

Community-First Tourism: Self-Employment and Sustainable Growth

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Abstract

Community-first tourism (CFT) is a sustainable tourism model, this allows communities to directly benefit from tourism activities. This research explores the practical applications, and developmental implications of community-first tourism. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to investigate the feasibility of community-first tourism projects and self-employment opportunities. The study employed qualitative case study method using the district of Batticaloa in the Eastern Province. The data collected through focused group and one-on-one interview method choosing tourist and tourism services providers of local community. Tabulation and thematic analysis were carried out to find out summarized opinion of respondents. It was found that there are many community-first tourism projects and products feasible to launch and many self-employment opportunities are available for the host community.

Keywords: Community-First Tourism, CBT, Sri Lanka Tourism, Self-employment in tourism, sustainable growth

1. Introduction

Community-first tourism (CFT), often referred to as community-based tourism (CBT), and also known as community-led or community tourism, is a sustainable tourism model where local communities develop, own, and manage tourism experiences. This approach allows communities to directly benefit from tourism activities, fostering self-employment and sustainable growth. This also referred to as a participatory model that places local communities at the heart of tourism development. It emphasizes self-employment, local ownership, and sustainable practices that align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

CFT generates income and creates job opportunities within the community, often benefiting women and other underrepresented groups. To a certain level the host communities gain control over tourism initiatives, fostering direct participation and management. Local communities often tend to act as stewards of their natural surroundings, promoting conservation and responsible tourism practices. CFT promotes cross-cultural understanding and respect between travelers and local communities, creating meaningful experiences for both. CFT emphasizes authenticity, aligning tourism products with local values, traditions, and culture. Locals are involved in all aspects, from hosting travelers to providing accommodations, meals, and cultural activities

This research explores the practical applications, and developmental implications of community-first tourism, drawing from recent literature and case studies.

Objectives of the study;

1. To examine the tourist expectation in relation to the study area
2. To investigate the feasibility of Community-First Tourism projects and products.
3. To analyses tourism self-employment opportunities and sustainable growth

2. Literature review

Based on a review of existing literature, the concept of Community-First Tourism (CFT) or community-based tourism (CBT), has been extensively explored, it has emerged as a viable alternative to mass tourism, emphasizing local empowerment, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. This model places communities at the center of tourism planning and operations, aiming to generate equitable economic benefits and foster long-term resilience (Bozdaglar, 2023). The literature highlights CFT's significant potential for fostering sustainable growth and creating self-employment opportunities by empowering local populations. However, scholarly work also identifies substantial challenges to its successful and equitable implementation.

CBT gained prominence in the 1970s and 1990s as a response to the negative impacts of mass tourism, such as cultural erosion, environmental degradation, and economic leakage (Bozdaglar, 2023). Unlike conventional tourism models, CFT adopts a bottom-up approach, enabling communities to lead tourism initiatives and make decisions that reflect their values and priorities.

A key theoretical underpinning of CFT is closely aligned with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), which emphasizes the use of local assets such as natural, human, physical, financial, and social capital to reduce vulnerability and enhance resilience. Recent research has expanded this framework to include socio-cultural capital, recognizing its role in preserving heritage and fostering community identity. Ashley & Roe (2002) provided some of the early

theoretical frameworks for pro-poor tourism, which significantly influenced the discourse around CFT as a development tool. Anuar & Sood (2017) clearly overviewed of the benefits associated with CBT including job creation, local development, and cultural preservation. CFT initiatives often diversify income sources through homestays, guiding services, and artisanal crafts, reducing reliance on traditional sectors like agriculture. This diversification strengthens economic resilience and promotes entrepreneurship.

CFT contributes significantly to cultural preservation by enabling communities to share their traditions, stories, and practices with visitors. This fosters mutual respect and instills a sense of pride among residents (Bozdaglar, 2023). Moreover, CFT encourages eco-friendly practices and responsible resource management, offering incentives for conservation and minimizing tourism's environmental footprint (Lee & Jan 2019). The participatory nature of CFT enhances social cohesion and collective action. It promotes inclusive governance, infrastructure development, and leadership particularly among women and marginalized groups (Lee & Jan 2019). These outcomes align with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including poverty alleviation and decent work (Bozdaglar, 2023).

