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Bridging Expert Frameworks and Local Perceptions: Evaluation of Pro-Poor Tourism in Ahwaz, Iran

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Abstract

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) shifts the focus of tourism development by centering poverty alleviation within inclusive growth, empowerment, and sustainability, aiming to generate economic opportunities, enhancing skills, and uplifting marginalized communities, particularly in rural and underserved areas. This study evaluates PPT's effectiveness using a mixed-methods approach, combining a literature review with empirical data collected from Ameri neighborhood in Ahwaz city, Iran. Drawing on global PPT frameworks, the research identifies and assesses four key criteria: Economic Benefits, Social/Governance, Social/Cultural, and Environmental Sustainability. Using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), Technical experts prioritized Economic Benefits as the most critical criterion, emphasizing on Income Generation and Employment Opportunities. This aligns with literature highlighting economic empowerment's role in poverty alleviation. However, local community responses indicated only moderate alignment with expert priorities, suggesting a potential gap between expert models and community needs. In contrast, local residents prioritized Governance Structures and Stakeholder Engagement, indicating the importance of participatory governance. They also rated Sustainable Resource Use and Eco-Friendly Practices highly, although receiving less emphasis from experts. Notable discrepancies emerged in perceptions regarding Community Well-Being, Social Equity, and Cultural Preservation, with significant variation among local responses, indicating uncertainty or dissatisfaction in these aspects. The findings supports a multidimensional PPT approach that balances economic gains with inclusive governance, cultural values, and environmental stewardship. By aligning expert insights with local realities, this study provides practical guidance for achieving equitable and sustainable tourism development, especially in ecologically and culturally sensitive regions like Ameri.

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Introduction

Tourism contributes trillion of dollars annually to the global economy, yet its benefits rarely reach the poorest communities (WTTC, 2024). Despite its vast potential to improve livelihoods, tourism often perpetuates systemic inequities, channeling revenues Manyara predominantly to large corporations, foreign investors, or urban elites (Ashley et al., 2000; Binns & Nel, 2002; Manyara & Jones, 2007; Li et al., 2018; Liu & Wu, 2019). In many cases, rural and marginalized populations remain excluded from the industry's economic gains, raising critical questions about how tourism can be reimagined as a force for equitable development (Wen et al., 2021). This systematic exclusion underscores the urgent need for alternative models that ensure tourism contributes tangible benefits for the poorest and most vulnerable populations.

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) offers such an alternative by positioning poverty alleviation at the center of tourism planning and development. Unlike traditional tourism models, which often prioritize profit maximization, PPT emphasizes inclusivity, empowerment, and sustainability. It focuses on creating economic opportunities, enhancing skills, and empowering marginalized communities, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Miller et al., 2024; Shukla & Shamurailatpam, 2024). Grounded in participatory development theory and Sen's capability approach, which views development as an expansion of individuals freedom and choices, PPT positions tourism not merely as an economic tool, but as a mechanism for advancing individual freedoms and social justice. The effectiveness of PPT initiatives, however, hinges on several interrelated factors, including their design, implementation, and alignment with local needs and resources. For example, involving local communities in decision-making ensures that tourism initiatives align with their needs and priorities, fostering ownership and long-term sustainability (Manyara & Jones, 2007; Betseha et al., 2024). Similarly, integrating cultural and environmental sustainability is essential for ensuring that tourism contributes meaningfully to sustainable development rather than exacerbating existing inequalities (Wen et al., 2021; Manwa & Manwa, 2014). Without such integration, even well-intentioned initiatives may fail to deliver lasting benefits to impoverished communities.

To enhance our understanding of these dynamics, this study focuses on two essential questions:

1. What are the main criteria that influence the effectiveness of PPT initiatives?
2. To what degree do the priorities of local communities align with those of Technical experts regarding the significance of the identified PPT criteria?

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, beginning with the identification and prioritization of key criteria that influence the effectiveness of PPT. This is achieved through a systematic literature review and the AHP method, integrating insights from experts. Subsequently, these

criteria are assessed through grassroots perspectives via a 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire distributed to 100 residents of the Ameri neighborhood in Ahwaz, Iran. Ameri was selected due to its status as a marginalized community with rich cultural and ecological assets, yet limited participation in tourism planning and unequal benefit distribution. Its early stage of tourism development offers a timely opportunity to align expert frameworks with local priorities for inclusive and sustainable outcomes.

By integrating expert and community insights, this study enhances both theoretical understanding and practical strategies for reorienting PPT toward more equitable and sustainable development, particularly in regions where cultural identity and environmental stewardship are deeply intertwined with local livelihoods.

literature Review

Origins, Definition, and Core Principles of PPT

PPT, first conceptualized by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in the early 2000s, redefines tourism's role in development by prioritizing poverty alleviation alongside economic growth (Ashley et al., 2000; Ashley & Roe, 2002). Defined as tourism that generates net benefits for poor people, through income generation, improved infrastructure, or enhanced community well-being, PPT seeks to address systemic inequities within the tourism industry. Ashley et al. (2000) emphasize that PPT does not require all tourists to be "poor-friendly", but rather focuses on maximizing the positive impacts of tourism activities on marginalized communities, including better access to education, healthcare, and stronger social capital.

Rooted in equity, inclusivity, and sustainability, PPT emerged from a broader shift in development discourse that placed poverty at the center of policy agendas (Scheyvens, 2007). It goes beyond material gains by embracing Amartya Sen's capability approach (1999), which frames development as the expansion of individual freedoms. From this perspective, PPT aims to empower marginalized groups by enhancing their participation in and control over tourism activities, thereby challenging structural inequalities.

Success depends on integrating local assets, such as cultural heritage and natural environments, into development strategies (Wen et al., 2021), while ensuring environmentally responsible practices. Without such integration, even well intentioned initiatives risk reinforcing existing inequalities. Thus, effective PPT requires a balanced, holistic approach that links economic empowerment with social justice and ecological preservation.

Factors Influencing the Success of PPT Initiatives

Numerous studies identify community participation, resource alignment, stakeholder collaboration, and supportive policies as key to effective PPT initiatives (Medhekar & Roy, 2024; Putri et al., 2023; Lazic & Gasparini, 2023; Demková et al., 2022).

