



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

PARTICIPACIÓN COMUNITARIA EN EL TURISMO RURAL SOSTENIBLE: UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA DE LA LITERATURA

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Suggested citation (APA, seventh ed.)

Yongxia, W., Jaafar, M., & Lei, L. (2026). Community participation in sustainable rural tourism: A systematic literature review. *Universidad y Sociedad* 18(4). e6197.

ABSTRACT:

Community participation (CP) is crucial to achieve the sustainability of rural tourism (RT) and its importance is increasingly recognized. Nevertheless, the status of CP is not ideal. To enhance CP in RT, this study carries out a systematic analysis of CP in sustainable rural tourism development (SRTD), simultaneously filling the research gap. This study uses the method of PRISMA to analyze the existing peer-reviewed literature on CP in RT development, identifying 143 related studies from Web of Science and Scopus databases. The findings highlight CP's importance for RT sustainability, with empowerment as a key factor. However, CP faces economic, social, cultural, and environmental constraints and challenges. The study proposes establishing a comprehensive empowerment mechanism to enhance community empowerment and involvement in decision-making as practical solutions, and suggests future studies employ quantitative or mixed methods to obtain more reliable data and insights. This study mainly focuses on CP factors and challenges, without delving into its degree, model, and other aspect. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of CP factors and challenges and offers practical strategies, filling a gap in previous research.

Keywords: Community participation, Sustainable rural tourism, Influencing factors, Constraints, Interrelationship.

RESUMEN:

La participación comunitaria (PC) es fundamental para alcanzar la sostenibilidad del turismo rural (TR), y su importancia ha sido cada vez más reconocida. Sin embargo, el estado actual de la participación comunitaria aún presenta limitaciones significativas. Con el propósito de fortalecer la PC en el turismo rural, este estudio realizó un análisis sistemático de la participación comunitaria en el desarrollo sostenible del turismo rural (DSTR), se contribuye, además, a cubrir un vacío existente en la literatura científica. Para ello, se utilizó la metodología PRISMA para analizar la literatura revisada por pares sobre participación comunitaria en el desarrollo del turismo rural, identificándose 143 estudios relacionados en las bases de datos Web of Science y Scopus. Los resultados destacan la importancia de la participación comunitaria para la sostenibilidad del turismo rural, siendo el empoderamiento uno de los factores más influyentes. No obstante, la participación comunitaria enfrenta restricciones y desafíos de carácter económico, social, cultural y ambiental. Como respuesta, el estudio propone el establecimiento de un mecanismo integral de empoderamiento que fortalezca la participación de las comunidades y su involucramiento en la toma de decisiones. Asimismo, se recomienda que futuras investigaciones empleen métodos cuantitativos o mixtos para obtener datos y evidencias más sólidas. Este trabajo se centra principalmente en los factores y desafíos de la participación comunitaria, sin profundizar



en aspectos como sus niveles, modelos u otras dimensiones específicas. En conjunto, el estudio ofrece un análisis integral de los factores y desafíos asociados a la participación comunitaria y propone estrategias prácticas para su fortalecimiento, permite también, subsanar una brecha identificada en investigaciones previas.

Palabras clave: Participación comunitaria, Turismo rural sostenible, Factores influyentes, Restricciones, Interrelación.

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism (RT), as defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2024), involves activities such as experiencing natural scenery, agriculture, rural lifestyles, local culture, and sightseeing. It plays a significant role in addressing rural challenges and promoting territorial revitalization while demonstrating the value of sustainability. Sustainable tourism, also known as ecotourism or responsible tourism, is defined as tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities. It is a key strategy for balancing societal, economic, and environmental needs, adapting to local development needs, and achieving sustainable development (Scheyvens & Laeis, 2021).

In recent decades, tourism has evolved from being viewed solely as an economic activity to being recognized as a multidimensional development tool capable of generating social, cultural, and environmental benefits. This transformation has been particularly relevant in rural territories, where traditional economic sectors such as agriculture and livestock farming often face structural limitations, declining profitability, and population outmigration. In this context, rural tourism has emerged as a viable alternative for diversifying local economies, creating new income opportunities, and strengthening community resilience. By capitalizing on local resources, traditions, landscapes, and cultural assets, RT contributes not only to economic growth but also to the preservation of rural identities and the promotion of inclusive development.