Giampiccoli (2020) explained the CFT's potential to reduce inequality and empower marginalized communities. Despite its promise, CFT faces several implementation challenges. Many projects struggle after initial funding ends due to limited business acumen, marketing skills, and financial resources. Economic benefits are not always equitably distributed, with local elites sometimes monopolizing profits and decision-making.

Dependency on tourism can also make communities vulnerable to external shocks, such as pandemics or economic downturns. Additionally, poorly managed CFT initiatives risk commodifying culture, where traditions are performed solely for tourist consumption, undermining authenticity. Environmental mismanagement, including waste and water pollution, remains a concern in some cases (Lee & Jan 2019).

Community-first tourism represents a transformative approach to tourism development. By fostering self-employment and aligning with sustainability goals, it offers a pathway to inclusive and resilient growth. However, its success hinges on community empowerment, institutional support, and a commitment to long-term sustainability. As global tourism continues to evolve, CFT stands out as a model that not only benefits travelers but also uplifts the communities they visit.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative and Case Studies technique to ensure a comprehensive understanding of tourist expectations, community-first tourism feasibility, and self-employment opportunities in the tourism sector.

The research was conducted in the selected geographical area of Batticaloa to study for its tourism potential and community involvement.

Data Collection Methods

Objective 1: To examine the tourist expectation in relation to the study area

Conducted interviews with selected tourists to gain deeper insights into expectations and experiences based on a semi-structured questionnaire covering the areas of accessibility, accommodation, attraction & activities, ancillary services and general requirements.

Secondary data collected by review of tourism reports, visitor feedback platforms, and travel blogs.

Objective 2: To investigate the feasibility of Community-First Tourism projects and products

Carried out Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with local community members, tourism entrepreneurs, and local government officials to assess: Community readiness, Existing tourism products, Challenges and opportunities.

Case Studies analysis conducted to investigate the successfulness of community-first tourism in the context of chosen study area.

Further, the Gap Analysis employed to evaluate opportunities of implementing tourism projects.

Objective 3: To analyse tourism self-employment opportunities and sustainable growth

Interviews conducted with self-employed individuals in the tourism sector to examine the income levels, employment rates, and business sustainability.

Sampling Techniques

In selecting the tourist as respondents, the Convenient sampling method used, while purposive sampling method was employed in selecting community members to include diverse stakeholders.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analyzed using tabulation and thematic analysis used to identify patterns and insights. Comparative Analysis was also employed between expectations and actual experiences; between feasibility and current practices.

4. Analysis and Finding

Situational Analysis of the case study area

The Batticaloa District offers a diverse array of attractions that appeal to both domestic and international tourists. Among its most remarkable features are the expansive sandy beaches with warm, blue waters, and the country's longest lagoon. The region is also home to numerous religious sites, with annual festivals drawing large crowds. The infrastructure developments, including the construction of new bridges and roads, have significantly improved travel across the Eastern Province's coastal belt. This change has shortened travel time and made more accessible, positioning it as a potential hotspot for beach tourism in the district.

Table 1: Key areas of Situation Analysis

- Rich and ancient history
- Fishing community having marine expertise
- Abundance of cheap labour
- Existence of organic cultivation practice
- Inbound tourism renaissance
- Largest Lagoon
- Perfect conditions for water sports (Lagoon)
- Pristine beaches and environment
- Availability of unutilized land
- Existence of organic cultivations
- Long distance from main airports
- Poor road network and access
- Labour requires extensive training

Analysis of Tourist Expectation

The expectations of the tourist visiting to the focused case study area assessed based on the accessibility, accommodation, attraction & activities, ancillary services and general requirements. The key indicators of each assessment area and their expectations are given in the below table in detail.

