall (2019) argues that sustainable tourism development should not be assessed solely through economic growth measures but should consider whether tourism contributes to social inclusion and improved community wellbeing.

The findings from South Luangwa therefore challenge the assumption that tourism presence within a community automatically creates development benefits. Instead, tourism outcomes depend on the mechanisms through which communities access opportunities, participate in decision-making, and capture economic value.

Community Participation and Tourism Value Chain Inclusion

The study found that community participation remains a critical determinant of whether tourism contributes to poverty reduction. Although tourism provides employment opportunities, many community members participate primarily through low-skilled jobs rather than ownership, entrepreneurship, or decision-making roles.

The quantitative findings indicate that households involved in tourism-related activities generally report better livelihood outcomes; however, participation levels remain limited. The qualitative findings explain this pattern by revealing barriers such as inadequate skills, limited financial resources, and restricted access to tourism markets.

These findings support Scheyvens and Biddulph's (2018) argument that inclusive tourism requires communities to move beyond being passive recipients of tourism benefits towards becoming active participants and owners within tourism systems. Tourism development becomes more meaningful when communities can establish enterprises, supply tourism businesses, and influence tourism decisions.

In the South Luangwa context, increasing community participation requires strengthening local entrepreneurship, improving tourism skills, and creating stronger connections between tourism operators and local producers.

Livelihood Assets and the Ability to Benefit from Tourism

The findings demonstrate that household access to livelihood assets significantly influences tourism participation and poverty outcomes. This supports the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, which argues that households require access to human, financial, physical, social, and natural capital to improve their livelihoods.

The study found that households with better education, tourism-related skills, and economic resources were more likely to access tourism opportunities. Conversely, households lacking these assets remained excluded from higher-value tourism activities.

Human capital emerged as an important factor influencing tourism participation. Limited hospitality skills, entrepreneurship knowledge, and professional training restrict community access to formal tourism employment and business opportunities. This suggests that tourism growth strategies should incorporate skills development as a central component of poverty reduction.

Financial capital was also identified as a major constraint. Many households lack access to credit and investment resources required to establish tourism enterprises. Consequently, tourism opportunities are often captured by individuals and organizations with greater financial capacity.

These findings reinforce the argument by Dossou et al. (2024) that tourism contributes more effectively to inclusive growth when supported by strong institutional systems and enabling economic conditions.

Tourism Benefit Distribution and Economic Leakage

Another significant finding is that the poverty-reduction impact of tourism is influenced by how tourism benefits are distributed within destination communities. The study found that although tourism generates economic value, local communities often perceive that benefits are unevenly distributed.

The qualitative findings indicate concerns regarding external ownership, limited local procurement, and weak connections between tourism businesses and community economies. These challenges reduce local multiplier effects and limit the extent to which tourism contributes to household income improvement.

This finding aligns with broader tourism research highlighting economic leakage as a major challenge in developing country tourism destinations. Where tourism businesses rely heavily on external suppliers, foreign investment, and imported goods, a substantial proportion of tourism revenue may leave the destination economy.

Therefore, strengthening local economic linkages is essential. Tourism operators should increase local sourcing, support community enterprises, and develop partnerships that enable communities to participate in tourism supply chains.

Governance Systems and Inclusive Tourism Development

The findings highlight governance as a central factor influencing tourism outcomes. Tourism development involves multiple actors, including government institutions, tourism operators, conservation authorities, traditional leaders, and communities. The effectiveness of relationships among these actors determines whether tourism benefits are distributed inclusively.

The study found that limited community participation in tourism decisions contributes to feelings of exclusion among local residents. Participants emphasized the importance of transparent decision-making, stakeholder collaboration, and meaningful community involvement.

These findings support governance perspectives that emphasize the importance of participatory institutions in sustainable tourism development (Bramwell & Lane, 2018; Pierre & Peters, 2020). Effective tourism governance requires not only coordination among stakeholders but also mechanisms that empower communities to influence decisions affecting their resources and livelihoods.

In the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor, strengthening governance systems could involve:

1. Improving community representation in tourism planning;
2. Increasing transparency in benefit-sharing arrangements;
3. Strengthening partnerships between tourism operators and communities;
4. Enhancing accountability among tourism stakeholders.