Community participation emerges as a cornerstone of successful PPT programs. Manyara and Jones (2007) argue that involving local communities in decision-making ensures tourism initiatives align with their needs and priorities, fostering ownership and long-term sustainability. This participatory approach is exemplified in North-Western Ethiopia, where Betseha et al. (2024) observed a 6% increase in livelihood diversification and a 31% rise in asset accumulation among participants in community-based tourism (CBT). Similarly, Lo et al. (2019) found that households involved in PPT projects in Southern Shaanxi, China, earned significantly higher incomes and had greater access to livelihood capital compared to non-participating households. Scheyvens (2002) further emphasizes CBT's role in empowering communities and retaining benefits locally.

The economic benefits generated by PPT initiatives are substantial, particularly when they create employment opportunities, foster entrepreneurship, and stimulate local economies. Putri et al. (2023) transformed Kesatrian Village in Indonesia from a slum into a thriving tourist destination, improving residents' economic conditions and social capital. Indirect benefits, such as the growth of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in Botswana, leading to sustainable livelihoods for disadvantaged groups (Manwa & Manwa, 2014). Likewise, in rural India, community-based ecotourism has generated employment opportunities and improved living standards while preserving natural resources (Demková et al., 2022). Success also depends on aligning PPT initiatives with local cultural and natural assets as Wen et al. (2021) demonstrated in rural China. However, the sustainability of these initiatives depends on environmentally responsible practices. In Botswana, ecotourism in forest reserves has alleviated poverty while ensuring biodiversity conservation (Manwa & Manwa, 2014). In India's Sikkim Himalayas, Demková et al. (2022) similarly highlight how ecotourism supports both economic empowerment and ecological preservation.

Ashley and Roe (2002) emphasize that multi-stakeholder partnerships among local governments, NGOs, private sector, and communities are vital for mobilizing resources and ensuring accountability, particularly when scaling up initiatives in countries like Costa Rica and Kenya. Feng *et al.* (2018) illustrate this dynamic in Zhuanshui Village, China, where stakeholder involvement facilitated the development of a multi-industry integration network that contributed to poverty alleviation. Finally, government policies can promote local linkages and enhance community participation in the tourism value chain, as in Tibet, China (Ji et al., 2022) and Sarawak, Malaysia (Wasudawan & Ab-Rahim, 2018). However, excessive government intervention can sometimes hinder PPT outcomes. In Nglanggeran,

Indonesia, Suyatna et al. (2024) found that top-down intervention created power imbalances, limiting community participation and leading to institutional constraints.

Synthesis of Gaps and Research Justification

While the existing literature highlights the potential of PPT, critical gaps remain in understanding the factors that contribute to its practical effectiveness. First, although community participation, resource alignment, and stakeholder collaboration are widely acknowledged as critical success factors, their relative importance and interrelationships remain underexplored, limiting the development of standardized guidelines or scalable models that could support more consistent and impactful PPT initiatives across diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts. Second, many studies rely on top-down approaches with minimal community input, creating a noticeable gap in systematically comparing expert-derived priorities with grassroots perceptions. As a result, discrepancies between technical planning and community expectations may go unnoticed, potentially undermining the inclusiveness and long term sustainability of PPT interventions. Despite its potential, PPT implementation faces persistent challenges, including unequal benefit distribution due to entrenched power structures (Honey, 2008), limited technical capacity in rural areas (Liu & Wu, 2019), and over-reliance on short-term funding (Li et al., 2018). These systemic barriers highlight the need for context-sensitive models that align expert planning with local realities, a gap this study seeks to address. This study addresses these gaps by:

- Identifying and prioritizing the key PPT effectiveness criteria through a mixed-methods approach combining a systematic literature review with expert judgments using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP);
- Assessing the alignment between expert priorities and local community perspectives.

By integrating technical expertise with local knowledge, the research advances both theoretical understanding and practical application in inclusive tourism development. It offers a context-sensitive framework for bridging policy and practice, particularly relevant in culturally rich and ecologically vulnerable regions where tourism intersects closely with livelihoods, identity, and sustainable development goals.

Methodology

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to address two central research questions, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to ensure both theoretical rigor and practical relevance. First, key criteria contributing to the effectiveness of PPT initiatives were identified through a systematic literature review of existing peer-reviewed articles, case studies, and empirical data from academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. The identified criteria were categorized into overarching thematic domains and subsequently prioritized using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) and Saaty's nine-point scale. To ensure stakeholder inclusivity and sector-specific relevance, the pairwise comparison matrices were completed by ten Technical experts representing diverse backgrounds in tourism planning, rural development, environmental management, and local governance. Final criterion weights were derived by averaging judgments across stakeholders, ensuring a consensus-based, sector-informed ranking of PPT effectiveness factors. Second, to assess the degree of alignment between local community priorities and those of Technical experts, a 15-item five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was developed and administered to 100 residents of the Ameri neighborhood in Ahwaz, Iran (Figure 1). The questionnaire design was directly informed by the AHP results, ensuring that greater emphasis was placed on criteria identified as most important in the expert phase. Survey items were distributed across the four main criteria based on their assigned weights:

- Five questions focused on economic aspects (highest weight)
- Four questions addressed socio-governance factors
- Three questions explored socio-cultural dimensions
- Three questions covered environmental sustainability

This distribution ensured adequate representation of the most prioritized criteria, while also capturing nuanced local perspectives across key dimensions of PPT effectiveness. Quantitative data from responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and aligned with expert-derived AHP weights through difference analysis, calculated as:

$$\text{Difference} = \text{Normalized Score} - \text{AHP Weight}.$$

Positive values indicated overestimation by locals relative to experts, while negative values suggested underestimation.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods enhances the robustness and credibility of the findings (Figure 2). The literature review establishes a strong theoretical foundation, while the AHP analysis operationalizes this knowledge by identifying and prioritizing key criteria influencing PPT effectiveness. The inclusion of community-level perspectives further enriches the study by identifying

potential mismatches between technical planning and grassroots expectations. To ensure reliability and validity, methodological triangulation and sensitivity analyses were employed to address Potential limitations, such as subjectivity in stakeholder judgments and variability in data quality. These strategies strengthened the internal consistency of the AHP model and confirmed the stability of the resulting priority ranking, reinforcing the trustworthiness of the findings.