Table 2: Analysis of Tourist Expectations

Accessibility	Expectations
• Road network • Walkways • Cycle paths & hiring facilities • Road Signage • Tourist Maps	1. Roads and general access to tourist areas lack quality while proper public transportation systems are inadequate and the environment is currently unsuitable for walking, etc. 2. Walking/ Cycling is generally the preferred mode of travel among tourists to interact with locals and to purchase locally produced goods. Hiring facilities should be made available at tourist hotels / close vicinity. Furthermore, cycling/ walk paths are required to ensure the safety and comfort that will encourage visitors to explore tourist sites. 3. Maps are extremely important for the tourists and they are used to carry with them to find tourist sites. This should be linked with “Google maps” and be available via GPS/ Satellite systems and must provide information on accommodation and ancillary service providers.
Accommodation	Expectations
• Star class hotels • Guest Houses / Basic accommodation • Home stay accommodation • Luxury House boats	1. Star class accommodation is scarcely available in the current context and restricted to the Passikudah area. Potential can be seen in the area surrounding other beach areas. 2. Basic/ Mid-range accommodation facilities are currently inadequate to cater to the expected influx of foreign tourists. Present accommodation units need to be refurbished. 3. Home stay accommodation providers, while there are many, do not seem to fully comprehend the concept and services were found to be lacking in many areas. Need to maintain good hygiene and sanitation conditions. Hospitality and the personal touch were also very rarely witnessed during the field visit. 4. Prospects for the operation of House boats are good due to the geographical features of the Batticaloa lagoon. Luxury house boats, though currently unseen in this area can be developed / encouraged as there is local expertise freely available in avenues of boating.

Attraction & Activities	Expectations
• Soft adventure sports • Water sports in lagoon • Fishing and whale watching • Agro / organic tourism • Lagoon / Mangrove based eco-tourism	1. Being the longest/ largest Lagoon in Sri Lanka, tourist expects to have boat rides, fun fishing, and site seeing tours. 2. Non-motorized water sports: it would be ideal however, to minimize motor boat usage in order to protect the pristine environment. 3. Organic tourism can create a huge potential for a niche market with interest in Organic food and organic cultivation.
Ancillary Services	Expectations
• Restaurants • Spa / Ayurvedic Spa • Handicraft industries • Shopping arcades	1. Tourists prefer to dine out in restaurants patronised by locals. There should be a wide array of restaurants/ dining options. Currently few/ no establishments are seen suiting tourist expectations. Especially in terms of hygiene and sanitation. Quality restaurants serving authentic cuisine, tourist-oriented meals, seafood specials will be highly demanded and therefore training in these areas, specifically quality and standard maximization will be useful. 2. Tourist shops can be developed by uplifting the local handicraft industries. 3. Specialist areas such as wellness and ayurvedic facilities are also required to be present in tourism resort areas.
General	Expectations
• Availability of Information and transparency • Clean, Green environment	1. There is no proper information available on public sources with regards to available services in this region that would assist with the tourist in making travel plans. Hence, initiation must be made to ensure positive and accurate information is available via web media and other information sources. 2. Tourist expects a clean and habitable environment while striving to maintain its serenity and beauty through landscaping and tree planting projects rather than the dusty, bare spaces currently seen.

Analysis of CFT Projects and the contribution to the local community

Cultural & Heritage

This project is designed to create awareness of and encourage visitation to the lesser known cultural and archeological sites of Batticaloa. This will also encourage home industries and handicrafts men providing opportunities for an enhanced learning experience for tourists and an opportunity to participate in these activities while trying their hand at authentic local arts n crafts. Home stay accommodation will provide an excellent opportunity for one-on-one interactions to enhance the tourist experience and create a true understanding of the colorful local culture.

Activities & Sites include; explore the village culture and community interactions on bicycle/ foot and meeting locals and cuisine. Visit the historic sites like Batticaloa Gate, Dutch Fort, Dutch Bridge, and Lighthouse. Visit handloom sarong making, Palmyrah / Mangrove/ Cane crafts and Wood carving.

Cultivation & Village life

To enhance the tourist's experience with a personal touch and increase interaction with the local community. Home stay accommodation coupled with the true village life style experiences will be attractive to a niche market in search of an educational and spiritually enhancing experience. In line with sustainable tourism concepts, we hereby highlight the upliftment of livelihoods while encouraging cross cultural interactions. This has been created to include visitation to diverse cultivations and to encourage the tourists' hands on experience in traditional / organic cultivation method which are no longer part of the developed cultures. Live with the local community and experience the essence of Batticaloa lifestyles and cuisine.

Activities & Sites: explore the lifestyles of community and interactions to understand their lifestyles. Engage in paddy cultivation activities (ploughing, sowing, harvesting) and a traditional bullock cart ride and visit the local irrigation tank, farmyards and cattle-sheds to experience and engage in farming activities (Feeding, Milking, etc)

Lagoon based Activities

This project is to target the younger generation of tourists searching for soft adventure activities as well as young families looking for fun for all. The Batticaloa lagoon hosts many water-based activities suiting all ages and capabilities in the midst of a tranquil and exquisite environment. Enjoy the warmth of the local families as they open their very own homes and share their culture and lifestyles. Explore the beauty of Batti and make excursions to Farms and cultivations where you may try your hand at the local life skills

Activities & Sites include; water-sports and ride a traditional catamaran, lagoon tours with a local interpreter, bird watching, and snorkel the local coral reefs.

