



RETHINKING COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN TOURISM: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Participatory approaches to sustainable tourism have proliferated, yet many host communities remain marginalized despite rising involvement. This systematic review synthesizes 51 peer-reviewed studies (2015–2025) following a PRISMA-guided protocol to explain why participation frequently remains symbolic and when it can evolve into substantive empowerment. The thematic synthesis indicates that tokenistic engagement, elite capture, and weak institutional safeguards can generate participation fatigue, while empowerment is multidimensional and commonly begins with psychological mechanisms (self-efficacy, pride, and perceived agency). Durable improvements, however, depend on institutional mechanisms that formalize community rights, representation, and benefit-sharing rules. Building on these insights, we propose the Community Agency Reshaping Model (CARM), which links drivers, process stages, dual mechanisms, and outcomes to describe an iterative pathway from induced entry to consolidated community agency and more equitable tourism benefits. The model offers testable propositions and a diagnostic tool for intervention design.

Keywords: benefit sharing, community empowerment, community participation, systematic review, tourism governance

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A KÖZÖSSÉGI MEGERŐSÖDÉS ÚJRAGONDOLÁSA A TURIZMUSBAN: RENDSZEREZŐ ÁTTEKINTÉS

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ABSZTRAKT

A fenntartható turizmus részvételen alapuló megközelítései nem újkeletűek ugyan, sok fogadó közösség a növekvő részvétel ellenére mégis marginalizálódott. A jelen szisztematikus áttekintés 51 lektorált tanulmányt (2015–2025) szintetizál a PRISMA protokoll alapján, hogy megmutassa, mikor marad a részvétel pusztán szimbolikus, és mikor válhat érdemivé. A tematikus szintézis szerint a csupán látszólagos elköteleződés, a javak elit általi kisajátítása és a gyenge intézményi védintézkedések az aktív részvétel lanyhulásával járhatnak, szemben a megerősödés többdimenziós és általában pszichológiai mechanizmusaival (önhatékonyság, büszkeség és tényleges tenni akarás). A tartós fejlesztések azoktól az intézményi mechanizmusoktól függenek, amelyek formalizálják a közösségi jogokat, a képviselőket és a haszonmegosztás szabályait. Ezen ismeretekre építve teszünk javaslatot a közösségi cselekvés átalakítási modelljére (CARM), amely rendszerbe foglalja az ösztönzőket, a folyamat szakaszait, a kettős mechanizmusokat és az eredményeket, és ezáltal leírja a kezdeti érdeklődéstől a konszolidált közösségi cselekvőképességig, az igazságosabb turisztikai előnyökig vezető utat. A modell tesztelhető javaslatokat és diagnosztikai eszközt kínál az intervenció megtervezéséhez.

Kulcsszavak: haszonmegosztás, közösségi megerősödés, közösségi részvétel, rendszerező áttekintés, turisztikai irányítás

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1. Introduction

Participatory methods for community engagement in sustainable tourism are emerging constantly, yet a paradox persists: despite an apparent increase in community participation, many host communities remain marginalized in terms of actual influence and benefits (Tosun, 2000; Xue et al., 2015). Studies from diverse backgrounds indicate that inviting local stakeholders to planning meetings or tourism initiatives tend to merely result in superficial consultation rather than genuine power-sharing. For instance, in a World Heritage site in China, a highly engaged community tourism model failed to empower locals or improve livelihoods, whereas a more top-down, externally driven model adopted by a neighboring village yielded better results, highlighting the "sustainable tourism paradox" that mere participation is not a panacea (Liu et al., 2025). Similarly, research in Ethiopian national parks found that residents were mostly limited to symbolic participation, with locals being "deceived by symbolic participation" that brought little tangible benefit, leading instead to unequal distribution of tourism revenues (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). These cases reflect a participation gap: while communities exist in the process of tourism development, they remain powerless to influence decision-making or obtain equitable benefits. Inclusive rhetoric conceals the reality of continued disenfranchisement, prompting deep reflection on why increased participation does not automatically translate into community well-being or empowerment.