Figure 1. Interviews conducted with local residents in the study area to gather qualitative insights into their perceptions of PPT initiatives. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all photographed participants.

Case study: Ameri neighborhood, Ahwaz, Iran

The Ameri neighborhood, located in Ahwaz, Khuzestan Province, Iran (49°11' E, 31°50' N), lies along the Karun River at 18 meters above sea level (Figure 3). Characterized by traditional architecture and residential structure over 300 years old, Ameri maintains a deep cultural and historical connection to its riverine environment. Local livelihoods and traditions centered on the Karun River have contributed to its growing potential as a cultural and heritage tourism destination (Figure 4).

Ameri was selected as the case study site due to its strategic relevance to PPT research. It represents a marginalized community with rich cultural and ecological assets, yet faces limited inclusion in tourism planning and unequal benefit distribution, key challenges in PPT implementation. Situated in one of Iran's most socioeconomically disadvantaged regions, Ameri is at an early stage of tourism development, offering a timely opportunity to integrate inclusive and sustainable models before large-scale interventions occur. This context provides a critical lens for evaluating the alignment between expert-driven frameworks and local community priorities, enhancing both theoretical understanding and practical strategies for equitable tourism development.

Results

The findings address two key research questions: the determinants of PPT effectiveness, and the alignment between local community and expert stakeholder priorities. To address the first research question, a systematic analysis of 41 peer-reviewed studies identifies four main interconnected criteria and 24 sub-criteria categorized under three overarching thematic domains: Economic (21 references),

Social (26 references), and Environmental (9 references) (see Table 1). Within the Economic domain, one primary criterion—Economic Benefits —was identified, supported by seven sub-criteria. These include aspects such as income generation and employment opportunities, all of which are essential for ensuring that tourism contributes directly to poverty alleviation. The Social domain comprises of two distinct but interrelated criteria:

- 1) Social/Governance, comprising Community Empowerment (Four sub criteria) and Power Dynamics (Four sub criteria) supported by 22 references;
- 2) Social/Cultural, which encompasses five sub-criteria, supported by six references.

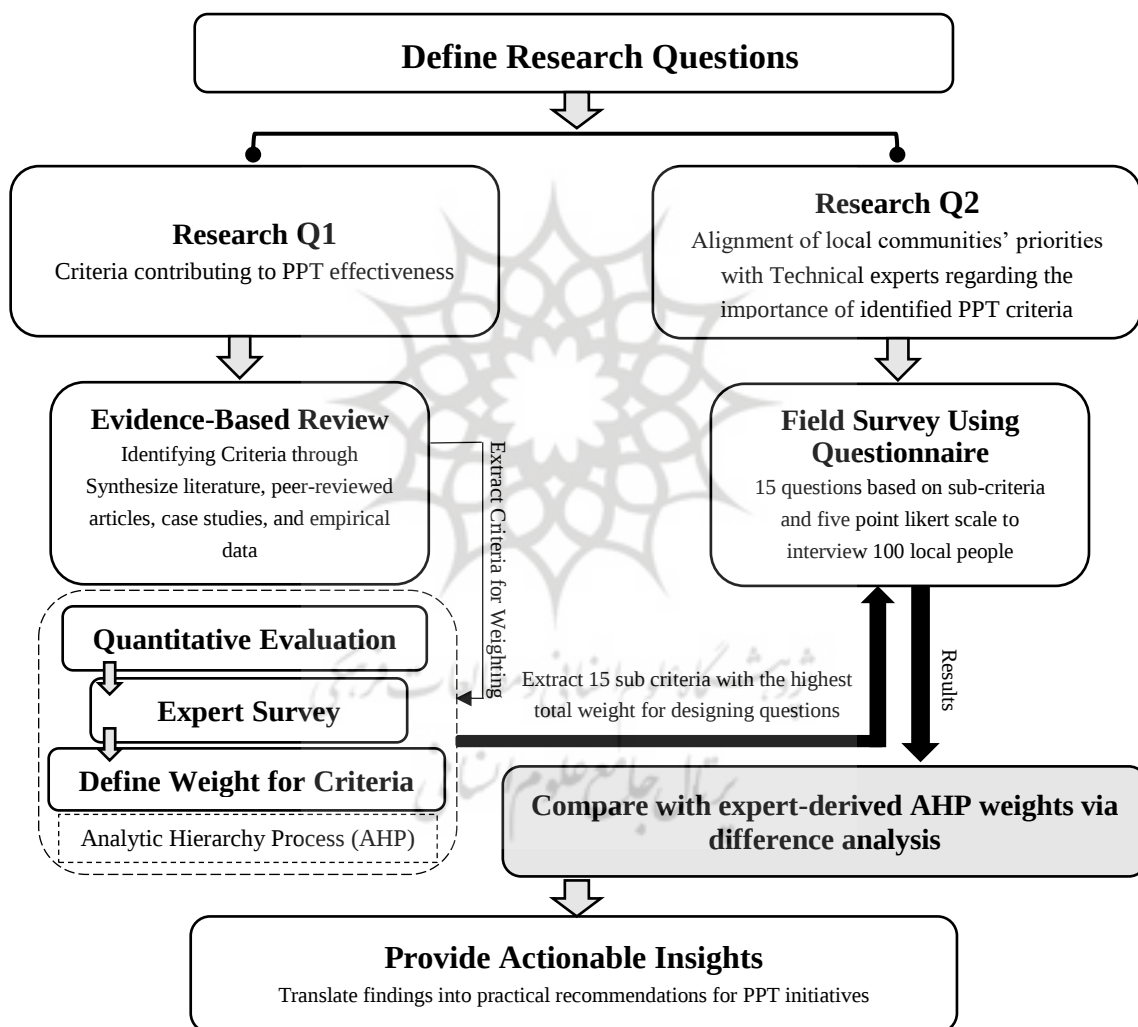


Figure 2. Overview of the Methodology Used in the Study

The Environmental domain features Environmental Sustainability with four associated sub-criteria. These emphasize the importance of ecological stewardship and responsible resource use in ensuring

long-term viability and equitable outcomes in PPT initiatives. Together, these form a comprehensive framework for understanding the need for integrated approaches that balance economic opportunity, social equity, and environmental responsibility. Table 2 presents the geographical distribution of PPT studies and their associated criteria, identified through existing literature, illustrating how different regions prioritize various dimensions of PPT.