Recent studies in Latin America further highlight the contribution of rural and community-based tourism to the preservation of cultural identity, social cohesion, and local economic diversification. In Ecuador, community tourism initiatives have been shown to strengthen cultural heritage, empower local communities, and foster sustainable livelihoods through the active participation of residents in tourism management and decision-making processes. Similarly, evidence from Peru indicates that cultural tourism centered on living heritage contributes to sustainable territorial development by promoting the conservation of traditional knowledge, enhancing community resilience, and generating inclusive economic opportunities while

safeguarding cultural resources for future. These findings reinforce the role of rural tourism as an effective mechanism for integrating cultural preservation, community well-being, and sustainable development objectives.

The importance of sustainable rural tourism has become increasingly evident in the context of global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, economic inequality, and demographic decline in rural regions. Many governments and international organizations promote sustainable tourism as a pathway to achieving several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including poverty reduction, decent work, responsible consumption and production, climate action, and sustainable communities. Sustainable tourism encourages a balanced approach that integrates environmental conservation, economic viability, and social equity, ensuring that tourism development does not compromise the ability of future generations to benefit from local resources and ecosystems.

Developing countries advocate for sustainable tourism due to its potential to revitalize rural areas and benefits such as reducing environmental impacts, improving community well-being, enhancing capacity, preserving natural and cultural resources and creating jobs. Sustainable tourism seeks to ensure that economic gains benefit local residents rather than being concentrated among external investors or tourism operators. Furthermore, tourism-related enterprises can stimulate entrepreneurship, support local supply chains, and encourage investments in infrastructure and public services that improve quality of life for host communities.

RT is closely intertwined with local community development. Rural tourism focuses on vacationing in rural areas while utilizing local resources, traditions, and cultural assets, thereby directly impacting the lives of local residents (Murphy, 1985). The success and sustainability of tourism initiatives depend largely on the degree to which communities are involved in planning, implementation, and benefit-sharing processes. Consequently, community participation (CP) has become one of the most important principles in sustainable tourism development. Community participation ensures that local residents have a voice in decisions affecting their territories and promotes a sense of ownership and responsibility toward tourism initiatives.

Local residents' participation serves as a crucial prerequisite for promoting sustainable tourism. CP can enhance community belonging, social networking, and environmental appreciation (Jaafar et al., 2023), while also helping conserve biodiversity and improve livelihoods. Through active engagement, communities are better positioned to identify local priorities, manage natural and cultural resources responsibly, and create tourism products that reflect authentic local identities. Moreover, participation fosters social capital, strengthens trust among stakeholders, and

facilitates collaborative governance processes that contribute to long-term sustainability.

Regional tourism planning should involve local residents to achieve sustainable economic, social, cultural, and environmental goals. Participatory approaches enable communities to influence tourism policies, reduce potential conflicts among stakeholders, and ensure that tourism development aligns with local aspirations and values. When local populations are meaningfully engaged, tourism projects are more likely to gain social legitimacy, increase community support, and generate positive outcomes for both residents and visitors.

Nevertheless, local populations in developing nations often have limited opportunities for tourism participation in decision-making, planning, and management processes. Even when involved in tourism planning, their opinions are frequently overlooked or given limited consideration. In many cases, tourism development remains dominated by government agencies, private investors, or external organizations, leaving local communities with little influence over strategic decisions. Furthermore, local residents engaging in grassroots service work often gain only a small share of tourism revenues (Tosun, 2005). Inadequate engagement and unequal benefit distribution restrict the growth potential of RT and may create social tensions, dissatisfaction, and resistance toward tourism initiatives (Su et al., 2019).

Additional barriers to effective participation include limited access to education and training, lack of financial resources, insufficient institutional support, weak governance structures, and unequal power relations among stakeholders. These constraints can reduce the ability of local communities to engage meaningfully in tourism development and limit the sustainability of tourism outcomes. Consequently, addressing participation barriers is essential for ensuring that tourism contributes to inclusive and equitable development.

Despite the emphasis placed on local communities within the sustainable tourism literature, systematic analyses regarding community participation in sustainable rural tourism development (SRTD) remain limited. Existing studies often focus on isolated case studies or specific dimensions of participation, making it difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing community engagement and the mechanisms through which participation contributes to sustainability outcomes. This study seeks to address this gap by promoting a more comprehensive understanding of local community participation in rural tourism for sustainability.

