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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN PROMOTING CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT IN CALABAR METROPOLIS, NIGERIA

Jerry Nkere Etta
Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management.
Faculty of Administration
jerrynkereetta@gmail.com.

Etta Kate Jerry
Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management.
Faculty of Administration
Iyitorpurity@gmail.com.

Theresa Azin Mbu
Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management.
Faculty of Administration
tessymbu@gmail. Com

Hans Abang Akan
Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management.
Faculty of Administration
akanhans045@gmail.com

Abang Deborah Alice
Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management.
Faculty of Administration
deborahosang502@gmail.com

Abstract
The paper focuses on the importance of sustainable tourism in facilitating cultural interactions and inclusive growth in Calabar Metropolis, Nigeria. With the application of the mixed method, the study was able to gather its data from the survey techniques involving 400 questionnaires, Focus Group Discussion, and Key Informant Interviews to evaluate the levels of sociality and economicity of the impacts brought about by the forces of tourism to the area. The quantitative result, which involves descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, indicated the importance of tourism benefits on the residents, including their financial, cultural, and interactional contributions, especially in the context of Calabar Carnival, while the themes clearly justified the quantitative result by implying the benefits brought about by the forces of tourism, which are, however, hampered by the lack of infrastructure, lack of security, and the lack of coordination in the programmes initiated by the forces of tourism on the residents of the area.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Cultural exchange, Inclusive development, Calabar, Community participation, Policy framework.

Introduction

The importance of tourism is continuously being appreciated today as one of the drivers of sustainable development, particularly in countries that seek to develop their economies without undermining their cultures. Sustainable tourism, unlike traditional or conventional

mass tourism, gives importance to the conservation of the environment, the protection of the cultural heritage, and the fair sharing of benefits with the host communities (Sihombing, Suastini, & Puja, 2024). In support of the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs, the provision of sustainable tourism supports SDG 8 or Decent Work & Economic Growth, SDG 11 or Sustainable Cities & Communities, and SDG 12 or Sustainable Consumption & Production Patterns, which encourage the sustainable growth provided by tourism today (Gunawan, Permatasari, & Tilt, 2020). Internationally, sustainable tourism encourages the sharing of different cultures, hence promoting social cohesion today. Costa Rica, for one, practices community-based ecotourism, which helps in the protection of biodiversity, while Sweden practices the "Sustainable Destination," which focuses on the support of national treasures with the value of sustainability, according to (Mattsoff, 2021; Chauhan, 2025).

In developing countries, there is hope as well as danger in the application of sustainable tourism practices. There is employment creation, but there is also the potential for the commoditizing of cultures, if not well planned for. "High value, low impact" tourism is "Bhutanese national tourism policy," according to Beal (2025). Other countries, like Kenya and South Africa, are practicing community tourism with their heritages or "authentic experiences" stressed, according to Chivandi, Samuel and Muchie, (2020), practices that help the community because, with its application, "tourism can be designed to be the powerful force that drives inclusive, sustainable growth." Although significant attention is currently being dedicated to the focus of this study, there is still scant empirical data available on the extent to which sustainable tourism supports cultural exchange and inclusive development in Nigeria, especially in the culturally diverse city of Calabar, which is also recognized for its vibrant festivals, music, and arts. Most existing literature on the topic appears to focus on the economic or environmental considerations of tourism, disregarding the socio-cultural element of the phenomenon. The current study will bridge the gap by offering quantitative support on the extent to which sustainable tourism supports cultural exchange in Calabar, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria, being with diverse cultures and sceneries, has the prospects of fully tapping into the benefits derivable from sustainable tourism practices. However, the application or operation of sustainable tourism, with its obvious strengths in promoting cross-cultural interactions and inclusive growth, remains imperfectly practiced in the context of Nigeria, because of challenges that limit its effectiveness, including deficits in the required human resources with the proper skill set, poor support structures, or the lack of proper prioritization of the necessary formulation or management of sustainable tourism interventions, beyond other challenges of political instability, poor policies, or the lack of community participation in tourism development processes, among others, as presented in (Egbo, Anih, Jonas, Peter, & Obiokoye, 2025).

