

Making Sustainable Development Goals Work for People in Africa: A Tourism Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework for addressing development challenges through integrated economic, social, and environmental strategies. In Africa, where deficits coexist with rich natural and cultural assets, tourism plays a strategic role in sustainability debates. Despite recognition of its potential, progress toward the SDGs remains off-track. The 2024 Africa Sustainable Development Report revealed that only 6 percent of measurable targets are on course for achievement by 2030, with over 281 million Africans facing food insecurity and persistent structural unemployment. This paper examines tourism as a pathway for advancing SDGs in Africa, emphasising people-centred development and environmental sustainability. Adopting the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), it draws on peer-reviewed literature, policy frameworks, and institutional reports published between 2015 and 2024. The study explores tourism's alignment with Africa's SDG priorities, assesses economic and environmental contributions, reviews policy instruments, and identifies opportunities for strengthening tourism-led partnerships. Using evidence from Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, and Morocco, the findings show tourism can contribute to poverty reduction, employment, environmental conservation, sustainable urban growth, and global partnerships when guided by sustainability principles. The paper concludes that policy coherence, regulatory frameworks, and inclusive collaboration are essential for leveraging tourism to achieve the SDGs in Africa.

KEYWORDS

Sustainable Development Goals, Tourism Development, Environmental Sustainability, Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, Africa, Agenda 2063

1 | INTRODUCTION

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under the United Nations 2030 Agenda marked a decisive turning point in the history of global development policy. Unlike its predecessor frameworks, the 2030 Agenda is universal in application, integrated in design, and explicitly grounded in the recognition that poverty eradication, environmental protection, and inclusive economic growth are inseparable objectives that must be pursued concurrently (United Nations, 2015). This integrated vision demands sector-specific approaches that can simultaneously generate economic value, protect environmental resources, and promote social equity. For Africa, the SDGs represent not merely an external policy commitment but a direct response to longstanding structural vulnerabilities that have resisted resolution across successive development frameworks.

Africa's development record under the SDGs is cause for urgent concern. According to the 2024 Africa Sustainable Development Report, prepared jointly by the African Union (AU), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), only six percent of measurable SDG targets reviewed by the High-

Level Political Forum were on track for achievement by 2030. More than 281 million Africans experienced food insecurity in 2022, a figure that has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and recurring climate shocks. Youth unemployment in several African economies exceeds 40 percent, and in South Africa alone, youth unemployment reached 62.2 percent in 2024 using the expanded definition that includes discouraged workers (World Bank, 2024). Sub-Saharan Africa remains home to approximately 490 million people living in extreme poverty, constituting more than half of the global extreme poor, even as other developing regions have recorded significant poverty reductions. The Gini coefficient for South Africa stands at 0.63, one of the highest in the world, reflecting deeply entrenched inequality that cuts across racial, geographic, and gender lines (World Bank, 2021). By contrast, the Asia-Pacific region, which similarly committed to the SDGs in 2015, has made comparatively greater strides in reducing extreme poverty and expanding access to basic services, underscoring the structural dimensions of Africa's development challenge and the urgency of identifying high-impact sectoral pathways.

The tourism sector has increasingly been advanced in both academic literature and policy discourse as one such pathway. Tourism is labour-intensive, creates employment along wide

value chains, generates foreign exchange earnings, incentivises environmental conservation, and fosters cultural exchange and international partnerships. In Africa, where the continent's competitive advantage lies substantially in its extraordinary natural heritage including the world's largest terrestrial mammal migrations, extensive marine ecosystems, the Congo Basin rainforest, the Saharan and Sahelian landscapes, and thousands of protected areas, tourism represents a sector with genuine transformative potential. In 2024, Africa welcomed 73.9 million international tourists, generating receipts of approximately USD 42.6 billion, which accounts for 41 percent of the continent's total service exports, the highest share of service exports globally (UN Tourism, 2025). Tourism contributes between 7 and 10 percent of GDP in several African economies, and the sector is increasingly embedded in national development plans across the continent (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2022).

Yet the gap between tourism's theoretical potential and its actual contribution to sustainable development in Africa is substantial and insufficiently interrogated in the literature. This gap manifests at multiple levels. At the governance level, tourism policies in many African nations continue to operate in isolation from broader development planning instruments, environmental management frameworks, and social protection systems. At the institutional level, weak regulatory enforcement, limited interministerial coordination, and inadequate capacity for monitoring and evaluation undermine the coherence and effectiveness of sustainability-oriented tourism strategies. At the analytical level, the existing literature on tourism and the SDGs in Africa has tended toward institutional and policy endorsement rather than critical synthesis cataloguing what institutions recommend without adequately examining the conditions under which tourism-led development succeeds or fails, or engaging with the growing body of scholarship that questions the very premises of sustainable tourism as conventionally framed.

Previous studies addressing the relationship between tourism and the SDGs in Africa have contributed valuable empirical and policy insights, particularly in Southern Africa (Saarinen and Rogerson, 2020) and West Africa (Mensah, Amuquandoh, and Boakye, 2021). However, this body of work has not been synthesized in a manner that (i) maps tourism's alignment with Africa's SDG priorities across the full spectrum of the continent's sub-regional diversity; (ii) integrates critical perspectives from the overtourism, degrowth, and political ecology literatures that have fundamentally reshaped the sustainable tourism debate internationally; or (iii) develops actionable, institution-specific policy recommendations grounded in empirical evidence from multiple African contexts.