A systematic literature review was conducted to examine the current state of knowledge on community participation

in sustainable rural tourism development and to identify key patterns, challenges, and opportunities. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between CP and SRTD?
2. What factors affect CP in RT?
3. What obstacles do local communities face in achieving comprehensive participation in RT?
4. What solutions have been recommended to improve CP in RT?

The research is organized as follows: this section presents the introduction and theoretical background. The subsequent section describes the methodology adopted for the systematic literature review, followed by a comprehensive analysis and discussion of the findings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main contributions of the study, presents recommendations for policymakers and practitioners, and identifies future research directions to advance knowledge on community participation in sustainable rural tourism development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study aims to identify papers on CP in SRTD by reviewing literature on local residents' participation in RT for sustainability. A systematic literature review was conducted, since it has the advantages of recognizing the limitations, potential, and characteristics of the current investigation and perhaps resolving the research questions. This study uses the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) technique, a four-phase methodology, to investigate research topics (Page et al., 2021). This study did not adhere to a specific plan or set of instructions, known as a protocol, because the PRISMA guidelines, which aim to limit unnecessary resources use in biomedical research, do not apply to this study. The authors collaborated with a reference group to design the search method, with a specialist mediating the specified eligibility criteria.

Keywords searching and articles identifying

The first phase of this study involves determining a list of keywords that are related to the main research objective, which is to find out the factors influencing CP in RT, identify the relationship between CP and SRTD, explore the challenges local communities face, and provide suggestions for enhancing comprehensive participation in RT. The terms incorporate the ideas of "community participation" and "sustainable rural tourism". Based on the search experience and consultation with the research group, the term "community participation" can be replaced with other terms such as "residents' participation", "community involvement", "community engagement", "residents'

involvement”, and “residents’ engagement”. The tourism field widely uses these alternative terms. Similarly, the term “sustainable” might be synonymous with “sustainable development” or substituted with the phrase “sustainability”. The term “rural tourism” has become popular in academic fields, and it is commonly defined by scholars as tourism activities that take place in rural destinations. These activities include ecotourism, heritage tourism, agrotourism, farm-based tourism, nature-based tourism, adventure tourism, spiritual tourism, wellness tourism, nostalgia tourism, cultural tourism, and other similar activities in rural areas (Rosalina et al., 2021). Therefore, the search query employs the word “rural tourism” in this particular topic. The evaluation of these three pairs of keywords occurs at the first stage.

The study performs a comprehensive analysis of scholarly papers using two important databases: Scopus and Web of Science. The Web of Science database has more than 33,000 publications covering over 256 subjects, whereas the Scopus database includes over 22,800 journals from more than 5,000 publishers worldwide (Jaafar et al., 2023). Searches conducted in the Scopus and Web of Science databases yielded 5,667 records. After duplicate removal and the application of the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, 22 studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final qualitative synthesis (table 1).

Table 1. Search string and results of the Scopus and WOS databases.

Search Engine	Search String	Results
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("community participat*" OR "residents participat*" OR "community involve*" OR "community engag*" OR "residents involv*" OR "residents engag*") AND "rural tourism" OR ("sustainable develop-ment" OR sustainab*))	5228
WOS	TS (("community participat*" OR "residents participat*" OR "community involv*" OR "community engag*" OR "residents involv*" OR "residents engag*") AND "rural tourism") Keywords added: SHOULD INCLUDE ("sustainable development" OR sustainab*)	439
Search Keywords	"community participation", "residents' participation", "community involvement", "community engagement", "residents' involvement", "residents' engagement", "sustainable development", "sustainability", "rural tourism"	
Total		5667

Data collection

The records retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science were exported and screened following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Duplicate records were removed before conducting title and abstract screening. Subsequently, the full texts of potentially relevant publications were assessed according to the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies that did not address community participation in sustainable rural tourism development, lacked empirical or theoretical relevance, or did not meet the eligibility criteria were excluded. After the complete screening and eligibility assessment, 22 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final qualitative synthesis (Figure 1). These studies constituted the basis for the thematic analysis presented in this review.