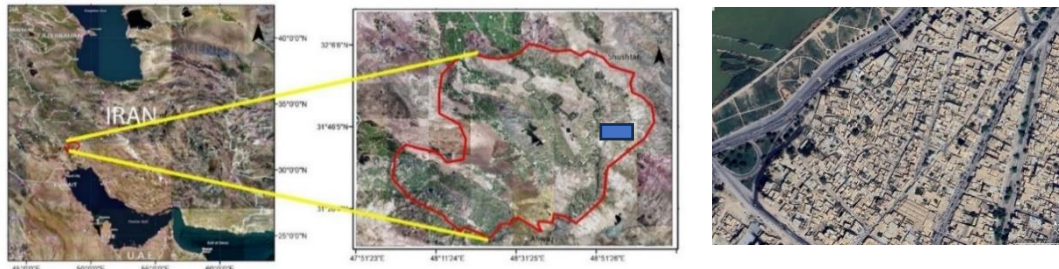


Figure 3. The study site is located in Ahvaz city the capital of Khuzestan Province, known for its Karun River, Iran.



Figure 4. Traditional local activities in the area have continued over time and remain integral to the community's identity and livelihoods.

The analysis of expert evaluations using AHP reveals that among the four main criteria, Economic Benefits emerged as the most significant contributor to PPT effectiveness, with an overall weight of 0.57. This was followed by Social/Governance (0.26), Social/Cultural (0.11), and Environmental Sustainability (0.06) (Table 3). Among the sub criteria, Income Generation (within-criterion weight = 0.380; overall weight = 0.2166) and Employment Opportunities (within-criterion weight = 0.290; overall weight = 0.1653), both under the economic benefits criterion, were ranked first and second, respectively. Community participation, a sub-criterion under social/governance (within the community empowerment criterion, ranked third overall with an overall weight of 0.1411, and first within its own criterion with a weight of 0.543 (Table 4) (Figure 5).

Table1. Main Criteria and Sub-Criteria Identified as Influencing the Effectiveness of PPT Initiatives

Criteria	Sub-Criteria	Supporting Literature
Economic	Economic Benefits	Income generation, Employment opportunities, Revenue sharing, Supply chains, Poverty alleviation, Local manufacturing and services, Infrastructure development (roads, transport, communication systems, tourism facilities)
	Community Empowerment	Community participation, Stakeholder engagement, Capacity development, Local decision-making
Social	Social/Governance	Stakeholder alignment, Governance structures, Policy frameworks, Value chain analysis
	Power Dynamics	Stakeholder alignment, Governance structures, Policy frameworks, Value chain analysis
Social/Cultural	Social/Cultural	Social equity and inclusion, Cultural preservation, Regional development, Promotion of local traditions, Community well-being
	Social/Cultural	Social equity and inclusion, Cultural preservation, Regional development, Promotion of local traditions, Community well-being
Environmental	Environmental Sustainability	Sustainable resource use, Biodiversity conservation, Carbon sequestration, Eco-friendly tourism practices

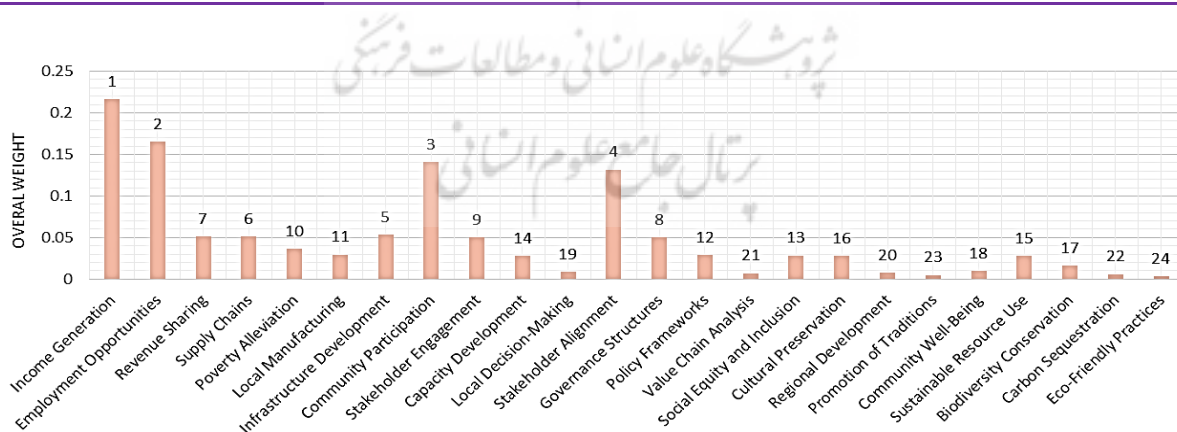
**Figure 5. Sub-Criteria and their Rankings Based on Expert Opinions**

Table 2. Regional and Country-Level Focus of PPT Research: Associated Criteria Identified in Literature

Region	Country	Number of Studies		Economic Benefits	Associated Criterion(s)			
					Social/Governance		Social/Cultural	Environmental Sustainability
					PD	CE		
Southeast Asia	Indonesia	3	$\Sigma = 13$	$\Sigma = 17$				
	Malaysia	1						
	Vietnam	1						
	China	5						
	Thailand	1						
	Nepal	2						
South Asia	India	4	$\Sigma = 4$					
Africa	Kenya	2	$\Sigma = 10$					
	Uganda	2						
	Tanzania	2						
	South Africa	1						
	Botswana	2						
	Zimbabwe	1						
Latin America	Bolivia	1	$\Sigma = 5$					
	Ecuador	1						
	Peru	1						
	Costa Rica	1						
	Mexico	1						
Europe	Italy	2	$\Sigma = 2$					
Oceania	Fiji	1	$\Sigma = 1$					

Table 3. Expert-Derived Weights of the Four Main PPT Effectiveness Criteria Based on AHP Analysis