This paper addresses these gaps by undertaking a critical, theoretically grounded, and geographically inclusive review of the literature, incorporating country-level case evidence and engaging directly with the contradictions and governance challenges that characterise tourism-led development across

the continent. In doing so, it seeks to reposition tourism not merely as a sectoral income generator, but as a potentially transformative and instrumental whose contribution to the SDGs depends fundamentally on the quality of governance, the distribution of benefits, and the depth of environmental stewardship embedded in its management.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Theoretical background

2.1.1 The SDGs and Africa's Development Context

Africa is the world's second-largest and second-most populous continent, endowed with exceptional biodiversity, mineral wealth, and cultural diversity. These assets constitute both the foundation of the continent's tourism potential and the substance of its broader development prospects (World Bank, 2021). The 2030 Agenda explicitly recognises Africa's unique development challenges and calls for targeted implementation strategies, strengthened policy coherence, and deepened partnerships to support SDG attainment (United Nations, 2015). Yet the continent's development trajectory since 2015 has been disrupted by overlapping crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate shocks, debt distress, geopolitical conflicts, and commodity price volatility that have eroded earlier gains and widened the distance between current performance and SDG targets.

At the continental level, Africa's engagement with the SDGs is institutionally anchored in Agenda 2063, the African Union's long-term framework for an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa. Agenda 2063 and the SDGs are substantially complementary, sharing common objectives related to inclusive growth, environmental sustainability, and institutional strengthening (African Union Commission, 2015; UNDP, 2020). This alignment provides a strategic architecture for positioning tourism as a development catalyst, particularly given that several of Agenda 2063's aspirations including the development of world-class tourism infrastructure, the promotion of Pan-African cultural identity, and the realisation of an integrated single tourism market directly intersect with SDG priorities.

2.1.2 The African Common Position and Sectoral Development

Africa has consistently articulated a unified development stance in global negotiations through the African Common Position (ACP) on the post-2015 development agenda. The ACP prioritises structural economic transformation, people-centred development, environmental sustainability, peace and security, and global partnerships as core development imperatives (African Union Commission, 2015). These pillars align closely with the principles of sustainable development embedded in the SDGs, and tourism's cross-cutting character enables it to contribute across all five.

As a service-intensive industry with extensive forward and backward economic linkages, tourism interacts with agriculture,

infrastructure, manufacturing, cultural industries, and financial services. It fosters employment, supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), promotes cultural exchange, and creates financial incentives for environmental conservation (UNWTO, 2019a; World Bank, 2021). These characteristics make tourism a candidate for translating continental policy commitments into localised development outcomes, provided that the sector is appropriately governed and that benefit-sharing mechanisms are both equitable and enforceable.

2.1.3 Tourism and Environmental Sustainability

Sustainable tourism is commonly defined as tourism that fully considers its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts while meeting the needs of visitors, host communities, and the environment (UNWTO, 2019a). This definition has been widely adopted in institutional documents and policy frameworks; however, scholars have noted that it is fundamentally aspirational in character and poorly operationalised in practice (Hall, 2019). The definition's emphasis on 'fully considering' impacts does not translate automatically into the regulatory and monitoring systems necessary to ensure that such consideration occurs in practice, particularly in institutional environments characterised by limited enforcement capacity, competing political priorities, and short-term economic incentives.

Notwithstanding these definitional limitations, the conceptual link between tourism and environmental sustainability remains significant. In Africa, the continent most visited tourism assets are savannahs, rainforests, marine environments, and protected areas are also its most ecologically fragile. Conservation-based tourism, particularly wildlife and nature-based ecotourism, has demonstrated the potential to generate financial flows that support the maintenance of protected areas and biodiversity conservation programmes (International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN], 2020a). Park entrance fees, conservation levies, and ecotourism concession revenues have funded anti-poaching operations, habitat restoration, and community conservation initiatives across East and Southern Africa. At the same time, poorly managed tourism poses acute environmental risks, including biodiversity loss, carbon emissions from aviation and accommodation, coastal degradation, freshwater depletion, and land-use conflicts that displace indigenous and local communities.

2.1.4 Tourism and the SDGs: Multiple Linkages

Tourism's capacity to advance the SDGs is most evident across six goals: SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). However, its potential to address SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) is increasingly emphasised in recent scholarship, particularly as evidence has accumulated on the gendered dimensions of

tourism employment and the persistence of elite capture in tourism revenue distribution (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021; Ashley and Mitchell, 2020).

SDG 1 and SDG 8 are directly linked to tourism through the sector's capacity to generate employment and income across multiple segments of the value chain including accommodation, food and beverage services, transport, handicrafts, cultural performances, and tour guiding. Women and youth, who are disproportionately excluded from formal labour markets in many African economies, are significant participants in tourism-related employment (WTTC, 2022a). Community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives have demonstrated particular promise in this regard, enabling local communities to retain a greater share of tourism revenues and develop entrepreneurial capacity in ways that more conventional resort or enclave tourism models do not permit (UNDP, 2020).

SDG 11 is addressed through the contribution of urban and heritage tourism to the revitalisation of historic city centres, the development of accessible public infrastructure, and the promotion of cultural heritage conservation. In cities such as Marrakech, Zanzibar, Kigali, and Cape Town, tourism has provided both the financial justification and the visitor traffic necessary to support the preservation of built and intangible heritage that might otherwise have been lost to neglect or redevelopment. SDGs 13, 14, and 15 intersect with tourism through the conservation finance mechanisms generated by protected area tourism and the growing imperative for low-carbon tourism development. SDG 17 is advanced through the multilateral partnerships, foreign direct investment, and intergovernmental cooperation frameworks that characterise international tourism development.