Arnstein's (1969) seminal "Ladder of Citizen Participation" conceptualizes a hierarchy of civic power, ranging from nonparticipation and tokenism (e.g., mere informing and consultation) to substantive citizen power (e.g., delegated power and citizen control). While tourism scholars frequently apply this framework to assess engagement, empirical evidence reveals a persistent stagnation: marginalized host communities, particularly in the Global South, rarely ascend beyond the lower rungs of "tokenism" (Tosun, 2000). They remain trapped in advisory roles stripped of actual decision-making authority. Consequently, a primary theoretical vision of the CARM framework proposed in this review is to articulate the precise transitional mechanisms required to propel communities from the illusion of tokenism to the apex of the ladder—substantive citizen power and structural empowerment.

This systematic review is designed precisely to meet this need. We have critically synthesized the latest research on community participation, empowerment, and benefit-sharing in sustainable tourism, with a focus on empirical studies from 2015 to 2025. This review identifies patterns and contradictions in the evidence and constructs a comprehensive conceptual framework to explain how to reshape community agency – from perfunctory participation to genuine empowerment – and how to reconstruct benefit-sharing mechanisms to achieve greater equity. In doing so, we highlight the "gap between theoretical visions and empirical results" pointed out by scholars studying tourism in developing regions (Tosun, 2000) and propose a new model.

Based on this paradox and the identified gap between theoretical visions and empirical results, the review is guided by three interrelated research questions.

- Research Question 1:

Why does community participation in sustainable tourism governance often remain superficial or symbolic, failing to produce substantial empowerment?

- Research Question 2:

Under what enabling conditions can participation evolve into meaningful community agency, and through which transformation paths (especially psychological empowerment and institutional arrangements) is this transformation achieved?

- Research Question 3:

How do benefit-sharing arrangements, especially their degree of institutionalization and distribution rules, shape the trajectory of empowerment and equitable outcomes within host communities?

These questions collectively constitute our mechanism-oriented thematic comprehensive analysis framework and directly drive the development of the Community Agency Remodeling Model (CARM).

This model aims to bridge this gap. The core contribution of this review lies in the proposal of the Community Agency Remodeling Model, which synthesizes the driving factors, processes, and mechanisms proposed in the literature, which are crucial for transforming participation into empowerment. Before presenting these findings, we outline the rigorous methodology adopted, followed by a descriptive overview of the literature, and present a thematic analysis of key emerging themes: 1) the pitfalls of superficial participation, 2) nuances of community empowerment (especially psychological empowerment), and 3) innovations in benefit sharing. These sections collectively lay the foundation for the CARM framework and future research agenda to advance the theory and practice of community empowerment in sustainable tourism.

