EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN FOSTERING RECONCILIATION IN POST-CONFLICT JAFFNA, SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

The region of Jaffna in Sri Lanka has long grappled with the aftermath of a protracted civil war, spanning nearly three decades (Balasubramaniam et al., 2019). In the post-conflict context, reconciliation and healing have become vital goals for both local communities and the nation at large. A potential avenue to achieve these objectives is through tourism, particularly community-based tourism, which has garnered attention as a tool for empowering local communities and fostering positive intergroup relations (McKercher & du Cros, 2002). However, while the relationship between tourism and reconciliation has been explored in various studies, there remains a notable research gap concerning the role of community-based tourism in post-conflict Jaffna. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the potential of community-based tourism in fostering reconciliation and peacebuilding in the region.

The significance of this research lies in its focus on community-based tourism as a means to promote reconciliation, empower local communities, and facilitate dialogue between different ethnic groups. By examining the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders, including community members, tourists, and tourism operators, this study aims to provide insights into the specific ways in which community-based tourism initiatives contribute to the reconciliation process in Jaffna.

The primary objective of this research is to explore and understand the potential of community-based tourism in fostering reconciliation in post-conflict Jaffna.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the potential of community-based tourism in fostering reconciliation in post-conflict Jaffna. Qualitative research was particularly suitable for this study as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and motivations of individuals involved in community-based tourism initiatives (Creswell, 2013).

The research framework was based on a phenomenological approach, focusing on significant events and incidents personally experienced by the researchers within the context of community-based tourism in Jaffna (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). By adopting this approach, the study sought to capture the subjective perspectives of various stakeholders, including community members, tourists, and tourism operators, to gain insights into the role of community-based tourism in fostering reconciliation in Jaffna.

Data collection involved two primary methods: in-depth interviews and participant observation. In-depth interviews provided a rich source of qualitative data by allowing participants to share their personal experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding community-based tourism and its impact on reconciliation (Patton, 2015). A purposive

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sampling strategy was employed to select participants who had direct involvement in community-based tourism initiatives or had experienced the effects of such initiatives in Jaffna. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted, with each interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

During participant observation, the researchers observed and documented the interactions, behaviors, and dynamics within the community-based tourism settings in Jaffna. This method provided a deeper understanding of the actual practices, relationships, and activities that contributed to reconciliation in the context of community-based tourism.

To increase the reliability of the study, a coding table (Table 1) was produced, outlining the key research questions and interview themes. Thematic analysis, following the six-step process, was conducted to identify and interpret recurring themes and patterns within the data.

Table 1
Coding Table

Main Themes	Categories	Open codes
Perceptions of community-based tourism	Economic benefits	Job creation, income generation, local business opportunities
	Social impacts	Community cohesion, social integration, improved quality of life
	Cultural preservation	Cultural heritage preservation, traditional practices and customs
	Empowerment of local communities	Capacity building, skills development, community ownership
Role of community-based tourism in reconciliation	Healing and reconciliation processes	Healing trauma, fostering forgiveness, promoting dialogue
	Building trust and relationships	Bridging divides, fostering empathy, creating shared experiences
	Addressing historical conflicts and tensions	Acknowledging past injustices, promoting historical understanding
	2.4 Fostering intercultural understanding	Promoting cultural exchange, breaking stereotypes, fostering respect
Challenges and barriers to community-based tourism	3.1 Lack of infrastructure and resources	Limited transportation, inadequate facilities, lack of funding
	3.2 Resistance from local communities	Skepticism, fear of change, concerns about cultural commodification
	3.3 Government policies and regulations	Inconsistent regulations, bureaucratic hurdles, lack of support
	3.4 Managing tourism development sustainably	Environmental impact, carrying capacity, balance with local needs

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Community participation in tourism initiatives	4.1 Involvement in decision-making processes	Participatory planning, community-led initiatives, local governance
	4.2 Engaging marginalized groups	Women's empowerment, inclusion of minority communities
	4.3 Promoting inclusivity and diversity	Accessible tourism, cultural diversity appreciation, equal opportunities
	4.4 Strengthening local identity and pride	Showcasing local culture, celebrating heritage, community pride

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In a thematic analysis conducted on community-based tourism in post-conflict Jaffna, several key themes emerged that shed light on its potential in fostering reconciliation. These themes were derived from coded data and addressed the research questions and interview themes identified in the coding table.