2.2 | Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Review of Relevant Theories

The relationship between tourism, sustainable development, and SDG implementation in Africa has been approached through several theoretical lenses in the academic literature. Three frameworks are particularly germane to the present study: Political Ecology, Stakeholder Theory, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF).

Political Ecology examines the power relations, social inequalities, and institutional structures that shape human-environment interactions, including those mediated by tourism. Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe (2008) offer a foundational critique of what they term 'fortress conservation', it is the exclusion of indigenous and local communities from protected areas in the name of conservation which is directly relevant to understanding why tourism in Africa's protected areas has frequently failed to deliver equitable development outcomes. Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2020) extend this analysis by examining how dominant narratives of sustainable development can mask dispossession and reproduce social inequality, a dynamic evident in several African tourism contexts where land alienation and benefit denial have attended the expansion of

conservation-based tourism. The political ecology lens thus draws analytical attention to the political economy of tourism development who controls the resources, who captures the revenues, and whose livelihoods and rights are compromised in the process.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), developed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID, 1999) and subsequently elaborated in development scholarship, analyses livelihood outcomes by mapping the assets (human, social, financial, physical, and natural capital), vulnerability contexts, institutional structures, and livelihood strategies that shape people's ability to sustain and improve their living standards. The SLF is well suited to the present study because it captures the multidimensional relationship between tourism, natural resource endowments, community capacity, and institutional governance that drives or inhibits SDG achievement. Crucially, the SLF locates tourism within a broader vulnerability context including climate shocks, economic downturns, and governance failures that determines whether the benefits of tourism translate into durable livelihood improvements or remain episodic and unequally distributed.

2.2.2 Adopted Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as its primary theoretical anchor. The SLF is selected for several reasons. First, it is explicitly people-centred, consistent with the paper's core argument that tourism must be evaluated not merely as an economic sector but as a force that shapes or fails to shape people's material and social conditions. Second, the SLF's emphasis on natural capital is particularly appropriate in the African context, where tourism's viability depends overwhelmingly on the integrity of natural ecosystems and cultural heritage that constitute the continent's tourism assets. Third, the framework's institutional dimension provides a basis for analysing how governance structures, policy environments, and stakeholder relations mediate the relationship between tourism and SDG outcomes, which is the central concern of this study's fourth objective. The SLF thus provides an integrative analytical lens that encompasses the economic, environmental, social, and governance dimensions of tourism-led sustainable development without reducing the analysis to any single dimension.

2.3 | Policy Instruments for Sustainable Tourism Development in Africa

The extent to which tourism contributes to sustainable development outcomes is shaped substantially by the policy instruments and governance frameworks that guide sectoral growth. Effective tourism governance prioritises sustainability, inclusivity, and institutional accountability across several policy domains (UNWTO, 2019a).

2.3.1 Sustainable Financing Mechanisms

Tourism provides access to innovative financing mechanisms

for sustainable development through conservation trust funds, green taxes, destination levies, and public-private partnerships (PPPs). These instruments generate stable financial resources for environmental protection, heritage conservation, and infrastructure development, while promoting fiscal sustainability and local ownership (World Bank, 2021). In Rwanda, for example, the Gorilla Conservation Fund supported in part by revenue from mountain gorilla trekking permits, which are among the most expensive in the world at USD 1,500 per visit, channels a significant share of proceeds to surrounding communities, providing a model for linking luxury conservation-based tourism to community benefit distribution.

2.3.2 Environmental Planning and Management

Strategic environmental planning tools including land-use zoning, carrying capacity evaluations, environmental impact assessments, and integrated coastal zone management are critical for managing the environmental stresses generated by tourism. The integration of waste management systems, energy-efficient technologies, and green construction standards further reduces the ecological footprint of tourism activities and enhances destination resilience (UNEP, 2020). In the absence of such instruments, tourism infrastructure development frequently exceeds the absorptive capacity of natural and urban systems, generating pollution, habitat fragmentation, and resource depletion that undermine both conservation goals and the long-term competitiveness of the destination itself.

2.3.3 Environmental Awareness and Knowledge Transfer

Tourism provides a platform for fostering responsible conduct among tourists and host communities while disseminating environmental knowledge. Eco-certification programmes, interpretive initiatives, and responsible tourism campaigns reinforce sustainable consumption norms and conservation principles (UNWTO, 2019b). In Africa, such instruments are particularly valuable given the continent's reliance on charismatic wildlife and sensitive ecosystems as primary tourism attractions contexts in which visitor behaviour can have immediate and significant ecological consequences.

2.3.4 Protection of Natural and Cultural Heritage

The creation and maintenance of protected areas across Africa has been substantially supported by tourism revenues. Wildlife and nature-based tourism assign economic value to conservation, strengthening the incentive structures for long-term resource stewardship and ecosystem protection (IUCN, 2020a). Cultural heritage tourism performs an analogous function for the built and intangible cultural estate, making the preservation of historic sites, traditional practices, and indigenous knowledge economically viable and locally valued.

2.3.5 Regulatory and Institutional Frameworks

Robust regulatory frameworks are essential for ensuring that tourism development remains within ecological and social bounds. Regulations governing visitor numbers, zoning, environmental standards, licensing, and community benefit-

sharing promote sustainable destination management when supported by strong institutions and meaningful stakeholder participation (UNWTO, 2019a). In many African jurisdictions, however, the enforcement of existing regulations remains inconsistent, reflecting broader deficits in state capacity and political will that are not specific to the tourism sector but are acutely consequential for it.