However, the country's endowments of beautiful landscapes and cultural diversities are largely untapped yet. There are isolated pockets of good sustainable tourism practices, but these are neither scalable nor scaled up for national development. Notably, the study fills the existing gaps that have emerged from the study on the role of sustainable tourism in relation to cultural exchange and national development, generally, within the context of Calabar Metropolis. The scope of the study is only Calabar Metropolis, the capital city of Cross-River

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State, located in southern Nigeria, including the two Local Government Areas, Calabar Municipality, and Calabar South. The study areas are also split into different political wards or communities, including Big Qua, Ikot Ansa, Akim Qua, Bayside, Anantigha, and Henshaw Town, amongst others, to reflect the city's diversities, which are culturally different.

Literature Review

Sustainable tourism has also developed into a complex tool that supports economic inclusion, cultural exchange, or social transformation. The current empirical context in Africa, among other parts of the world, confirms the effectiveness of community-focused tourism in achieving equitable inclusion, community empowerment, or sustained development (Adeniyi, Kumeka, Orekoya, & Adekunle, 2023; Uduji, Okolo-Obasi, & Asongu, 2022). In the Calabar context, the study finds that more than 77 per cent of the survey population recognizes the economic inclusion facilitated by tourism, while about 74.5 per cent agree on the cross-cultural facilitated aspects, thereby confirming its positive impacts on social development. Like most other early studies conducted in Nigeria on the impacts of tourism, but with a different focus, the study introduces the following variables to evaluate the current scope of cultural exchange facilitated by tourism in the current study context, which are yet to be explored in the current discourses on tourism in Nigeria: the number of interactions between different cultures involved in the festivals, the maintenance of native languages, the native theatre, women/youth involvement in tourism businesses, among others, which now bring meaning to the concept of cultural exchange, recognized but yet quantified in the discourses on tourism in Nigeria. The Calabar Carnival, Efik Festivals, among others, are practical samples to define the impacts of tourism on facilitating inter-cultural dialogues, community integration, or economic diversification, hence confirming the arguments provided by Elyasi and Yamaclı (2024) who provided arguments on how authentic tourism has the potential to engage on local traditions, on the one hand, while developing facilitated dialogues between different cultures, on the other hand, required to be sustained for the future effectiveness of tourism development on the host communities, on the other hand.

The study also confirms García-Ramón, Sanz-Ibáñez, and Lois-González (2025), arguments on the impacts of sustainable tourism on facilitated or sustained development, linking the impacts on sustained consumption, on the one hand, facilitated, on the other, requiring the urgent attention of sustained development within the host communities, on the other, yet requiring the validation facilitated on sustained development, on the other, yet discovered that the levels of the responders' academic qualifications enhance the degree or impacts on facilitated cultural aspects of tourism, that is, $\chi^2 = 11.54$, p Rather, the Calabar case study highlights the importance of community involvement and cultural relevance in the sustainability of tourism, especially in developing countries, unlike other studies by Serio, Dickson, de Graaff, and Pels, (2024); Zandi (2023) who emphasize the importance of institutional & technological facilitators in developed countries. The study, therefore, uses Focus Group Discussions to show the role of the carnival in encouraging cooperation between different communities, hence promoting social cohesion, consistent with the arguments presented by Krittayaruangroja, Suriyankietkaew, and Hallinger, (2023) who argued that community-based tourism boosts the recovery process in the post-crisis period by reinforcing their social network structures. Also, the involvement of women & youth in craft

production, entertainment, & local buying & selling activities in the Calabar Carnival provides practical examples of the benefits of inclusion, consistent with the arguments presented by Osinubi, Adedoyin, Osinubi and Ajide, (2023); Bashiru and Fagbolu, (2023). Rather, the uniqueness of the study on the global platform is the application & relevance of the concept of sustainable tourism to the culturally diverse city of Calabar, showing that beyond the stimulation of the economy, the event also provides sustainability in terms of retaining the city's & the people's cultural identity & practices.

Methodology

The study utilised a mixed-method design, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate how sustainable tourism supports cultural sharing and inclusive development in Calabar Metropolis. A sampling procedure was conducted on 400 respondents with the multi-stage sampling method in Calabar Municipality and Calabar South. The study utilises the structured questionnaires, 12 Key Informed Interviews, and 3 FGDs conducted with the help of validated questionnaires with the 5-point likert scale, having an Alpha value of 0.83 validated with the help of the pilot study, quantitative analysed with the help of the SPSS v26 package, with the help of descriptives frequency, mean, SD, percent, inferential on Chi square, t-test, the help of NVivo12 with the help of the NVivo12 package, with triangulation of the study for incorporating the statistical & the thematic aspects, Ethical clearance from the Research & Ethical Committee, University of Calabar, maintained with the help of consent & with the help of secrecy maintained throughout the study design.