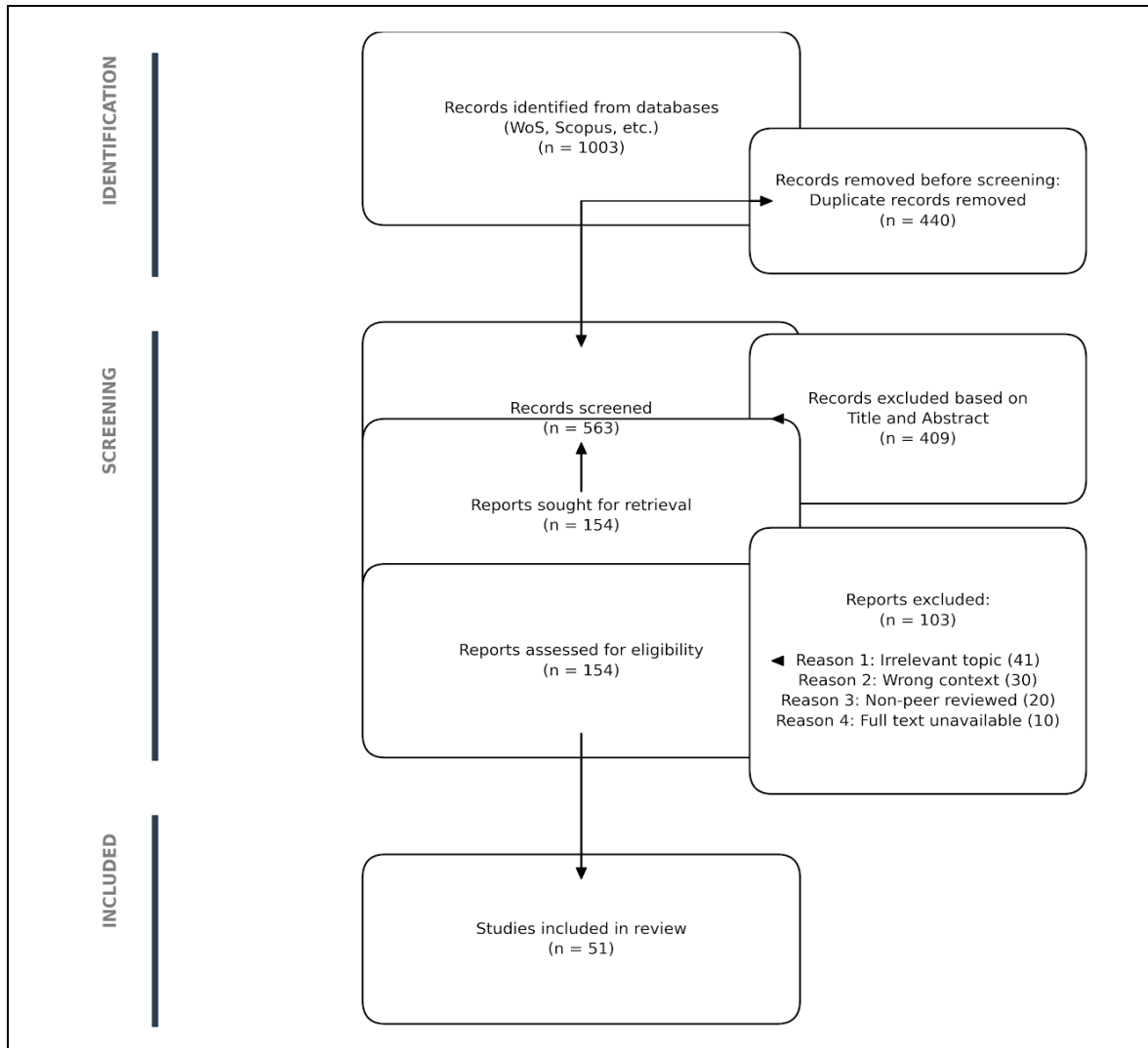
2. Methodology

2.1. Review design and protocol (PRISMA)

To minimize the subjective selection bias often inherent in traditional narrative reviews and to establish a robust, objective evidence base for the proposed CARM, this study adopted a structured systematic literature review design. The entire review process was strictly guided by the updated Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021), building upon its foundational protocols (Moher et al., 2009). As increasingly advocated in contemporary top-tier tourism and sustainability research, the PRISMA framework ensures the utmost transparency, rigorous standardization, and reproducibility in literature retrieval, screening, and data extraction. By adhering to these internationally recognized standards, this review guarantees that the empirical evidence used to conceptualize community empowerment and benefit-sharing mechanisms is both scientifically valid and methodologically auditable.

Figure 1 illustrates the comprehensive flow of study identification, screening, and final inclusion.

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart



Source: Edited by the authors

2.2. Search strategy and screening procedure

First stage: Literature search strategy. To ensure a comprehensive and systematic retrieval of the relevant literature on community participation, community empowerment, and benefit-sharing in sustainable tourism, the search strategy was meticulously designed to distinguish between different types of databases. Initially, the search relied on premier multidisciplinary reference and citation databases, specifically the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection and Scopus, to capture a rigorous network of peer-reviewed academic journals. To guarantee an exhaustive coverage of specific literature within the domains of tourism and rural development, this was subsequently supplemented by targeted searches within full-text publisher databases (such as ScienceDirect and Taylor & Francis). The initial search (covering publications up to the beginning of 2025) yielded a total of 1,003 records

after removing completely duplicate items. These records were obtained using a wide range of keyword searches, such as "community participation AND tourism AND sustainable", "community empowerment tourism", "benefit sharing tourism community", and related terms.