2.4 Empirical Review

The empirical literature on tourism and sustainable development in Africa has grown considerably over the past decade, though it remains geographically concentrated and methodologically varied. This review organises the evidence by sub-region while also engaging with critical theoretical perspectives that have reshaped the international sustainable tourism debate.

In Southern Africa, Saarinen and Rogerson (2020) found that when backed by inclusive governance frameworks, community-based tourism projects significantly enhanced local livelihoods while improving conservation outcomes. Their study, conducted across multiple sites in Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, underscores the importance of institutional design in determining the extent to which benefits percolate to rural and marginalised communities rather than concentrating in the hands of commercial intermediaries. Rogerson (2020) similarly found in a South African context that tourism's contribution to local economic development was mediated by the degree of local ownership and the extent of supply chain integration with the domestic economy. Where tourism enterprises sourced locally and employed community members in skilled positions, development outcomes were substantially more positive than in enclave resort models oriented toward imported goods and expatriate management.

In West Africa, Mensah, Amuquandoh, and Boakye (2021) demonstrated that eco-friendly tourism practices in Ghana's protected areas had a favourable impact on job creation and environmental conservation. Their study focused on the Kakum National Park and revealed that community-based conservation tourism, supported by the Ghana Wildlife Division, had generated measurable improvements in both household income and wildlife protection outcomes since the park's commercialisation in the early 2000s. In Nigeria, Bashiru and Fagbolu (2022) examined tourism development in relation to SDG implementation at Old Oyo National Park, arguing that the Nigerian government should strengthen the integrity of local tourism activities by prioritising enterprises that conserve wildlife, tourism heritage, and traditional values. Their analysis points to the persistent challenge of integrating park-based tourism into community development planning in a context of weak institutional coordination and inadequate revenue-sharing mechanisms.

In East Africa, Kenya presents one of the continent's most instructive cases of tourism-SDG integration. The Kenya Vision 2030, which identifies tourism as a key sector under its economic and social pillars, targets the country's emergence as

among the top ten long-haul destinations globally. The tourism sector contributed approximately 8.2 percent of GDP and employed an estimated 1.6 million Kenyans prior to the COVID-19 disruption (WTTC, 2020). Kenya welcomed 2.1 million international tourists in 2023, with projected receipts of approximately USD 2 billion in 2024, reflecting robust post-pandemic recovery (Kenya National Tourism Strategy, 2025). The Maasai Mara ecosystem, Amboseli, and the coastal strip remain the dominant tourism nodes, though government policy has increasingly sought to diversify the product base toward cultural, agricultural, and urban tourism in order to spread economic benefits more equitably.

Rwanda offers a particularly compelling example of tourism's potential as a sustainable development vehicle. Rwanda's GDP grew by 8.4 percent in the first three quarters of 2022, with growth spurred substantially by the revival of the tourism sector following the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to improved employment indicators (World Bank, 2023). Nature-based tourism, which accounts for approximately 80 percent of leisure and conference visitors to Rwanda, is anchored by mountain gorilla trekking in Volcanoes National Park, one of the most profitable conservation tourism products in the world. The Rwandan government has embedded tourism within its Vision 2050 and National Strategy for Transformation (NST1, 2017-2024), recognising the sector's capacity to generate foreign exchange, create formal employment, and finance protected area conservation simultaneously.

In North Africa, Morocco has positioned itself as one of the continent's most proactive tourism-sustainability advocates. In December 2024, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a landmark resolution proposed by Morocco on sustainable tourism as a tool for poverty reduction and environmental conservation, co-sponsored by 109 member states. Morocco hosted the 2001 Conference of the Parties (COP7) and the 2016 COP22, reflecting sustained national commitment to environmental governance that extends to its tourism sector. The country's Vision 2020 tourism strategy incorporated ecotourism, cultural tourism, and rural tourism product development aligned with sustainable development principles, and Morocco has since established itself among the top tourism investment destinations in Africa alongside South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia, and Kenya (UN Tourism, 2025). Egypt's initiatives, including the Hayah Karima (Decent Life) programme targeting rural communities that border tourism zones, further demonstrate how North African governments have sought to align tourism revenues with social protection objectives. In Central Africa, the empirical literature on tourism-SDG linkages remains limited, reflecting both the restricted development of the tourism sector in this sub-region and the concentration of accessible scholarship in Anglophone and Francophone contexts. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), despite hosting part of the Congo Basin, one of the world's most important terrestrial carbon sinks and a biodiversity hotspot of global significance has been unable to translate its ecological assets into significant tourism revenues due to political instability, infrastructure deficits, and

governance challenges. This evidential gap constitutes a genuine limitation of the literature and is acknowledged as a constraint on the continental scope of the present analysis.

A critical and often underexplored dimension of the sustainable tourism literature concerns the risks and limits of tourism-led development. The overtourism scholarship (Koens, Postma, and Papp, 2018; Peeters et al., 2018) has documented how unmanaged visitor growth can overwhelm destination infrastructure, displace local residents, commodify cultural practices, and generate net environmental disbenefits that outweigh economic gains. Though overtourism has been most extensively studied in European contexts, its dynamics are increasingly relevant to popular African destinations such as Zanzibar, Victoria Falls, and the Okavango Delta, where visitor numbers have grown rapidly without commensurate investment in carrying capacity management or sustainable destination governance.