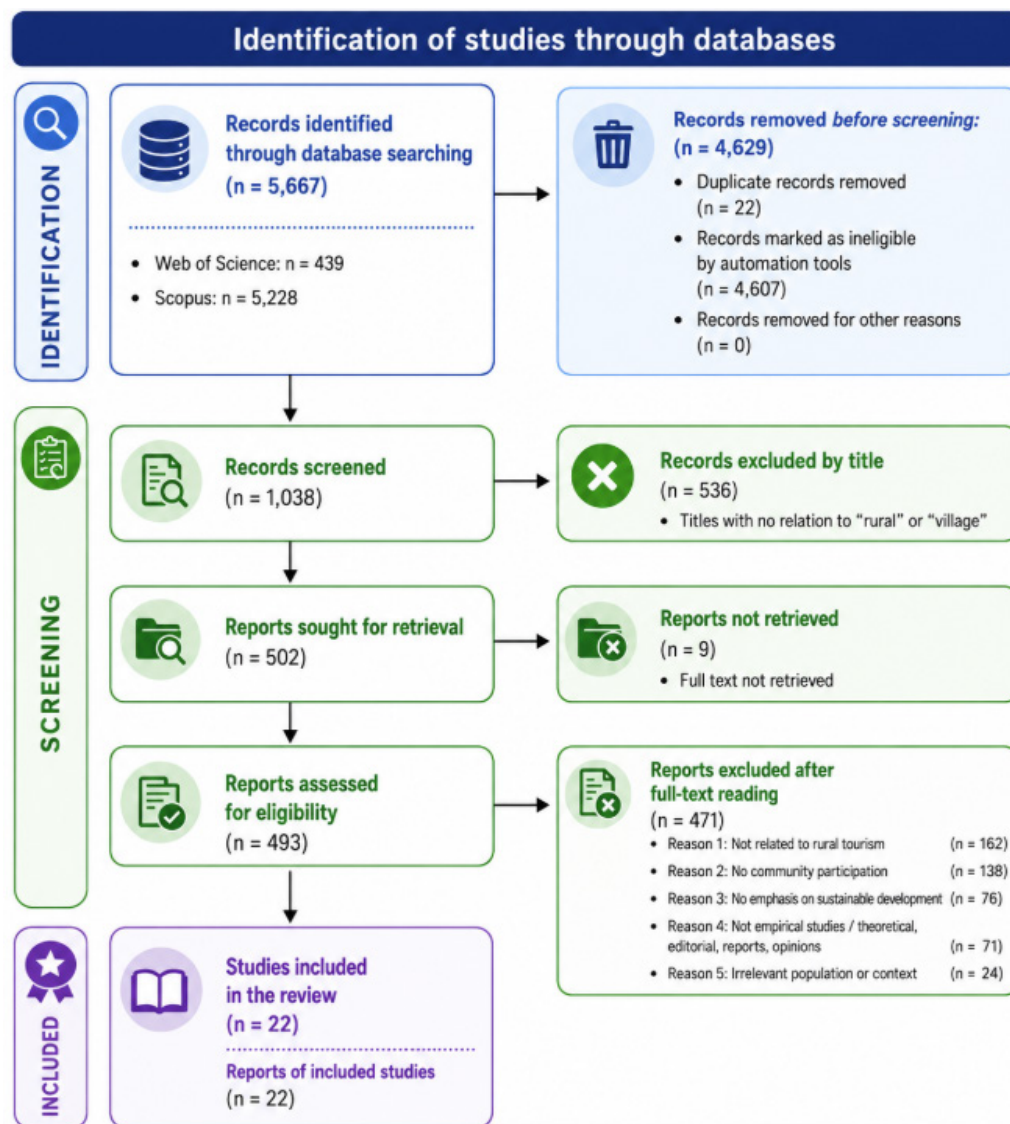


Fig 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the study selection process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a comprehensive analysis and discussion of the 22 included studies, organized according to the main themes identified in the literature. Four key themes emerged regarding sustainable rural tourism development (SRTD), with a particular focus on community participation: (1) the relationship between community participation and SRTD, (2) factors influencing community participation, (3) barriers to community participation, and (4) policy measures to strengthen community participation in SRTD. Additionally, this section discusses the implications of the findings, the limitations of the review, and directions for future research (Figure 1).

Figure 2 presents the annual distribution of the records retrieved from the Scopus and Web of Science databases between 2013 and April 2024. The search results show a progressive increase in the number of retrieved records over time, reflecting the growing scientific interest in community participation and sustainable rural tourism development. It should be noted that these values correspond to all records identified during the search process and not to the 22 studies included in the final qualitative synthesis after the PRISMA screening procedure.