Criteria	10 Responses- Average Weight										Overall Weight	Rank
	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10		
<i>Economic Benefits</i>	0.56	0.64	0.48	0.60	0.66	0.45	0.58	0.62	0.47	0.59	0.57	1
<i>Social/Governance</i>	0.26	0.20	0.32	0.22	0.16	0.35	0.25	0.18	0.36	0.23	0.26	2
<i>Social/Cultural</i>	0.12	0.09	0.13	0.14	0.10	0.11	0.10	0.16	0.09	0.12	0.11	3
<i>Environmental Sustainability</i>	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.04	0.08	0.09	0.07	0.04	0.08	0.09	0.06	4

Table 4. Weights and Rankings of Sub-Criteria Influencing PPT Effectiveness Based on AHP Analysis

Theme	Criteria	Sub-Criteria	Within Weight	Within Rank	Overall Weight	Overall Rank	
Economic	Economic Benefits (0.57)	Income Generation	0.380	1	0.2166	1	
		Employment Opportunities	0.290	2	0.1653	2	
		Revenue Sharing	0.100	3	0.0510	7	
		Supply Chains	0.090	5	0.0513	6	
		Poverty Alleviation	0.063	6	0.0360	10	
		Local Manufacturing	0.052	7	0.0296	11	
		Infrastructure Development	0.094	4	0.0536	5	
Social	Social/Governance (0.26)	Community Empowerment	Community Participation	0.543	1	0.1411	3
			Stakeholder Engagement	0.245	4	0.0500	9
			Capacity Development	0.120	6	0.0280	14
			Local Decision-Making	0.072	7	0.0090	19
		Power Dynamics	Stakeholder Alignment	0.507	2	0.1318	4
			Governance Structures	0.280	3	0.0505	8
			Policy Frameworks	0.145	5	0.0290	12
			Value Chain Analysis	0.034	8	0.0070	21
	Social/Cultural (0.11)		Social Equity and Inclusion	0.46	1	0.0285	13
			Cultural Preservation	0.250	2	0.0275	16
			Regional Development	0.130	3	0.0080	20
			Promotion of Traditions	0.053	5	0.0050	23
			Community Well-Being	0.089	4	0.0100	18
	Environmental	Environmental Sustainability (0.06)	Sustainable Resource Use	0.545	1	0.0278	15
Biodiversity Conservation			0.265	2	0.0160	17	
Carbon Sequestration			0.115	3	0.0060	22	
Eco-Friendly Practices			0.055	4	0.0030	24	

To address the second research question, assessing alignment between local community perceptions and expert stakeholder priorities, a 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to residents of the Ameri neighborhood in Ahwaz. The questionnaire assessed perception across 15 sub-criteria distributed among four main categories aligned with the PPT framework: Economic Benefits, Social/Governance, Social/Cultural, and Environmental Sustainability. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha in SPSS v26 revealed strong internal consistency for the overall scale of $\alpha = 0.8$, indicating good internal consistency across all items. Domain-specific reliabilities were: Economic Benefits (Q1–Q5): $\alpha = 0.78$,

Social/Governance (Q6–Q9): $\alpha = 0.81$, Social/Cultural (Q10–Q12): $\alpha = 0.69$, and Environmental Sustainability (Q13–Q15): $\alpha = 0.73$. While most domains demonstrated acceptable to high reliability, the Social/Cultural category showed relatively lower internal consistency, possibly due to higher variability in local perceptions of concepts such as social equity and well-being. This highlights the importance of refining culturally sensitive indicators to ensure both validity and reliability in future PPT research.

To enable direct comparison with expert-derived AHP weights, average response scores for each question were normalized using the Sum Normalization method, yielding standardized values between 0 and 1. Descriptive statistics, focusing on mean scores and variance, were used to evaluate central tendency and response dispersion (Table 5). The results indicate that participants generally expressed agreement with most PPT-related sub-criteria, particularly those related to governance structures (Q9), stakeholder engagement (Q8), sustainable resource use (Q13) and eco-friendly practices (Q15), with low variance, indicating high consensus within the community. In contrast, several sub-criteria showed lower agreement and higher variability, particularly under the Social/Cultural domain: Social Equity and Inclusion (Q10, mean= 3.36, variance= 1.53) and Community Well-being (Q12, mean= 3.20, variance= 1.29) indicated mixed or uncertain perceptions. Revenue Sharing (Q4, mean= 3.68, variance= 1.28) also showed notable divergence.

These findings highlight critical gaps between community understanding and expert frameworks, suggesting a need for enhanced communication, participatory planning, and context-specific education to improve alignment and inclusivity in PPT initiatives.

Table 5. Mean Response Scores and Variance across PPT Sub-Criteria Based on Local Community Survey

Question	Sub-Criterion	Mean Score	Variance	Interpretation
Q1	Income Generation	4.08	1.19	Moderate agreement with varied perceptions
Q2	Employment Opportunities	4.26	0.79	High agreement
Q3	Supply Chains	4.32	0.75	High agreement
Q4	Revenue Sharing	3.68	1.28	Moderate agreement, high variability
Q5	Infrastructure Development	3.76	1.03	Moderate agreement
Q6	Community Participation	4.36	0.32	Strong consensus
Q7	Stakeholder Alignment	4.36	0.5	Strong agreement
Q8	Stakeholder Engagement	4.56	0.32	Very strong agreement
Q9	Governance Structures	4.78	0.21	Highest agreement, very consistent views
Q10	Social Equity and Inclusion	3.36	1.53	Mixed or unclear perception
Q11	Cultural Preservation	3.98	1.12	Generally agree, but some divergence
Q12	Community Well-being	3.2	1.29	Mostly neutral or slightly negative
Q13	Sustainable Resource Use	4.56	0.42	Strong agreement
Q14	Biodiversity Conservation	3.28	1.01	Mostly neutral
Q15	Eco-Friendly Practices	4.5	0.57	High agreement

The demographic profile of the 100 participants was analyzed to assess gender and age distribution (Table 6). The sample was slightly male-dominant, with 64% male and 36% female respondents. The largest age group was 31–45 years (22%), followed by 18–30(19%), 46–60(19%), and over 60(17%). Among female participants, the 46–60 age group had the highest representation (12%), while those aged 31–45 were underrepresented (7%). Males were more evenly distributed across age groups. This distribution suggest relatively broad community representation, particularly among working-age adults. A Chi-square test of independence revealed no significant association between gender and age group, $\chi^2 (4) = 1.42$, $p = 0.841$, indicating a relatively consistent age distribution across genders.