More fundamentally, the degrowth literature in tourism (Fletcher et al., 2019) challenges the assumption embedded in UNWTO frameworks and most national tourism strategies, that more tourism is inherently better for development. Fletcher and colleagues argue that the relentless growth imperative in tourism policy drives environmental degradation, social displacement, and economic dependency, and that genuinely sustainable development may require qualitative improvements in tourism governance rather than quantitative expansion of visitor numbers. This perspective has particular salience for Africa, where several high-biodiversity destinations face acute tensions between conservation imperatives and commercial tourism pressures. The political ecology literature (Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe, 2008; Svarstad and Benjaminsen, 2020) reinforces this critique by revealing how conservation-based tourism narratives have, in numerous documented cases, served to legitimise the exclusion of indigenous and local communities from their traditional lands and resources, undermining rather than advancing SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and the human rights dimensions of the 2030 Agenda.

In a wider African context, Adeola, Boso, and Evans (2022) found that the relationship between tourism growth and sustainable development indicators in African economies is significantly mediated by institutional quality and policy coherence. Their analysis indicates that tourism's contribution to the SDGs is greatest where environmental regulations, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and investment frameworks are well-established and consistently enforced a finding that reinforces the SLF's emphasis on the institutional dimension of livelihood outcomes and points to governance reform as the primary lever for enhancing tourism's SDG contribution.

3 | Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based research design specifically a narrative integrative review to examine tourism as a pathway for SDG achievement in Africa. The

choice of this methodology is deliberate and appropriate because the study's objectives are conceptual and policy-oriented rather than primarily empirical also it seeks to map, synthesise, and critically analyse existing knowledge rather than generate new primary data. Literature-based methodologies are well established in sustainable tourism and development studies research (Hall, 2019; Novelli et al., 2022), and their capacity to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps across a body of evidence makes them particularly suited to the kind of critical synthesis this paper undertakes.

The review was conducted through systematic searches of peer-reviewed databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. In addition, the repositories of major international organisations including the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, the African Union Commission, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) were searched for relevant policy documents, institutional reports, and technical publications. The primary search terms used, individually and in combination, included: 'tourism AND SDGs AND Africa'; 'sustainable tourism AND development AND sub-Saharan Africa'; 'tourism AND poverty reduction AND Africa'; 'ecotourism AND conservation AND Africa'; 'tourism governance AND sustainable development AND Africa'; 'tourism AND Agenda 2063'; 'overtourism AND Africa'; 'community-based tourism AND SDGs'; and 'political ecology AND conservation tourism AND Africa.'

The temporal scope of the review was set at 2015 to 2024, capturing the full SDG implementation period to date. Where seminal works published prior to 2015 including foundational policy documents such as the African Union Commission's Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission, 2015) and institutional frameworks that predate or straddle the SDG adoption period are cited, this is justified on the grounds that they constitute the indispensable policy context within which contemporary tourism-SDG debates are conducted. Several pre-2015 academic studies are also referenced where they represent foundational theoretical contributions (e.g., Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe, 2008; DFID, 1999) that have not been superseded and remain analytically essential. The inclusion of these sources is not inconsistent with the study's aims; rather, it reflects the scholarly norm of grounding contemporary analysis in the theoretical traditions from which it draws.

Inclusion criteria for the review were: (i) publications addressing the relationship between tourism and sustainable development, the SDGs, or development outcomes in Africa or in comparable developing-country contexts; (ii) peer-reviewed empirical studies, theoretical papers, or policy analyses of sufficient methodological transparency to permit critical evaluation; and (iii) institutional reports from credible international organisations with demonstrated expertise in the relevant domains. Exclusion criteria were: (i) publications

without identifiable authorship or institutional affiliation; (ii) studies focused exclusively on tourism markets or demand analysis without development-relevant content; and (iii) publications whose geographical scope was entirely outside Africa and did not engage with questions of theoretical or comparative relevance to the study's arguments. Thematic content analysis was used to synthesise the reviewed literature, with themes derived inductively from the evidence base and organised deductively in relation to the four stated study objectives. The analytical procedure involved iterative reading, coding, and cross-referencing of sources, with attention to convergences, contradictions, and gaps in the evidence.

4 | Discussion of Findings

The findings from the reviewed literature affirm that tourism occupies a strategic, multidimensional, and critically contradictory position in relation to Africa's SDG agenda. The discussion is organised around the study's four objectives: the alignment between tourism and Africa's SDG priorities; country-level evidence on implementation; the challenges and sustainability paradox that limit tourism's development potential; and the governance and policy pathways for strengthening tourism-led SDG achievement.

4.1 Tourism and SDG Alignment in Africa

The evidence demonstrates strong convergence between tourism development and several of Africa's core SDG priorities when the sector is governed with sustainability and inclusion as deliberate design principles. Tourism's most direct SDG contributions are concentrated in SDGs 1, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, and 17, though its implications for SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) are equally significant and deserve greater analytical attention than they have typically received in the policy-oriented literature.