Comparison with Global and African Tourism Evidence

The findings from South Luangwa reflect wider global and African experiences where tourism growth has produced mixed poverty reduction outcomes. Globally, tourism has been recognized as an important contributor to employment and economic development, but researchers increasingly argue that growth must be accompanied by inclusive governance and equitable benefit distribution (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

African tourism destinations face similar challenges because many tourism resources are located in rural communities with limited economic alternatives. Wildlife tourism, in particular, creates significant economic value but often struggles to ensure that surrounding communities receive proportional benefits.

The South Luangwa case contributes to African tourism scholarship by providing empirical evidence that rural poverty persistence is not necessarily caused by inadequate tourism growth but by limitations in the systems connecting tourism growth with local livelihoods.

Overall Explanation of the Tourism Growth–Poverty Paradox

The findings demonstrate that the persistence of poverty in the South Luangwa Tourism Corridor can be explained through five interconnected factors:

Limited community participation

Communities participate mainly in lower-value tourism activities with limited ownership opportunities.

Insufficient livelihood assets

Skills, finance, infrastructure, and entrepreneurial capacity remain inadequate.

Unequal tourism benefit distribution

Tourism revenue does not circulate sufficiently within local communities.

Weak local economic linkages

Limited connections exist between tourism businesses and community producers.

Governance challenges

Participation and decision-making mechanisms require strengthening.

Therefore, tourism growth should be understood as a potential pathway rather than an automatic solution to rural poverty. Inclusive tourism development requires deliberate interventions that enable communities to access opportunities, develop capabilities, and capture a fair share of tourism-generated value.

Theoretical Contribution, Policy Implications and Practical Recommendations

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes important theoretical contributions to tourism development and poverty reduction scholarship by integrating the **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework** and **Inclusive Development Theory** to explain why poverty persists despite tourism growth. Existing tourism research has frequently focused on the economic contribution of tourism measured through visitor arrivals, tourism receipts, employment creation, and investment flows. However, this study advances understanding by demonstrating that tourism growth must be examined through the lens of household capabilities, participation structures, governance arrangements, and benefit distribution mechanisms.

First, the study contributes to the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework by demonstrating that access to tourism opportunities does not automatically improve household livelihoods. Tourism resources may exist within a community; however, households require enabling livelihood assets, including education, skills, financial resources, infrastructure, and social networks, to transform tourism opportunities into sustainable livelihood improvements. The South Luangwa case illustrates that communities located near valuable tourism resources may remain vulnerable when they lack the assets required to participate effectively in tourism economies.

Second, the study extends Inclusive Development Theory by demonstrating that economic growth becomes meaningful only when marginalized groups participate actively in development processes. The findings suggest that tourism development should not only focus on increasing economic activity but should also address questions of ownership, empowerment, decision-making influence, and equitable access to opportunities. Communities should be viewed as active development partners rather than passive recipients of tourism benefits.

Third, the study contributes to tourism governance literature by demonstrating that governance systems act as an important mechanism connecting tourism growth with poverty outcomes. Tourism expansion produces inclusive outcomes only when institutional arrangements facilitate collaboration, accountability, participation, and fair distribution of benefits among stakeholders.

Policy Implications

The findings have important implications for tourism and rural development policy in Zambia. While tourism remains a strategic sector for economic growth, policy approaches should move beyond tourism promotion towards ensuring that tourism contributes directly to poverty reduction and inclusive rural development.

Moving from Tourism Growth to Inclusive Tourism Development

Tourism policies should incorporate measurable indicators that assess community-level outcomes rather than focusing exclusively on tourism performance indicators such as visitor numbers, tourism revenue, and investment levels.

Policy evaluation should consider:

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VII July 2026

i. Household income improvements;

ii. Community employment quality;

iii. Local enterprise development;

iv. Participation in tourism value chains;

v. Distribution of tourism benefits.

This approach would provide a more comprehensive assessment of whether tourism contributes to national development objectives.

Strengthening Community-Based Tourism Participation

The findings indicate the need for stronger mechanisms to enable communities to participate meaningfully in tourism activities. Government agencies, conservation organizations, and tourism operators should support community-based tourism initiatives through:

i. Entrepreneurship training;

ii. Business development support;

iii. Access to tourism markets;

iv. Mentorship programmes;

v. Financial support mechanisms.

Community participation should move beyond consultation towards active involvement in tourism planning, ownership, and decision-making.