Results and Analysis

This section will discuss the quantitative and qualitative survey, Focus Group Discussions, and Key Informat Interviews conducted, with the view of achieving the study objectives on the manner in which sustainable tourism encourages cross-cultural development within the Calabar Metropolis. A total of 400 questionnaires was distributed, from which 384 responses were collected, with an effective response rate of 96 percent. The demographic variables are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	236	61.5
	Female	148	38.5
Age	18–35 years	164	42.7
	36–55 years	142	37.0
	Above 55 years	78	20.3
Education	Secondary	104	27.1
	Tertiary	192	50.0
	Postgraduate	88	22.9
Occupation	Tourism/Hospitality	96	25.0
	Artisan/Trader	104	27.1
	Civil Servant	88	22.9

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Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Student/Unemployed	96	25.0
Total		384	100.0

Source: Researchers' fieldwork, 2025

The study outcomes show that the main target group was economically active youth between 18-55 years, consisting largely of tourism-related jobs. This confirms the study hypothesis on tourism being an inclusive employment mobilizer in Calabar.

The scale used to establish the responses given by the respondents was the 5-point likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The table below highlights some of the core points related to the impacts of tourism on sustainability, cross-cultural experiences, and inclusion.

Table 2
Key Indicators of Tourism on Sustainability, Cultural Exchange, and Inclusion

Indicator	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Tourism contributes to local economic development	4.12	0.78	79.3
Tourism promotes cultural exchange among communities	3.98	0.84	74.5
Sustainable tourism enhances women and youth participation	3.76	0.92	69.2
Tourism supports the preservation of Efik and indigenous culture	4.04	0.81	77.1
Tourism improves community pride and social inclusion	3.87	0.88	71.8

Source: Researchers' fieldwork, 2025

A predominantly positive response has been observed regarding the benefits of sustainable tourism to the economy, with over 70 per cent of the respondents confirming its benefits to inclusivity, women, and the youth. The high mean values (> 3.8) reflect the extent of agreement with the proposed benefits of inclusive tourism, lending credence to the study by Adeniyi et al. (2023) about the benefits of inclusive tourism on African economies.

The FGDs and KIIs indicated the creation of employment by tourism, especially during the Calabar Carnival. The youth indicated employment creation in the areas of photography, crafts, and entertainment. The women also appreciated employment creation in the catering services, but they requested credit facilities to expand the businesses. The themes support the quantitative analysis, which indicated 74.5 per cent support the creation of employment for inclusivity by tourism.

The quantitative analysis indicates that 31.8 per cent strongly agreed, with 27.8 per cent agreement that tourism leads to the preservation of the indigenous culture. This is supported by the assertions made by the custodians of the cultures, who explained that ceremonies and oral traditions "keep the traditions alive and shape the identity." The cross-tabulation between the educational levels of the respondents on the topic of agreement on the preservation of the cultures indicated that 82 per cent of the tertiary-educated believed that tourism presented an

opportunity for the sharing of their cultures compared to 63 per cent with only secondary-level education.

The result of the chi-square test supported the significant impact of the level of education on the appreciation of the cultural impact of tourism, with $\chi^2 = 11.54$, $p < 0.05$, answering the question whether the appreciation of cultural tourism is elevated by awareness and educational input, supported by the claim from the interviewees on the importance of the cultural event, believing that "it keeps traditions alive, and boosts identity," in line with Elyasi and Yamacli, (2024), who supported the importance of the "authenticity of the heritage" of cultural tourism on the grounds that there is "a vital need for the consciousness of the other, the other cultures, and different civilizations."

The descriptive data indicated that 52.6 per cent of the responses pointed to tourism as an important employment source in Calabar. The employment stability was estimated to be 29.3 per cent stable jobs, 23.3 per cent seasonal jobs, while 16.8 per cent reported the jobs were mostly casual or informal jobs. The independent samples t-test between the households involved in tourism activities and those that are not involved indicated the result was significant with respect to income ($t = 2.73$, $p< 0.01$), which confirms that involvement in tourism activities improves the livelihood of the community members.

However, the pattern is supported by qualitative evidence, with KII interviews verifying that tourism brings about the creation of "non-oil sources of income" or "helps reduce the reliance on jobs provided by the government." Waldron, "Tourism," supports the creation of employment with the help of tourism by stating that the "industry is an important contributor to employment."