With respect to SDGs 1 and 8, tourism functions as what the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2022a) terms a 'pro-poor growth engine' when its value chains are structured to maximise local employment and procurement. The sector's 7 to 10 percent GDP contribution in several African economies including Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana, and Seychelles represents a substantial economic footprint. In tourism-dependent economies such as Seychelles and Mauritius, the sector accounts for an even higher share of GDP and employment, offering both a demonstration of what is achievable and a cautionary tale about the risks of excessive economic dependency on a single sector vulnerable to global shocks, as the COVID-19 pandemic devastatingly illustrated. Youth and women's participation in tourism-related enterprise and employment is particularly significant from an SDG 1 and SDG 5 perspective. In multiple African contexts, including Tanzania's Zanzibar Archipelago and Uganda's community tourism programme near Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, women-led community enterprises have proven to be among the most economically resilient and ecologically responsible tourism operators (Ashley and Mitchell, 2020).

Tourism intersects with SDG 11 through urban heritage tourism, which provides the financial justification and visitor traffic necessary to support the rehabilitation of historic city centres and the development of accessible public cultural infrastructure. Morocco's medinas including Marrakech and Fez have benefited from significant heritage conservation investment linked to tourism, with UNESCO World Heritage designation functioning as a quality signal that attracts premium visitors and reinforces the economic case for preservation. In Kigali, Rwanda, the city's rise as a conferences and meetings destination has been intentionally linked to a broader urban development agenda that has seen improvements in public infrastructure, waste management, and environmental cleanliness that benefit residents as well as visitors, a genuine example of tourism contributing to SDG 11 in ways that extend beyond the tourism economy itself.

Tourism relationship with SDGs 14 and 15 is mediated by the conservation finance mechanisms generated by protected area tourism. In Eastern and Southern Africa, revenues from national parks, game reserves, and community conservancies have, since the 1990s and with increasing scale through the 2000s and 2010s, funded anti-poaching operations, wildlife corridor restoration, and community outreach programmes (IUCN, 2020a; Spenceley, Snyman, and Eagles, 2021). The Rwandan Mountain gorilla trekking programme offers perhaps the most high-profile example: permit revenues, which reached approximately USD 22 million in 2019, have made a measurable contribution to the recovery of the mountain gorilla population from fewer than 250 individuals in the 1980s to over 1,000 today, a conservation success story with direct implications for SDG 15 (Spenceley et al., 2021). SDG 17 is directly advanced through the multilateral partnerships, bilateral cooperation frameworks, and international investment that underpin Africa tourism economy, including the African Development Bank's investments in sustainable tourism infrastructure and the ongoing collaboration between African Tourism Boards and international bodies such as the UNWTO and the IUCN.

4.2 Country Case Studies: Integrating Tourism into Development Frameworks

Kenya provides the most extensively documented African case of tourism integration within a national development framework. The Kenya Vision 2030, launched in 2008 and currently implemented through the Fourth Medium-Term Plan (2023-2027), identifies tourism as a flagship sector under both its economic and social pillars. The Vision targets Kenya's emergence as a top ten long-haul destination while simultaneously embedding tourism within poverty reduction and employment generation objectives. In practice, the government's 'Magical Kenya' brand strategy has been complemented by investments in tourism infrastructure, wildlife conservation, and capacity development that have diversified the product base and expanded the geographic distribution of tourism benefits beyond the traditional circuits of the Maasai Mara, the coast, and Amboseli. Kenya's receipt of

approximately USD 2 billion in tourism revenue in 2024, its welcome of 2.1 million international visitors in 2023, and its sustained positioning as Africa's leading destination for wildlife tourism all reflect the cumulative effect of sustained policy commitment (Kenya National Tourism Strategy, 2025). Challenges nevertheless persist: leakages from the tourism economy through imported goods, expatriate management, and foreign-owned hotel chains continue to limit the proportion of revenue that is retained domestically and distributed to local communities.

Rwanda's tourism strategy offers a compelling case of deliberate alignment between tourism, conservation, and development. The Rwanda Development Board's integrated management of tourism and investment promotion has enabled the government to pursue a 'high-value, low-volume' positioning strategy that maximises revenue per visitor while minimising environmental pressure, a direct response to the limitations of mass tourism models in ecologically sensitive destinations. The Gorilla Conservation Fund's revenue-sharing mechanism, which channels 10 percent of national park revenues to adjacent communities, has been identified as a model for SDG 10 in tourism (Spenceley et al., 2021), though researchers have noted that benefit amounts remain modest relative to the commercial value of the gorilla trekking product and that stronger institutional mechanisms for community voice and accountability are still required (Saarinen and Rogerson, 2020). Rwanda's embedding of tourism within Vision 2050 and the NST1 strategy also demonstrates how tourism can be integrated into national development planning in a manner that connects visitor economy objectives to broader goals of poverty reduction, environmental conservation, and human capital development.

South Africa's experience with tourism and the SDGs is instructive precisely because of its contradictions. The country possesses Africa most developed tourism infrastructure, an extraordinarily diverse product range, and a sophisticated policy apparatus, yet it simultaneously has one of the world's highest Gini coefficients (0.63), youth unemployment exceeding 62 percent, and persistent evidence that tourism revenues are concentrated in the formal private sector and largely divorced from the communities most in need of SDG-aligned development (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021). South Africa's National Tourism Sector Strategy (2016-2026) explicitly incorporates transformation and inclusive growth objectives, targeting the expansion of black-owned tourism enterprises and community-based tourism products as instruments for redirecting economic benefits toward historically marginalised populations. Progress toward these targets has, however, been uneven, and the structural power imbalances of the post-apartheid tourism economy in which land ownership, capital, and skills remain concentrated among a minority continue to limit the extent to which tourism policy can be an instrument of redistributive development (Rogerson, 2020).