Table 6. Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents: Gender and Age Distribution

Gender	Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Male</i>	<18	12	12%
	18–30	8	8%
	31–45	22	22%
	46–60	12	12%
	>60	10	10%
	<i>Total (Male)</i>	64	64%
<i>Female</i>	<18	6	6%
	18–30	6	6%
	31–45	6	6%
	46–60	12	12%
	>60	6	6%
	<i>Total (Female)</i>	36	36%

The results presented in Table 7 reveal a notable misalignment between expert and community perspectives, particularly in economic and governance domains, with greater convergence in social and environmental criteria. In the Economic category, Income Generation (Difference = -0.15) and Employment Opportunities (Difference = -0.0964) were significantly undervalued by the local community, suggesting a lack of awareness or perceived relevance despite their central role in expert frameworks. In contrast, indirect economic benefits, Supply Chains (Difference = $+0.0236$), Revenue Sharing (Difference = $+0.0088$), and Infrastructure Development (Difference = $+0.0065$), showed minor positive differences, indicating stronger local recognition of tangible, visible outcomes.

Within the Social/Governance domain, Community Participation (Difference = -0.0714) and Stakeholder Alignment (Difference = -0.0631) were underestimated by the locals, reflecting limited engagement with or understanding of governance mechanisms. However, Stakeholder Engagement

(Difference = +0.0279) and Governance Structures (Difference = +0.0316) received higher emphasis from the community, suggesting some level of recognition of their importance in decision making processes.

Findings indicate that in Social/Cultural category, Cultural Preservation (Difference = +0.038) and Community Well-Being (Difference = +0.0428) were more emphasized by the local population than by experts, underscoring the deep local value placed on cultural identity and quality of life. Notably, Social Equity and Inclusion indicates moderate community support but was relatively deprioritized by experts, suggesting a gap between community priorities and formal decision-making frameworks.

Most strikingly, all environmental sub-criteria showed positive differences, indicating stronger local emphasis. Notably, Eco-Friendly Practices (Difference = +0.0744) had the largest gap, followed by Sustainable Resource Use (Difference = +0.0471) and Biodiversity Conservation (Difference = +0.0368). This suggests a strong grassroots concern for environmental sustainability that is not fully reflected in expert-driven models, particularly in ecologically sensitive regions like Ameri.

Table 7. Mapping differences between local stakeholder perceptions and expert-derived AHP weights

Criteria	Sub Criteria	Questions No.	Average Score Each Question	Normalized Average (Questionnaire)	Overall Weight (AHP)	Difference
Economic	Income Generation	Q1	3.98	0.0667	0.2166	-0.1500
	Employment Opportunities	Q2	4.11	0.0689	0.1653	-0.0964
	Supply Chains	Q3	4.47	0.0749	0.0513	+0.0236
	Revenue Sharing	Q4	3.57	0.0598	0.0510	+0.0088
	Infrastructure Development	Q5	3.59	0.0601	0.0536	+0.0065
Social/ Governance	Community Participation	Q6	4.16	0.0697	0.1411	-0.0714
	Stakeholder Alignment	Q7	4.1	0.0687	0.1318	-0.0631
	Stakeholder Engagement	Q8	4.65	0.0779	0.0500	+0.0279
	Governance Structures	Q9	4.9	0.0821	0.0505	+0.0316
Social/ Cultural	Social Equity and Inclusion	Q10	2.86	0.0479	0.0285	+0.0194
	Cultural Preservation	Q11	3.91	0.0655	0.0275	+0.038
	Community Well-Being	Q12	3.15	0.0528	0.0100	+0.0428
Environmental	Sustainable Resource Use	Q13	4.47	0.0749	0.0278	+0.0471
	Biodiversity Conservation	Q14	3.15	0.0528	0.0160	+0.0368
	Eco-Friendly Practices	Q15	4.62	0.0774	0.0030	+0.0744

Discussion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of how local communities in Ameri perceive PPT initiatives relative to expert-derived priorities. By integrating an AHP based prioritization framework with community survey data, it bridges the gap between theoretical models and real world implementation, particularly in contexts like Ameri, where tourism is deeply intertwined with livelihoods, cultural identity and environmental sustainability.

Economic Empowerment: A Priority Gap

The AHP results reaffirm that economic benefits are the most critical criteria in PPT effectiveness, with the highest overall weight (0.57). This aligns with global trends, particularly in Asia and Africa, where countries like China (Five studies) and India (Four studies) prioritize tourism as a tool for poverty alleviation (Table 2). Experts ranked Income Generation (weight = 0.2166) and Employment Opportunities (weight = 0.1653) as the top sub-criteria, consistent with the literature that underscores the centrality of economic empowerment in poverty alleviation through tourism (Scheyvens, 2007; Miller et al., 2024; Shukla & Shamurailatpam, 2024; Betseha et al., 2024). However, survey data revealed a notable misalignment at the community level, where these sub-criteria showed negative differences (−0.15 and −0.0964 respectively), indicating lower perceived importance despite moderate agreement (mean= 4.08 and 4.26), suggesting a potential gap between expert models and community awareness or trust in tourism's economic benefits, consistent with findings from Murdana et al. (2021) and Spenceley (2022), which highlight the role of direct economic returns in enhancing livelihoods.

In contrast, indirect economic mechanisms such as Supply Chains (weight = 0.0513), Revenue Sharing (weight = 0.0510), and Infrastructure Development (weight = 0.0536) received relatively lower emphasis from experts but demonstrated moderate positive alignment with local perspectives. These findings suggest residents value tangible, visible outcomes, supporting arguments by Spenceley (2022) and Wen et al. (2021) on the importance of transparency and inclusivity in building trust and engagement.

This divergence between expert expectations and local perceptions highlights the need for transparent communication and capacity-building efforts, particularly in translating technical planning into grassroots understanding and participation, as emphasized by Scheyvens (2002, 2007) and Meyer (2007).