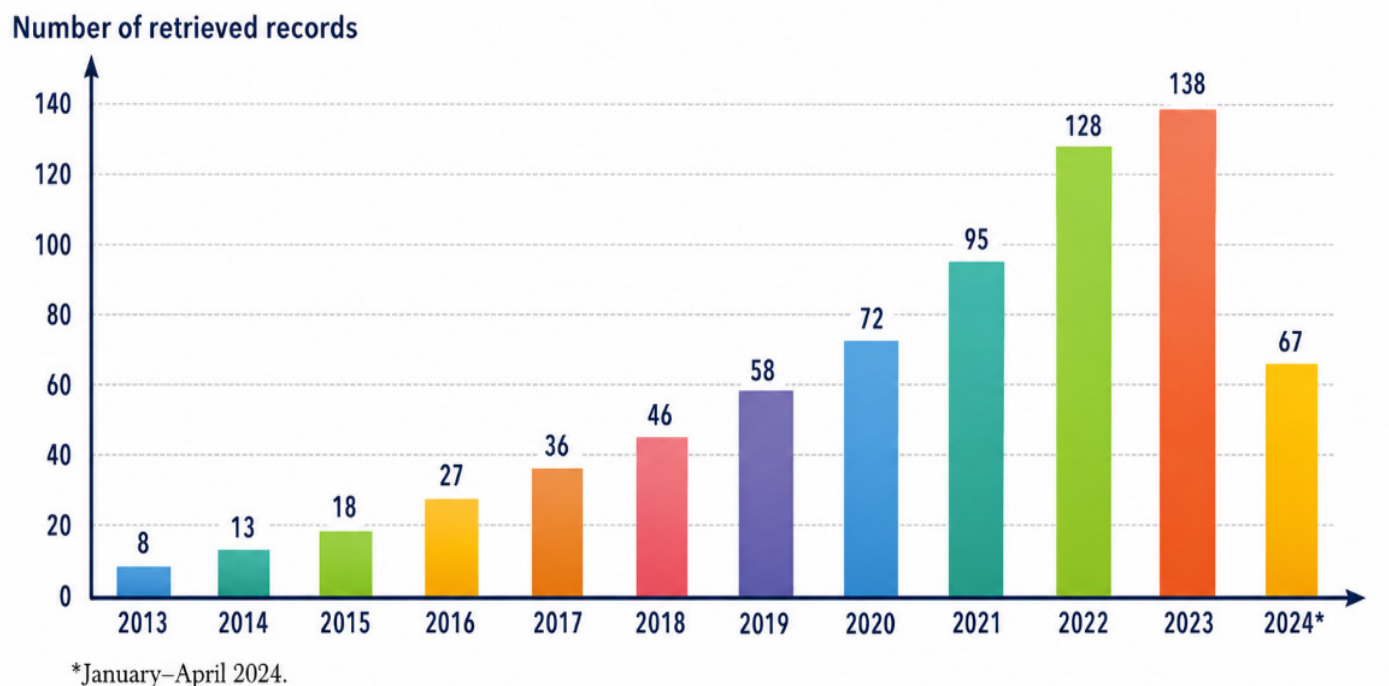


Fig 2: Annual distribution of records retrieved from the Scopus and Web of Science databases (2013–April 2024).

Relationship between CP and SRTD

The literature has extensively examined the topic of CP within the context of sustainable tourism. Community engagement encompasses the act of sharing information, obtaining commitment from the communities, and actively participating in the decision-making process. Local communities have the power to define, choose, and assess the sustainability indicators advantageous for tourism destinations. Multiple researchers have proposed that community involvement in decision-making is directly linked to the development of RT in terms of social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability.

Community engagement is considered crucial for maintaining rural tourism development. Tourism utilizes the community as a valuable asset, impacting all involved (Murphy, 1985). RT focuses on developing and promoting tourism products in rural areas, distinguished by active local involvement, which is essential for providing authentic experiences and services to tourists. Many rural regions recognize the significance of CP in tourism, transitioning from a goods-focused economy to service delivery through tourism activities. Active local participation is crucial for preserving traditional culture, offering high-quality services, ensuring environmental sustainability, and improving social interactions to provide innovative and collaborative tourism experiences. These actions, in turn, contribute to achieving tourist satisfaction and promoting the sustainable growth of RT.