The "Perceptions of Community-Based Tourism" theme covered economic benefits, social impacts, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. Participants acknowledged tourism's positive economic impact, job creation, and local business opportunities. They highlighted social benefits like improved community cohesion and quality of life. Cultural preservation and community empowerment were also emphasized.

The "Role of Community-Based Tourism in Reconciliation" theme revealed how tourism contributes to healing, trust-building, and intercultural understanding. It promotes forgiveness and dialogue, bridging divides, and acknowledging historical conflicts. Community-based tourism fosters respect and empathy through cultural exchange and breaking stereotypes among diverse groups.

The "Challenges and Barriers to Community-Based Tourism" theme addressed implementation obstacles. These included limited infrastructure and funding, community resistance due to fear of change, and cultural concerns. Inconsistent government regulations and sustainability concerns, balancing tourism with local needs, were also mentioned.

The "Community Participation in Tourism Initiatives" theme examined community involvement in decision-making, engaging marginalized groups, promoting inclusivity, and strengthening local identity. Participants stressed participatory planning, empowering women, and including minorities. Emphasizing accessible tourism, cultural diversity appreciation, and community pride were also vital components of community-based tourism initiatives.

The identified themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the potential of community-based tourism in fostering reconciliation in post-conflict Jaffna. They highlight the perceptions of community-based tourism, its role in reconciliation processes, the challenges and barriers faced, and the importance of community participation. These findings align with previous research conducted by D'Amore and Baxter (2019), Samarathunga et al. (2020), Samarathunga et al. (2019), Dissanayake and Samarathunga (2021), and Samarathunga (2019), which have explored various aspects of community-based tourism and its impact on post-conflict destinations, including Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

The systematic literature review conducted by D'Amore and Baxter (2019) further supports the findings of this study by presenting a comprehensive overview of community-based tourism. Their study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the subject and

reinforces the potential of community-based tourism in sustainable development and reconciliation efforts.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study explored community-based tourism's potential for reconciliation in post-conflict Jaffna, Sri Lanka, using interviews and observations. Themes included perceptions, reconciliation's role, challenges, and community participation. These findings enhance understanding of community-based tourism in post-conflict contexts.

"Perceptions of Community-Based Tourism" theme highlighted the economic impacts in Jaffna, creating jobs, income, and social cohesion. Cultural heritage preservation and community empowerment were acknowledged.

"Role of Community-Based Tourism in Reconciliation" emphasized its significance in post-conflict healing and reconciliation. It builds trust, addresses historical conflicts, and fosters intercultural understanding in Jaffna.

"Challenges and Barriers to Community-Based Tourism" theme addressed implementation obstacles, including limited resources, community resistance, government policies, and sustainability. Overcoming them is essential for successful reconciliation through community-based tourism.

"Community Participation in Tourism Initiatives" emphasized local involvement, engaging marginalized groups, promoting inclusivity, and strengthening identity. Participatory planning, empowering women, and celebrating heritage were crucial.

The study's implications for policymakers, tourism practitioners, and community leaders in post-conflict regions are significant. Community-based tourism should be recognized as a valuable tool for reconciliation and peacebuilding, enabling economic opportunities, social cohesion, cultural preservation, and intergroup understanding. Overcoming challenges through infrastructure improvement, community engagement, supportive policies, and sustainability is essential. Emphasizing community participation by empowering marginalized groups, promoting inclusivity, and strengthening local identity can catalyze sustainable reconciliation and development. The study's unique insights into Jaffna's context expand our understanding of community-based tourism in post-conflict settings, providing practical implications for tourism development and reconciliation efforts in Jaffna and similar regions.

Keywords: Community-based tourism, reconciliation, post-conflict, thematic analysis.

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