Governance and Participation: Mixed Engagement

Within the Social/Governance domain, significant gaps were observed between expert expectations and local perceptions. Experts assigned this criterion the second-highest weight (0.26), emphasizing Community Participation (0.1411) and Stakeholder Alignment (0.1318) as critical for equitable benefit

distribution and inclusive decision-making, supported by evidence from 11 countries in Table 2, particularly in African and Latin American contexts. However, survey data revealed that these same sub-criteria showed negative differences (-0.0714 and -0.0631 respectively), with local respondents assigning them lower importance (mean = 4.36 for both). This discrepancy suggests limited community involvement in decision-making processes and reflects concerns raised by Manyara & Jones (2007) and Betseha et al. (2024), who emphasize the role of participatory governance in fostering ownership and long-term sustainability.

In contrast, Stakeholder Engagement (mean = 4.56) and Governance Structures (mean score = 4.78) received strong community support, indicating recognition of their relevance when properly communicated and operationalized. These findings support the broader argument that effective PPT must extend beyond economic gains to include meaningful community involvement (Wang & Dong, 2022; Della Spina & Giorno, 2024; Saito et al., 2018). Nevertheless, certain sub-criteria such as Capacity Development and Local Decision-Making were rated lower by experts, suggesting a gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground implementation. Additionally, Social Equity and Inclusion (mean = 3.36, variance = 1.53) and Community Well-Being (mean = 3.20, variance = 1.29) showed high variability in responses, pointing to diverse or ambiguous perceptions within the community. These inconsistencies echo concerns raised by Jamal & Stronza (2009) and Lepp (2007), who highlight the challenges of addressing social equity in heterogeneous populations. Taken together, these findings underscore the need for capacity-building efforts, transparent communication, and inclusive planning mechanisms to bridge the gap between expert frameworks and fundamental understanding of governance in tourism development.

Cultural Values: Locally Prioritized, Globally Undervalued

In the Social/Cultural category, a striking pattern emerges; although cultural dimensions are underrepresented globally (see Table 2) and received relatively low emphasis from experts, particularly Cultural Preservation (0.0275) and Community Well-being (0.0100), they were significantly emphasized by local respondents (Differences = $+0.038$ and $+0.0428$ respectively), indicating that local identity, heritage, and quality of life are deeply valued by the community but often overlooked in top-down planning. Cultural Preservation (mean = 3.98) and Promotion of Traditions (mean = 3.00) reflect the intrinsic value local communities place on maintaining their cultural identity through tourism. Interestingly, despite its low weight in expert frameworks, Community Well-being showed a mean score of 3.20, suggesting that while not always central in formal planning, it remains an important outcome at the basic level. This divergence calls for a reevaluation of how cultural dimensions are integrated into PPT frameworks. As illustrated in figure 6, preserving Ameri's cultural identity requires inclusive

tourism planning that reflects local values and traditions. As Gonzo (2023) and Su (2010) argue, tourism can strengthen cultural pride and social cohesion, particularly in regions like Ameri, where tourism intersects closely with historical and traditional values. These findings align with broader calls for a more holistic approach to PPT that go beyond material gains to include intangible benefits such as identity reinforcement, cultural preservation, and community well-being (Gonzo, 2023; Su, 2010; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009).



Figure 6. Preserving Ameri's Cultural Identity through Inclusive Tourism Planning

As shown in table 2, cultural considerations remain underrepresented in global PPT research. Only 5 out of 20 reviewed countries explicitly address cultural themes, with Fiji and Mexico as notable exceptions. This marginalization contrasts sharply with the strong local emphasis on cultural preservation in Ameri, underscoring the need for future research and policy frameworks to better incorporate cultural values as core components of sustainable and inclusive tourism development.

Environmental Stewardship: Expert Neglect vs. Local Relevance

The most compelling finding is the consistent positive gap in the Environmental criterion, where all sub-criteria were more highly prioritized by local communities than by Technical experts. As shown in table 7, Eco-Friendly Practices (Difference = +0.0744) exhibited the largest disparity, followed by Sustainable Resource Use (+0.0471) and Biodiversity Conservation (+0.0368), reflecting a strong grassroots concern for environmental sustainability that is not fully reflected in expert-driven frameworks. In contrast, experts assigned environmental sustainability the lowest overall weight (0.06), with minimal emphasis on Eco-Friendly Practices (0.0030) and Carbon Sequestration (0.0160). Locals, however, expressed high agreement on Sustainable Resource Use (mean = 4.47, variance = 0.42) and Eco-Friendly Practices (mean = 4.62, variance = 0.57), with low variance, indicating widespread and consistent support. This misalignment suggests a gap between technical planning priorities and community-based environmental values. Residents in ecologically sensitive areas like Ameri, who depend directly on natural resources, demonstrate both awareness of ecological risks and a willingness to engage in

conservation when tangible benefits are linked to their livelihoods. These results underscore the need to integrate ecological stewardship into core PPT strategies, particularly in vulnerable regions. As Della Spina & Giorno (2024) and Demková et al. (2022) argue, long-term sustainability depends on aligning technical planning with local environmental priorities. Table 2 further shows that environmental concerns are more prominent in Latin America, Europe, and increasingly in parts of Southeast Asia and Africa, highlighting regional variations in environmental consciousness that shape research and policy focus.

Bridging Expert and Local Perspectives: Strategies for Inclusive PPT in Ameri

This study reveals a clear divergence between expert-derived and local priorities in PPT. Experts emphasize economic benefits and formal governance structures, while local residents prioritize environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and inclusive decision-making. These misalignments reinforce the argument that PPT should be approached as a multidimensional process requiring integrated strategies across economic, social, cultural, and environmental domains. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of participatory methods in reconciling differing perspectives and co-developing locally grounded solutions, as advocated by Rogerson (2014), Mitchell (2012), and Wen et al. (2021). To bridge this gap, seven actionable strategies are proposed:

1. Enhancing Participatory Governance and Local ownership

One of the most striking findings is the significant misalignment between expert priorities and local perceptions regarding Social/Governance criteria, particularly *Community Participation* and *Stakeholder Alignment*, which, despite being highly ranked by experts, show low community emphasis, suggesting that formal governance mechanisms are often perceived as inaccessible or irrelevant. To bridge this gap, it is essential to foster inclusive governance through actionable strategies: establishing community-led tourism committees with rotating leadership to ensure broad representation; implementing visioning workshops and participatory rural appraisal tools to co-design initiatives; and creating transparent feedback loops to communicate decisions and impacts. These measures can enhance local ownership, reduce power imbalances, and improve the long-term sustainability of PPT interventions.