Morocco's experience speaks to the potential of tourism as a

vehicle for North African SDG advancement. Following its Vision 2020 strategy, which positioned ecotourism and rural tourism alongside cultural and heritage tourism as development catalysts, Morocco has grown into one of Africa's top five tourism investment destinations (UN Tourism, 2025). The country's hosting of COP22 in Marrakech and its leadership of the December 2024 UNGA resolution on sustainable tourism reflect Morocco's deliberate positioning as an advocate for the tourism-sustainability nexus at the international level. The domestically owned hotel chain Labranda Hotels and other Moroccan enterprises have benefited from a regulatory environment that encourages local content requirements and tourism product development aligned with national priorities, though critics have noted the persistence of regional tourism inequality between the internationally recognised 'Imperial Cities' circuit and rural and peripheral areas with limited infrastructure.

4.3 Challenges and the Sustainability Paradox

Perhaps the most analytically significant finding of this review is what may be termed the sustainability paradox of African tourism: the sector that is most frequently advanced as a vehicle for environmental conservation and inclusive development is, under prevailing governance conditions, simultaneously one of the continent's most significant drivers of environmental degradation, inequality, and community displacement. This paradox is not unique to Africa, it has been documented globally by the overtourism (Koens et al., 2018; Peeters et al., 2018) and degrowth (Fletcher et al., 2019) literatures, but its manifestation in Africa carries particular significance given the continent's profound ecological assets, its acute development needs, and the institutional constraints that limit its capacity for effective tourism governance.

The paradox has several interrelated dimensions. Ecologically, the expansion of tourism infrastructure in coastal, forest, and savannah ecosystems has generated carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion that directly undermine SDGs 13, 14, and 15 (Hall, 2019; Gössling, Scott, and Hall, 2021). In destinations such as Zanzibar's northern coastal strip, the Seychelles, and South Africa's Garden Route, unregulated hotel development, inadequate wastewater treatment, and motorised water sports have degraded coral reef systems and dune habitats that constitute both conservation priorities and the ecological foundation of tourism competitiveness. Mass tourism models, in particular, generate per-visitor environmental impacts that are inconsistent with the carrying capacities of these sensitive ecosystems, and the revenue incentives driving visitor number maximisation create structural disincentives for the adoption of lower-impact, higher-quality tourism models.

Socially, the political ecology critique advanced by Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe (2008) and Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2020) has documented numerous cases in which the expansion of conservation-based tourism has served as a vehicle for the alienation of indigenous and local communities from their traditional lands and resources. The exclusion of

Maasai communities from Amboseli in Kenya, of San communities from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana, and of forest-dependent communities from several protected areas in Central and West Africa represents a pattern in which the benefits of tourism accrue to commercial operators and national governments while the costs are borne by the most marginalised groups, a dynamic that directly inverts the SDGs' inclusive development mandate.

Economically, the concentration of tourism revenues in a small number of large-scale operators, foreign-owned enterprises, and internationally branded hotel chains limits the domestic multiplier effects of tourism expenditure and weakens its contribution to broad-based poverty reduction. The 'elite capture' dynamic identified in the Discussion is not merely an equity concern; it is a structural governance failure that reflects the insufficiency of existing regulatory and benefit-sharing frameworks in ensuring that tourism's economic gains are distributed in proportion to the social and environmental costs that communities absorb.

Why does this paradox persist? The evidence points to three interrelated governance failures. First, tourism ministries in many African countries lack the authority, resources, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms necessary to enforce environmental regulations and community benefit provisions across the full value chain of tourism development. Tourism governance in many African contexts remains fragmented, a function of poorly integrated policy silos in which tourism promotion, environmental management, land administration, and community development are managed by separate agencies with competing priorities and limited institutional communication (Novelli et al., 2022).

4.4 Way Forward: Governance and Policy Pathways

Addressing the sustainability paradox and realising tourism's potential as an SDG pathway, requires a fundamental reorientation of tourism governance away from volume maximisation and toward quality, equity, and sustainability as the primary metrics of sectoral performance. The evidence reviewed in this study points to several governance and policy interventions reorientation.

At the continental level, the alignment between Agenda 2063 and the SDGs provides a political framework for elevating tourism governance as a continental priority. The African Union's Tourism Action Plan and the UNWTO's 'Tourism for Sustainable Development in Africa' programme represent institutional entry points for building the intergovernmental coordination and shared monitoring frameworks that national-level governance reforms require. Critically, these continental mechanisms must move beyond aspirational declarations and toward enforceable minimum standards for community benefit-sharing, environmental impact management, and stakeholder participation in tourism planning and governance. The 2024 Moroccan-led UNGA resolution on sustainable tourism, with its 109 co-sponsors, provides a political mandate for such standards at the global level.

At the national level, tourism ministries must be empowered to coordinate effectively with environment, land, finance, and social development ministries in the formulation and implementation of tourism policy. The Rwanda model of integrating tourism governance within a single investment and development promotion authority, which enables strategic alignment between visitor economy objectives and broader development goals, offers a template worth examining by other African governments. Kenya's integration of tourism within the Vision 2030 framework, and South Africa's National Tourism Sector Strategy's explicit transformation objectives, similarly demonstrate that policy coherence is achievable, but its realisation requires sustained political commitment and adequate institutional resourcing.