Adventure

Experience some of the world's best dives among the local warmth and hospitality. Live with the local and people and experience the diverse culture and lifestyle while gaining a world-class experience in Diving. HMS Hermes, the First purpose-built Air-Craft Carrier, gunned down in anchorage off the Batticaloa shore in 1942 by the same attackers of pearl harbour. This marine masterpiece has lain in these warm waters, unknown and untouched for close to six decades, serving as a home to a rich and abundant array of marine life. This will be a truly magnificent experience and a dive to remember! Indulge in the beauty and step back in time at the marine museum where you may learn the story of this wreck and of course, share your discoveries and experiences.

Activities & Sites include; dive the historic HMS Hermes – 58m depth, live coral reefs, Fun dive the 02 boiler wrecks – 9-15m depth, and water-sports.

Finding of Community-First Tourism for Self-Employment and Sustainable Growth

Table 3: Proposed Community-First Tourism Activities

Community-First Tourism
1. Guided tours to paddy fields and experiencing the agricultural activities such sowing, harvesting, ploughing, and weeding. 2. Guided farming activities: milking, feeding of cattle. 3. Experiencing fishing and prawn cultivation. 4. Organized tours to the lagoon, water tank, and small Island. 5. Local indigenous medical treatment. 6. Village cuisines: experience the village traditional cooking of Appam, Wadei, herbal porridge, Curd, Rasam, etc,. 7. Non-motorized water sports such as: wind sailing, canoeing/ kayaking, paddle boating, catamaran tours. 8. House boat and lagoon events and competitions. 9. Star watching and space drawing during the night at the lagoon. 10. Bird watching based nature tourism. 11. Small scale adventure park. 12. Organized celebrations of cultural and religious festivals and multi-cultural events. 13. Children entertainment. 14. Authentic food festival. 15. Religious cultural site tour. 16. City leisure walk and ride.

17. Events and competitions of bicycling, and traditional cooking competition.
18. Traditional bullock cart safari.
19. Mountain climbing & viewing the scenic beauty.

Table: 4 Self-employments

Self-Employment Opportunities
1. Agriculture, organic and chena cultivation of cashew, curd, yogurt, fruits, paddy, manioc, kakiri, mango, papaya etc. 2. Accommodation and homestay operators 3. Interpreters and guiding services 4. Ayurvedhic and other indigenous treatment providers 5. Handicraftsmen (e.g, Batticaloa Sarongs, handlooms & batiks 6. Events organizers 7. Boat service providers and traditional catamaran services 8. Bicycles, bullock carts, other transport facilitators 9. Park operators 10. Equipment renting (wind sailing, canoeing/ kayaking, camera etc) 11. Tour guide services 12. Taxi services 13. Restaurant and food stalls, and cool spots 14. Photography services 15. Selling Handicrafts 16. Folk dancers and singers 17. Hiring diving equipment 18. Selling Kites 19. Paid lavatory, changing rooms, car park 20. Bull cart safari 21. Adventure equipment renting