2. Improving Communication and Awareness around Economic Benefits

Economic empowerment remains central to PPT theory, with experts assigning high weight to Income Generation and Employment Opportunities. However, local respondents rated these sub-criteria lower, indicating limited awareness or skepticism about tourism's economic potential. To close this gap, employ storytelling, visual media, and facilitated dialogues to illustrate how tourism can contribute to inclusive development, poverty reduction, and improved quality of life.

3. Integrating Cultural Preservation into Planning Frameworks

Local respondents placed significantly higher value on Cultural Preservation and Community Well-being than experts, revealing a critical gap between community priorities and technical planning. While local identity and heritage are deeply cherished by the community, they are often overlooked in technical planning models. To bridge this gap, tourism initiatives should actively support local artisans, performers, and storytellers; develop heritage trails, cultural festivals, and interpretation centers; and integrate cultural preservation into core planning and practice. This not only strengthens community pride and social cohesion but also enhances the destination's authenticity and competitive advantage.

4. Recognizing Fundamental Environmental Stewardship

Perhaps the most compelling finding is the strong local emphasis on environmental sustainability, particularly in Eco-Friendly Practices and Sustainable Resource Use, criteria that received high community support despite being undervalued by experts. This misalignment highlights a critical gap between community-based environmental values and expert-driven planning. To align tourism development with local priorities, eco-tourism initiatives, such as guided nature walks, waste reduction campaigns, and renewable energy projects, should be integrated to generate income while protecting natural resources. Tourism planning should be aligned with relevant SDGs (e.g., SDG 1, 10, 15), and local residents should be trained as eco-guides or conservation ambassadors to empower community-led stewardship. Expert models must also be revised to assign greater weight to environmental indicators, recognizing their dual ecological and social importance. Given Ameri's ecological sensitivity, embedding environmental sustainability into core PPT planning is essential for long-term resilience and intergenerational equity.

5. Strengthening Equity and Inclusion through Policy

While equity was moderately valued by locals, it was largely overlooked from expert frameworks, reflecting a broader trend in PPT literature, where fairness and inclusion are often discussed but rarely prioritized in implementation. To promote more equitable outcomes, policies should promote inclusive hiring in tourism enterprises, Support women-led businesses, youth employment programs, and target marginalized groups. Transparent monitoring and public reporting of tourism benefit distribution, are essential. Integrating equity into both policy and implementation ensures that PPT genuinely serves the poorest and most vulnerable, moving beyond rhetoric to tangible, inclusive development.

6. Leveraging Technology for Transparency and Engagement

Emerging trends in PPT highlight the transformative potential of digital platforms in enhancing accessibility, transparency, and stakeholder engagement. As Miller et al. (2024) emphasize, technology can bridge knowledge gaps and empower local communities by fostering inclusion and participation.

Key recommendations include launching a community-based digital platform to share tourism updates, job opportunities, and financial reports; using mobile apps or SMS alerts for real-time feedback and education; and implementing participatory GIS mapping to visualize land use, tourism impacts, and benefit distribution. Together, these tools can strengthen communication between planners and residents, ensuring PPT initiatives are more responsive, adaptive, and grounded in local realities.

7. Promote Capacity Building and Education

Provide targeted training in entrepreneurship, leadership, and financial literacy to empower local actors and improve their ability to engage meaningfully in tourism-related opportunities. Encourage partnerships with educational institutions and NGOs to support skill development aligned with tourism employment and enterprise growth. By implementing these strategies, PPT initiatives in Ameri and similar contexts, can evolve into more inclusive, equitable, and culturally grounded models of tourism development. The study reaffirms that effective PPT must be approached as a multidimensional process, integrating economic empowerment with participatory governance, cultural dignity, and environmental stewardship. Only through such integrated and context-sensitive approaches can tourism truly serve as a transformative force for sustainable and inclusive development.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of expert judgment in AHP introduces subjective bias, although this was mitigated through stakeholder triangulation and sensitivity checks. Second, the sample size and geographical focus limit broader generalizations, though the case study in Ameri offers rich contextual insights that can inform future comparative studies. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the survey restricts causal interpretation, calling for longitudinal or experimental follow-ups. Finally, while the likert-scale survey allowed quantitative comparison with AHP weights, it may not fully capture culturally nuanced perceptions, particularly regarding social equity, cultural preservation, and well-being.

Future research should prioritize: (1) qualitative deep dives into local perceptions of equity, inclusion, and sustainability; (2) Comparative analyses across diverse geographical contexts to assess transferability; (3) Integration of digital tools and participatory GIS to enhance transparency and community input; and (4) Incorporation of climate-resilience strategies into PPT planning, particularly in ecologically vulnerable regions. Addressing these areas will strengthen the theoretical and practical foundations of PPT in pursuit of equitable and sustainable development.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms the multidimensional nature of PPT and emphasizes the necessity of adopting integrated, context-sensitive strategies that balance economic viability with social equity, cultural

integrity, and environmental sustainability. Key recommendations include enhancing local awareness of tourism economics, promoting participatory governance, and embedding ecological values into the core planning of PPT initiatives. By aligning expert-driven frameworks with grassroots perspectives, PPT has the potential to transition from a theoretical ideal into a practical and impactful tool for inclusive and sustainable development. The integration of literature-based insights with empirical findings in this study bolsters both the theoretical foundation and practical applicability of PPT, presenting a replicable model for future research and policy design in pro-poor tourism contexts.

These results also reflect a broader trend in PPT scholarship, where economic and institutional factors often overshadow considerations of social equity and environmental sustainability (Ashley & Roe, 2002; Scheyvens, 2007). While this focus may stem from a pragmatic emphasis on measurable poverty reduction outcomes, it also reveals a potential misalignment with long-term sustainability goals, particularly those outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To ensure that PPT fulfills its transformative potential, future initiatives must adopt more holistic approaches that actively integrate community voices, cultural preservation, and ecological stewardship, especially in ecologically and culturally sensitive regions like Ameri. Only through such integrated strategies can PPT truly contribute to equitable, resilient, and sustainable development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical principles for research involving human participants. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all individuals photographed, as written consent was not feasible for some participants due to literacy constraints. Consent included permission for photography and publication of images in academic contexts. The procedure was witnessed and documented by the researchers. All survey participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

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