At the destination and community level, the community-based tourism models documented in Southern and East Africa, while not without limitations, demonstrate that tourism can be structured to deliver direct and meaningful benefits to local communities when governance mechanisms are specifically designed with that outcome in mind. Revenue-sharing arrangements, local employment requirements, community representation in management bodies, and transparent benefit accounting are the practical instruments through which tourism's SDG contribution can be made concrete and measurable. The SLF's emphasis on building all five forms of capital; human, social, financial, physical, and nature within communities adjacent to tourism destinations provides a framework for designing CBT programmes that produce durable livelihood improvements rather than episodic income supplements.

Finally, the financing of sustainable tourism governance must be treated as a development investment rather than a bureaucratic cost. Conservation trust funds, green bonds, destination levies, and SDG-aligned public-private partnerships represent instruments that have demonstrated their viability in specific African contexts and could be scaled with appropriate institutional support from multilateral development banks and bilateral donors. The alignment of tourism investment frameworks with SDG monitoring and evaluation mechanisms would further enhance accountability and enable adaptive management, iterative learning and policy adjustment that is essential for navigating the complexity of sustainable development in diverse institutional environments.

5 | Conclusion and Policy Implications

This paper set out to examine tourism as a strategic pathway for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa, with particular attention to the intersection of people-centred development and environmental sustainability. Its four objectives were addressed systematically in the review and discussion, and the conclusions drawn from each are summarised here.

On the alignment between tourism development and Africa's SDG priorities (Objective 1), the evidence demonstrates convergent potential across SDGs 1, 5, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15,

and 17. Tourism is structurally positioned to address poverty, generate employment, advance conservation, support urban development, and enable international partnerships. However, this alignment is contingent rather than automatic; it materialises only when tourism development is embedded within governance frameworks that prioritise equity, environmental stewardship, and community agency. Nations that have integrated tourism into comprehensive national development plans such as Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, and Morocco demonstrate greater SDG alignment than those that treat tourism primarily as a revenue source.

On the role of sustainable tourism in promoting environmental conservation and inclusive economic growth (Objective 2), the evidence is characterised by the sustainability paradox identified in this study: tourism can simultaneously support and undermine environmental and social goals, depending on the governance conditions under which it is developed. The conservation finance generated by protected area tourism has made measurable contributions to biodiversity protection in East and Southern Africa. Community-based tourism has demonstrably improved livelihoods in contexts where governance mechanisms ensure equitable benefit distribution. At the same time, mass tourism models, inadequate environmental planning, and elite capture of revenues have degraded ecosystems, displaced communities, and reproduced inequality in numerous African destinations. Navigating this paradox is the central governance challenge facing tourism policymakers across the continent.

On policy instruments that enhance tourism's contribution to sustainable development (Objective 3), the evidence identifies sustainable financing mechanisms, environmental planning tools, eco-certification and awareness programmes, heritage protection frameworks, and robust regulatory institutions as the core instruments. Their effectiveness is contingent on interministerial policy coherence, adequate resourcing of enforcement institutions, and the meaningful participation of communities and civil society in tourism governance.

On pathways for strengthening tourism-led partnerships (Objective 4), the study identifies continental alignment through the AU-SDG framework, national integration through comprehensive development planning, destination-level community governance, and multilateral investment aligned with SDG monitoring as the strategic priorities. Power imbalances and accountability deficits in existing partnership arrangements must be addressed through participatory governance mechanisms and transparent benefit accounting.

This study contributes to existing knowledge by providing a theoretically grounded, geographically inclusive, and critically engaged synthesis of the tourism-SDG literature in Africa that goes beyond institutional endorsement to examine the structural conditions, governance quality, benefit distribution, political economy, and community agency that determine whether tourism advances or undermines the continent's SDG agenda. In adopting the Sustainable

Livelihoods Framework as its analytical anchor, the study also offers a people-centred evaluative lens that complements the predominantly economic and environmental framings of tourism-SDG research.

Differentiated policy recommendations for key institutional actors are as follows. The African Union and UNECA should develop enforceable continental standards for community benefit-sharing and environmental impact management in tourism development, aligned with the agenda 2063 tourism aspirations and the SDG monitoring framework. National tourism ministries across Africa should reform their sectoral performance metrics to include equity, environmental integrity, and community welfare indicators alongside conventional volume and revenue measures; and they should build interministerial coordination mechanisms that align tourism planning with environmental management, land administration, and social development objectives. Protected area management authorities should strengthen revenue-sharing arrangements with adjacent communities, ensure meaningful community representation in management bodies, and invest in local capacity development to enable communities to capture tourism value chains as entrepreneurs rather than merely as labour. Multilateral development banks and bilateral donors including the African Development Bank, the World Bank, and bilateral cooperation agencies should prioritise SDG-aligned tourism infrastructure investment that incorporates community consent, environmental impact assessment, and local content requirements as conditions of financing.

This study has several limitations that merit acknowledgement. As a literature-based review, it is subject to publication bias: empirical studies from Central Africa, certain francophone West African contexts, and subnational governance levels are underrepresented in the accessible English-language literature, limiting the geographic comprehensiveness of the synthesis. The study cannot capture the nuance of community-level tourism dynamics, informal economic practices, or subnational policy variations that empirical fieldwork would reveal. Future research should prioritise primary empirical work in underrepresented sub-regions, particularly Central Africa, and should employ mixed-method approaches that combine policy analysis with community-level fieldwork to assess the actual livelihood outcomes of tourism governance reforms. Longitudinal studies tracking the SDG contributions of specific tourism governance innovations, community benefit-sharing funds, green certification programmes, carrying capacity management systems would also significantly advance the evidence base on which policy recommendations can be grounded.

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