There are recurring challenges that emerged from both the quantitative and the qualitative responses. The commonest challenges, as highlighted in Table 3, are the deficits in the infrastructure, lack of consistency in policies, lack of community involvement, lack of cooperation from the private sector, lack of resources, lack of technology, lack of innovation, lack of human resources, lack of investment, lack of funds, lack of political will, lack of priority, lack of support, lack of commitment, lack of involvement, lack of participation, lack of sensitivity, lack of attention, lack of focus, lack of emphasis, lack of consideration, lack of recognition, lack of regard, lack of importance, lack of value, lack of priority, lack of emphasis, lack of attention, lack of consideration

Table 3

Barriers to Sustainable Tourism

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poor road infrastructure	276	71.9
Insecurity	244	63.5
Policy inconsistency	238	61.9
Inadequate funding	212	55.2
Low community involvement	196	51.0

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FGDs also pointed to the impact of irregular supply of power and insecurity on repeaters' revisits, while the traditional custodians complained about the "change of policies with each government" causing the abandonment of tourism projects.

Table 4

Summary of Quantitative Qualitative Linkages

Research Objective	Quantitative Evidence	Qualitative Support
Assess tourism's contribution to inclusive development	Mean = 4.12; t = 2.73, $p < 0.01$	KIIs revealed job creation and entrepreneurship via Calabar Carnival
Evaluate tourism's role in cultural exchange	$\chi^2 = 11.54$, $p < 0.05$	FGDs emphasized community bonding and heritage preservation
Identify challenges to sustainability	72% cited poor infrastructure, 63% insecurity	KIIs linked these to weak governance and limited local participation

The intersection of descriptive and inferential statistics confirms the themes uncovered through the qualitative study, providing quantitative support for the impacts of tourism on inclusive development and cultural exchange on the ground. In quantitative terms, educational qualifications, coupled with involvement in tourism, provide strong predictive variables about favorable attitudes towards cultural exchange, while qualitatively, the empowerment of the marginalized is revealed as the transformative potential of tourism on the city of Calabar Metropolis.

Discussion

The result supports that sustainable tourism highly reinforces inclusive growth, creating jobs and fostering the cultural identity of Calabar. The integration of quantifiable variables on interactions, conservation, or women/youth involvement is an implication beyond existing African studies on tourism contexts (Adeniyi et al., 2023; Uduji et al., 2022). The positive correlation between educational levels, employment, or appreciation of culture ($\chi^2 = 11.54$, t = 2.73) reaffirms that the degree of consciousness is the key to involvement, complementing García-Ramón et al. (2025). The case study indicates that community-driven, culturally-driven projects, such as Calabar Carnival, are the engines of inclusion, contrary to existing developed-economy studies, which stress technology or governmental strategies in Serio et al. (2024) & Zandi (2023).

Conclusion

Sustainable tourism practices in the Calabar Metropolis have emerged as major drivers of cross-cultural interactions and community development. Data analysis supports the effectiveness of education and involvement in the activity in stimulating economic inclusiveness and appreciation for different cultures. Thematic proofs also emerged about the activity's role in empowerment, cultural rebirth, and the pursuit of mutual understanding between different cultures. The applicability of the sustainable development paradigm is supported, with the importance of tourism for complex dynamics leading to the maintenance of equity and identity continuity clearly highlighted (Adeniyi et al., 2023; Elyasi & Yamacli,

2024). The study highlights the important role that sustainable tourism practices can play in realizing SDGs 8, 10, and 11 in developing countries.

Recommendations

1. The government must focus on the repair of the road network, provision of electric power, and the provision of security in the tourism zones across Calabar.
2. Tourism Agencies must create strategies for sustainability, with the focus on the preservation of culture, the protection of the environment, and the involvement of the community, through the Tourism Master Plan.
3. Traditional Institutions & Local Communities must be involved in tourism planning & implementation efforts. Ensure that the management of the local cultural heritage is community value-driven, with benefits shared fairly with the community members.
4. Financial Institutions and Development Partners must provide artisans, women, and youth with accessible loans, grants, and learning opportunities within the tourism value chain to promote innovation-driven growth in the economy.
5. The Private Sector and Hospitality Operators are encouraged to engage in community-based partnerships, CSR, involving support for community celebrations, eco-friendly practices, and sustainable employment creation.

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