Scholarly justification for the 2015–2025 timeframe: To provide a rigorous scholarly justification for defining 2015–2025 as the primary retrieval window, this study recognizes 2015 as a critical watershed year. In 2015, the United Nations formally adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). From this point onward, the role of tourism as a vital catalyst for poverty alleviation (SDG 1), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10) became comprehensively institutionalized and theorized within the international academic discourse. This macro-policy milestone triggered a paradigm shift in tourism research, pivoting scholarly attention toward how marginalized host communities can achieve substantive empowerment rather than mere nominal participation. Consequently, anchoring the systematic search within the 2015–2025 period most accurately captures the contemporary evolutionary trajectory of community empowerment theories in the post-SDG era. Nevertheless, to ensure theoretical continuity, seminal and pioneering works published prior to 2015 were selectively retained if they emerged during the search and offered foundational value.

In the second stage, we applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature. The specific inclusion and exclusion criteria we used are as follows: We screened the titles and abstracts based on predefined criteria. The included studies must meet the following conditions: 1) explicitly explore local community participation or empowerment issues in the context of tourism (with a focus on sustainable tourism development, community tourism, ecotourism, or related fields); 2) report empirical research results (quantitative or qualitative) or propose conceptual models based on the tourism context – pure opinion articles or editorials were to be excluded unless they presented rigorous conceptual synthesis; 3) published in peer-reviewed journals or authoritative conference proceedings; 4) written in English. We excluded studies that only indirectly mentioned community participation (for example, as one of many factors) without conducting a substantive analysis of community agency or benefit sharing. After title/abstract screening, 154 studies remained and were assessed for full-text eligibility. During this thorough evaluation, 103 reports were excluded due to irrelevant topics ($n=41$), wrong contexts ($n=30$), non-peer-reviewed status ($n=22$), or full-text unavailability ($n=10$). Ultimately, we obtained 51 studies that fully met the inclusion criteria for the final synthesis.

3. Results I: Descriptive characteristics of the evidence base

The final 51 studies formed the basis of our analysis. To maximize the methodological transparency and auditability of our claims (e.g., the geographic distribution and methodological paradigms), a comprehensive, PRISMA-compliant summary dataset of all 51 included studies is provided in Appendix B. This structured inventory details the

author(s), publication year, geographic context, methodological design, sample characteristics, key empirical findings, and specifically, how each study maps onto the conceptual components of the CARM developed in this review. We conducted a quantitative description of the basic characteristics of these 51 final included studies, as shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the 51 included studies

Category	Sub-category	N (%)
Publication Timeline	2024–2025 (Post-COVID Era)	16 (31.4%)
	2020–2023 (Pandemic Phase)	19 (37.3%)
	2015–2019 (Pre-Pandemic)	14 (27.5%)
	Pre-2015	2 (3.9%)
Geographical Context	Global South Focus	44 (86.3%)
	- East Asia (mainly China)	10 (19.6%)
	- Southeast Asia	12 (23.5%)
	- Africa & Latin America	14 (27.5%)
	- South Asia	8 (15.7%)
	Global North / Conceptual	7 (13.7%)
Methodological Paradigm	Qualitative (Ethnography, Case Study)	25 (49.0%)
	Quantitative (SEM, PLS-SEM)	14 (27.5%)
	Mixed Methods	8 (15.7%)
	Conceptual / Review	4 (7.8%)
Source Discipline	Tourism & Hospitality Journals	19 (37.3%)
	Sustainability & Development Journals	16 (31.4%)
	Geography & Land Use Journals	5 (9.8%)
	Other Disciplines	11 (21.6%)