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT), community-based tourism (CBT), and agrotourism demonstrate the effectiveness of community involvement in promoting local development. PPT focuses on participatory poverty alleviation, involving community efforts to enhance benefits and minimize disadvantages for the impoverished. Community engagement, in conjunction with local autonomy, is essential for assessing social sustainability in CBT development and is considered a fundamental approach to attaining sustainable development in the tourist community. Agrotourism is an agricultural approach that aims to enhance the growth of rural communities by integrating economic, environmental conservation, social, cultural, and community involvement components in a cohesive and balanced manner. Every community-based ecotourism development (CBED) plan stresses active local community engagement in RT development for sustainability and community well-being enhancement.

Factors influencing CP in RT

Since CP is the core element to achieving sustainable tourism development, academics have recently focused on the factors influencing CP in RT development. The systematic analysis was carried out by the research group to find that though disparate scholars hold their own views, some factors have been identified in consensus.

Some scholars propose that factors can be categorized into four levels: economic factors (such as economic benefits, employment, and financial capital) social factors (including power relations, personal values, social responsibility, and pressure to protect resources) (Bahamonde-Rodríguez et al., 2023), and cultural factors (such as gender stereotyping, cultural practices, and level of education). Fathizadeh et al. (2022) have studied the elements influencing an individual's psychological state, such as self-confidence and connection to society.

The thorough study reveals that empowerment is the primary element driving CP in RT. Empowerment is the premise and guarantee of CP (Hu et al., 2022). Community involvement will lose its guarantee and value in the absence of empowerment (Steiner et al., 2023). The villagers develop confidence and responsibility to engage in tourism development after being endowed with information and knowledge through empowerment, which strengthens their perception of, feelings about, and interactions with community planning and development. Recently, many scholars have turned their research focus onto the particular issues concerning the empowerment of community tourism: the specific path of community empowerment, such as information empowerment (Hu et al., 2022), the dimensions of community empowerment, including economic, psychological, social, and political empowerment and the effects of community empowerment.

In addition, scholars are increasingly focusing on the interrelationship between CP, empowerment, and such psychological factors as attitude (perception), willingness (awareness), place attachment, sense of place, etc. (Hu et al., 2022). This implies that besides the economic interests with which residents most concerned, the mental elements of community residents have similarly been followed with interest, as motivation is generally known as an energy that drives individuals to achieve their objectives and engage in behavioral activities. Table 2, displays the main factors influencing community participation in rural tourism.

Table 2: Factors influencing community participation in rural tourism.

Articles	Tourism Empowerment	Community Attitude
Ngo & Creutz (2022)	√	√
Nurvianti & Hastuti (2021)	√	
Tong et al. (2024)	√	
Ma et al. (2022)	√	
Paulino et al. (2023)	√	
Hu et al. (2022)	√	
Basile et al. (2021)	√	
Anwar et al. (2023)	√	

Constraints and challenges facing CP

When examining methods to encourage local community engagement, researchers have also investigated the negative aspects of participation. Some scholars propose that there are some constraints on the involvement of community members in the planning, execution, administration, and oversight of rural tourist development. Community engagement encounters problems that may be classified into five dimensions: economic, political, sociocultural, psychological, and environmental concerns.

The economic barriers to community engagement include the availability of seasonal, part-time, low-wage, and low-quality employment opportunities (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2018); limited access to start-up capital (Jaafar et al., 2023); inequitable distribution of tourist revenues; and a lack of financial assistance from the government. Of all the economic limitations, economic disempowerment, specifically unpredictable income, regional disparities, and an unequal income distribution system, are the primary factors that restrict CP.

Political limitations, also referred to as political disempowerment or structural constraints, include a hierarchical management structure, significant geographical distances between villagers and local government as well as between villagers and company, top-down decision-making loss of land ownership, limited access to information, restricted rights to self-expression, and inadequate protection of the right to education. The primary barrier to empowerment in all four communities, as highlighted by Hu et al. (2022), is restricted access to decision-making opportunities.