Enhancing Local Tourism Value Chains

A key policy implication is the need to strengthen economic linkages between tourism enterprises and surrounding communities. Tourism operators should be encouraged to increase local procurement and support community suppliers.

Potential areas include:

i. agricultural products supplied to lodges;

ii. cultural tourism products;

iii. transport services;

iv. locally produced goods;

v. maintenance and support services.

Strengthening local value chains would increase tourism multiplier effects and retain more tourism income within rural economies.

Improving Skills Development and Human Capital

The study demonstrates that skills limitations constrain community participation in tourism. Therefore, tourism development strategies should integrate targeted capacity-building programmes focusing on:

i. Hospitality skills;

ii. Tour guiding;

iii. Entrepreneurship;

iv. Financial literacy;

v. Digital marketing;

vi. Business management.

Partnerships between tourism institutions, training providers, and local communities could improve access to tourism employment and enterprise opportunities.

Strengthening Tourism Governance and Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms

Effective governance is essential for ensuring equitable tourism outcomes. Policies should strengthen:

i. Community representation in tourism decision-making;

ii. Transparency in tourism benefit distribution;

iii. Collaboration between stakeholders;

iv. Accountability mechanisms.

Communities should have clear information regarding tourism benefits and opportunities affecting their livelihoods.

Practical Recommendations for Stakeholders

Government Institutions

Government agencies responsible for tourism, conservation, and rural development should:

i. Coordinate tourism and poverty reduction programmes;

ii. Support community enterprise development;

iii. Invest in rural infrastructure;

iv. Improve access to tourism training;

v. Strengthen monitoring of tourism benefits.

Tourism Operators

Tourism businesses should adopt more inclusive practices by:

i. Employing and training local residents;

ii. Purchasing locally produced goods;

iii. Supporting community enterprises;

iv. Developing partnerships with local organizations;

v. Investing in community capacity-building initiatives.

Conservation Organizations

Conservation organizations should recognize that long-term conservation success depends on community support. They should therefore promote approaches that link conservation benefits with improved local livelihoods through:

i. Transparent benefit-sharing systems;

ii. Community development initiatives;

iii. Livelihood diversification programmes.

Local Communities

Communities should be supported to strengthen their organizational capacity and economic participation through:

i. Cooperative enterprises;

ii. Tourism entrepreneurship;

iii. Skills development;

iv. Partnerships with tourism stakeholders.

Empowered communities are better positioned to negotiate benefits and participate effectively in tourism economies.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the tourism growth–poverty paradox in Zambia's South Luangwa Tourism Corridor by investigating why rural poverty persists despite sustained tourism development. Using a mixed-methods approach involving **200 household surveys** and **20 key informant interviews**, the study demonstrates that tourism growth has created economic opportunities but has not automatically produced inclusive livelihood transformation.

The findings show that tourism's contribution to poverty reduction is influenced by the extent to which communities participate in tourism economies, access livelihood assets, and benefit from tourism-generated opportunities. While tourism provides employment, conservation benefits, and economic activity, many households remain vulnerable due to limited skills, inadequate financial resources, weak infrastructure, restricted market access, and unequal benefit distribution.

The study argues that tourism should not be viewed as an automatic solution to rural poverty. Instead, tourism must be supported by effective governance systems, inclusive participation mechanisms, and deliberate strategies that enable communities to capture greater economic value from tourism activities.

The South Luangwa Tourism Corridor provides important lessons for tourism-dependent rural destinations. Sustainable tourism development requires a shift from measuring success through tourism growth indicators alone towards evaluating whether tourism improves household wellbeing, strengthens community resilience, and promotes equitable development.

The study contributes to tourism and development scholarship by demonstrating that the relationship between tourism growth and poverty reduction is mediated by social, economic, and institutional conditions. Tourism becomes a genuine pathway for rural transformation only when communities are empowered as active participants in tourism development processes.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study focuses on one tourism corridor in Zambia. While the findings provide important contextual understanding, future studies could compare multiple tourism destinations to identify common and location-specific factors influencing tourism-led poverty reduction.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits understanding of long-term livelihood changes. Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how tourism participation influences household wellbeing over time.

Third, although the study incorporates household and stakeholder perspectives, future research could explore specific groups such as women, youth, and vulnerable households to understand differences in tourism participation and benefit access.

Future research should also investigate innovative models of community ownership, tourism entrepreneurship, and conservation partnerships that enhance inclusive rural development.

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