Source: Edited by the authors

3.1. Publication trends

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of studies exploring community engagement and empowerment in the tourism industry. In the early 2010s, relatively few studies explicitly addressed these themes, but since around 2015, research in this area has developed rapidly. Over half of the core articles reviewed in this synthesis were published after 2019, indicating a surge in academic interest in this field, which coincides with the global sustainable development agenda (such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals) and the increasing discussion on the role of tourism in community development. The bibliometric analysis by Iqbal et al. (2022) also confirms the "significant growth" in community engagement research over the past decade. This trend is evident not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of geography and methodology (as described below), reflecting that a subfield of tourism research is maturing and beginning to provide nuanced insights into community agency. Between 2020 and 2025, several high-quality studies on this topic were published annually in top journals such as

Annals of Tourism Research, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, and *Tourism Management*, whereas previously such studies were fewer in number and often published in broader development or sustainability journals. This increase indicates that community empowerment in tourism is now regarded as a key component of sustainability discussions, rather than a niche topic.

3.2. Geographical distribution

Relevant literature clearly favors the Global South. Most case studies and empirical investigations are concentrated in developing regions, particularly in Asia (e.g., China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Nepal), followed by Africa (e.g., South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia) and Latin America (e.g., Peru, Mexico). Over two-thirds of the studies examined tourism communities in Asia or Africa. For instance, Su et al. (2019) and Liu et al. (2025) discussed rural tourism villages and cultural heritage sites in China. Additionally, communities involved in ecotourism and responsible tourism projects in India have also been frequently studied by scholars (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Yadav et al., 2025), as have various community-based tourism projects in Southeast Asia. The dominance of such research may reflect regions where sustainable tourism projects are actively promoted and where communities face significant challenges in empowerment. In contrast, research on this specific topic is relatively scarce in Europe or North America – likely because in highly developed tourism economies, the issue of community empowerment manifests differently (or less prominently). The research focus in the Global South aligns with the view that in less developed regions, tourism is often promoted as a tool for development, making the question of who participates and who benefits particularly prominent. This circumstance also raises the issue of portability: theories and models derived from Global South cases may not be fully applicable to other regions, an issue we will revisit in the conclusion. Nevertheless, developing countries concentrate a substantial body of evidence that provides rich insights into the process of empowerment under conditions of economic constraints, sociocultural complexity, and sometimes weak governance – offering fertile ground for understanding the barriers and facilitators of genuine community agency.

3.3. Methodological characteristics

In terms of methodology, the field exhibits a degree of imbalance and evolving trends. Early research on community involvement in tourism primarily employed qualitative methods, relying on case study designs, interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observations conducted within a single community. These methods were able to provide in-depth contextual understanding – for instance, the ethnographic study conducted by Knight & Cottrell (2016) in a Peruvian village revealed subtle power dynamics within ostensibly community-run tourism enterprises. Qualitative case studies remain common (accounting for approximately half of the reviewed studies), but in recent years, there has also been an increase in quantitative and mixed-method research. Some studies have

adopted household surveys and statistical analysis – for example, Tong et al. (2024) and Yadav et al. (2025) used structural equation modeling to examine the relationship between perceived empowerment and support for tourism, or the relationship between participation and outcomes such as income diversification. Mixed-method designs, which combine surveys with interviews or participatory observation to validate research findings, are also common (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019; Dangi & Jamal, 2016). Despite the increasing diversity of methodologies, there remains an imbalance: quantitative research often focuses on perceived outcomes (e.g., measuring residents' sense of empowerment or satisfaction), while qualitative research uncovers process issues (e.g., how meetings are dominated by elites). Few studies have been able to combine the two, indicating a deficiency in capturing both the process and outcomes of empowerment within a single framework. Another noteworthy aspect is the scarcity of longitudinal research. Most studies provide only a snapshot of the community at a single point in time; Liu et al. (2025) is one of the few investigations that have tracked changes over multiple years, utilizing a decade-long field study to reveal differences in the empowerment trajectories of two villages in China. The limitations of such cross-sectional studies may restrict our ability to understand how participation-empowerment dynamics evolve over time.