Societal obstacles include the absence of social standing and familial ties (Jaafar et al., 2023), a limited sense of shared civic duty challenges in acquiring and retaining representatives in the decision-making process and community apathy towards governance and enhancing social cohesion. The local population' inclination to engage in rural tourist development is also affected by their impression of escalating living expenses and scarcity of products and services, as



well as the growing disparity between the impoverished and the affluent (Hu et al., 2022). We can classify these occurrences can be as forms of societal disempowerment to a certain degree. The primary cultural constraints are a deficiency in understanding of tourism and a deficiency in proficiency.

Psychological considerations have a crucial role in influencing people's involvement behaviors. Residents' support for tourist development is influenced by their perceptions of economic conflicts, social conflicts, and environmental conflicts. In addition, factors such as a lack of motivation to learn, a lack of proactivity, a lack of self-assurance, and a low inclination to take risks also hinder people's involvement in RT development.

One significant aspect that affects citizens' participation in RT is the environmental factors, such as the proximity of their homes to important tourist locations, the level of cleanliness (hygiene) (Jaafar et al., 2023), and the disputes between the community and the RT industry about environmental issues.

Practical policy solutions to enhance CP

Understanding the limitations and difficulties of CP may serve as a valuable resource for government and other stakeholders when formulating effective strategies to sustainable growth of RT. The lack of effective policies encouraging farmer involvement in research and technology has impeded local growth. Therefore, local government should provide a diverse range of avenues beyond tourism services, allowing locals to participate in decision-making, tourism management, and planning.

To gain local residents' support, specialists must take into account their preferences, interests, and willingness, avoiding imposed decisions. Policies should ensure residents' well-being by providing economic compensation for tourism-related cost increases, preventing unequal tourism benefit distribution, supporting economic development, and enhancing public recreational opportunities. Equitable policies and effective communication between the government, companies, and locals are essential to address information asymmetry and power dynamics.

Citizens engaging in decision-making, planning, administration, execution, and monitoring should be facilitated. A holistic empowerment structure that encompasses economic, political, social, and cultural aspects is necessary (Hu et al., 2022). Empowering citizens can maximize social resources and promote tourism development. This involves increasing training and educational opportunities to foster technical talents and skills, and providing financial aid and job creation tailored to community requirements (Ngo & Creutz, 2022). Establishing industrial connections and adopting family-focused strategies can further social empowerment. Enhancing people's involvement

can decrease tensions caused by tourist growth. Hence, government should provide communication channels for citizens to voice their opinions on tourism development, advocating for transparency and justice (Ma et al., 2022).

Cultivating resilient community leadership in rural areas is crucial for managing stakeholder disputes. To achieve sustainable outcomes, shifting from government-led to community-led approach is advisable. Planners and developers should diversify tourism controllers, encourage village administration, and strive for a fairer distribution of resources and benefits. A "collaborative governance" strategy at the village level fosters collaboration between governmental and non-governmental entities, supporting grassroots development.

CONCLUSIONS

This research employs the PRISMA method to make a systematic analysis of CP in SRTD, presenting findings on four key themes: (1) the relationship between community participation and sustainable rural tourism development, (2) factors influencing community participation, (3) barriers to community participation, and (4) policy measures to strengthen community participation. It proposes practical policy solutions to boost SRTD, emphasizing that CP creates sustainable benefits for locals through developing tourism, and cultivating awareness of natural and cultural resources protection, thus enabling sustainable tourism principles.

The findings reveal that factors like perception of benefits, empowerment, economic capital, and personal capability affect CP in SRTD. Social, economic, political, cultural, and even environmental factors pose challenges to CP. The previous research has not conducted such a comprehensive and systematic review of its factors or challenges.

Based on this systematic review, this research proposes a comprehensive empowerment mechanism and practical strategies for government and destination managers to improve CP effectiveness and RT sustainability.

This systematic review was based on the analysis of 22 studies that met the established eligibility criteria. Although the available evidence provides valuable insights into the role of community participation in sustainable rural tourism development, additional empirical research using quantitative and mixed-method approaches is needed to strengthen the evidence base and improve policy recommendations. Future studies should further explore the relationships among empowerment, governance, community attitudes, and sustainable rural tourism outcomes. Combining systematic reviews with field surveys and case studies may also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of community participation in different geographical and socio-cultural contexts.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contribution (CRediT Taxonomy)

Author	Roles
Author 1	Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft.
Author 2	Data curation, Formal analysis, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.
Author 3	Investigation, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis.



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