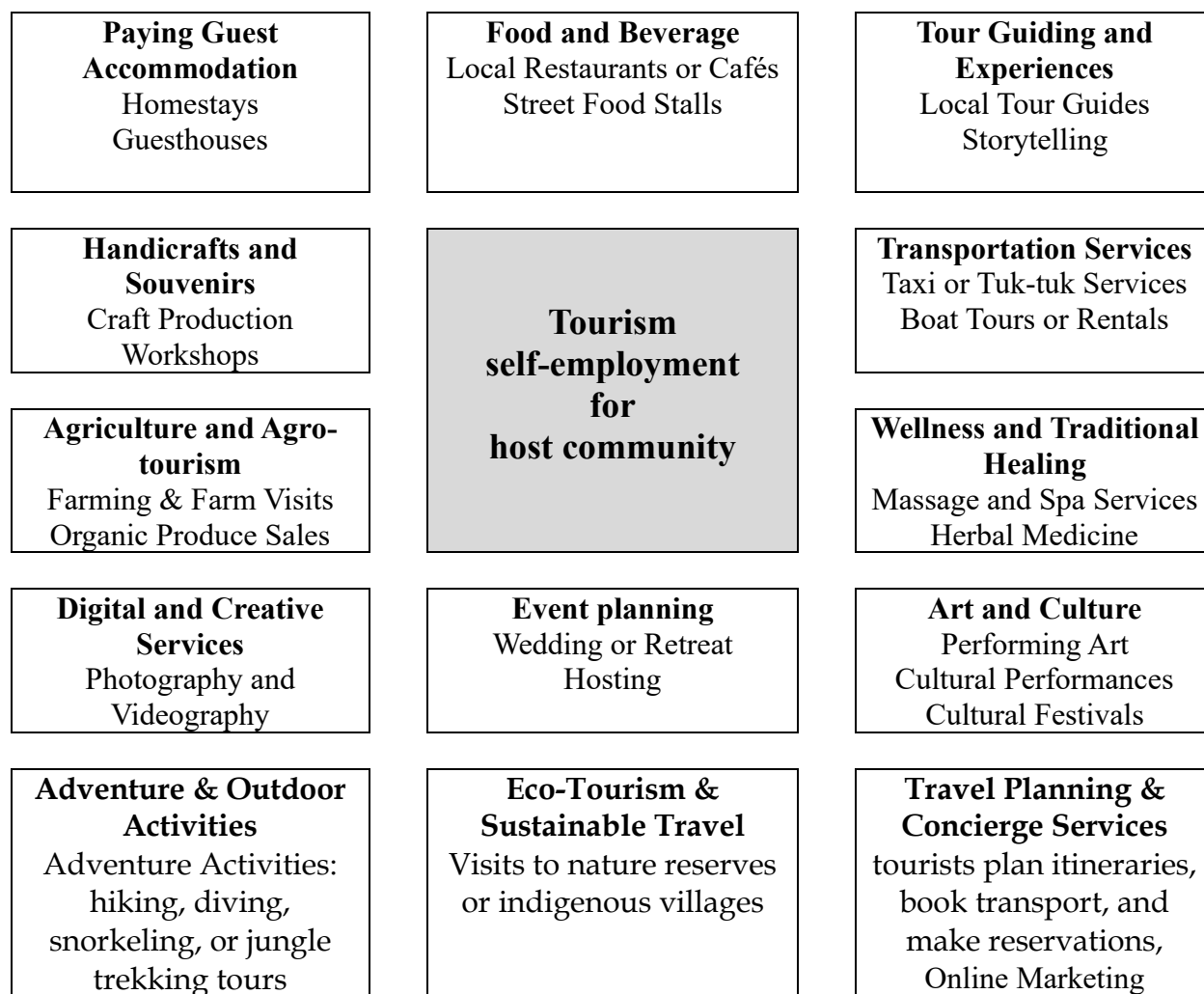


Figure 1: Tourism self-employment for host community

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study has identified several key areas where tourism development in the case study area can directly benefit the local community:

- **Agrotourism Promotion:** Empower farmers by creating market opportunities for local products.
- **Lagoon-Based Activities:** Collaborate with local fishermen to introduce engaging lagoon experiences for tourists, enhancing both livelihood and visitor attraction.

- Community Training for Tourism Services: Equip locals to serve as chauffeur guides and wildlife interpreters. Train residents to become site and area guides for tourist attractions.
- Water-Based Recreation: Involve community members in organizing beach and lagoon activities such as boat tours and windsurfing.
- Handicrafts and Souvenirs: Develop skills and establish markets for locally made crafts and souvenirs that reflect cultural identity.
- Youth Empowerment: Provide vocational training in hotel management.
- Arts and Culture: Create income-generating opportunities for local artists through regular cultural performances and art events.
- Community Event Participation: Implement a calendar of events that actively involves local communities, fostering ownership and engagement.
- Homestay Development: Encourage residents to offer homestay accommodations, creating business opportunities and enhancing the tourism experience.
- Support for Ancillary Services: Enable service providers such as taxi drivers, beauty salons, and other small businesses to benefit from increased tourist activity.
- Organizational Strengthening: Establish and support community-based tourism associations to ensure responsible and well-managed tourism growth.
- Inclusive Event Planning: Design events that promote active community participation, uphold ethnic harmony, and contribute to peaceful coexistence.

Achieving sustainable tourism in the study area is not an unrealistic goal. With strategic planning and inclusive development, tourism can significantly enhance community well-being and contribute to long-term prosperity.

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