3.4. Theoretical basis

A notable observation is that many studies lack robust theoretical testing. Although concepts such as empowerment and participation are discussed, only a portion of the literature explicitly places the analysis within a theoretical framework or tests theoretical models. Some researchers, such as Wondirad and Ewnetu (2019) and Su et al. (2019), have indeed cited frameworks such as Arnstein's "ladder" or Shevans' typology of empowerment in their studies as analytical perspectives, and a few researchers have proposed new conceptual models. For example, Dangi and Jamal (2016) constructed a comprehensive framework for sustainable community tourism, pointing out that key dimensions such as equity, justice, and governance have often been overlooked in previous research – which is a critique of the fragmented theoretical development in the field. Gutierrez (2023) proposed a revised model of the relationship between participation and empowerment, acknowledging the complex bidirectional relationship between the two.

However, such research outcomes are not common phenomena but rather the rare exceptions. More common are empirical studies that stop at constructing or testing theories, focusing instead on findings in specific contexts. Even when common theories are mentioned (such as stakeholder theory, social capital theory, social exchange theory), they are often only used as background theories without being rigorously tested. The prevalence of single-case studies exacerbates this phenomenon: due to the unique context of the case, authors often focus more on descriptive insights rather than universally applicable theories. As a result, the literature is filled with a wealth of valuable case evidence, but there are relatively few validated theoretical models. This imbalance highlights the need for a comprehensive review – by integrating different cases, gradually

building universally applicable theories. In the thematic analysis below, we will strive to distill such universally applicable insights (while pointing out contradictions) and integrate them into our proposed conceptual model aimed at elucidating the transition from participation to empowerment.

Building upon the descriptive characteristics of the evidence base, the subsequent core section presents a mechanism-oriented thematic synthesis. This analysis bypasses superficial summaries to directly address three critical dimensions: the structural barriers generating symbolic participation, the enabling conditions (dual mechanisms) required for genuine agency, and the institutionalization of equitable benefit-sharing.

4. Results II: Mechanism-oriented thematic synthesis

4.1. Why does community participation often fail to achieve empowerment?

Across different geographical and institutional contexts, a common finding is that participation is often procedural rather than substantive. Many tourism projects formally incorporate communities through meetings, consultations, or community-based labels, but decision-making power and control over resources remain concentrated in the hands of external actors or local elites. Empirical evidence from Chinese heritage tourism indicates that even highly participatory community-based models may not improve local livelihoods or decision-making power, while more centralized arrangements sometimes achieve better material outcomes, revealing a "sustainable tourism paradox". Similar patterns have emerged in protected area tourism in Ethiopia, where local residents mainly participate in information sharing or consultation, with minimal impact on outcomes, leading to unfair distribution of benefits and growing disillusionment (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019).

These research findings indicate that when participation is decoupled from power redistribution, it is insufficient as a pathway to empowerment. Scholars point out that communities may exist in the process of tourism governance, but they lack the power to influence strategic decisions or obtain crucial economic rents (Xue et al., 2015). This arrangement often leads to what scholars describe as pseudo-participation or symbolic participation, where participation merely serves a legitimizing function without altering underlying power relations. Furthermore, studies emphasize that symbolic participation can be positively disruptive. Repeated participation without substantive impact can exacerbate participation fatigue, erode trust, weaken social capital, and ultimately reduce communities' willingness to participate in future initiatives (Stoffelen et al., 2020; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). These dynamics suggest that the failure of participation is not accidental but structurally generated, rooted in asymmetric governance arrangements, elite capture, and weak institutional safeguards.

4.2. Under what conditions can participation promote empowerment?

Although the literature is replete with cases of failed participation, it also points out under what conditions participation can make a meaningful contribution to empowerment. A key insight is that empowerment is multidimensional and processual, rather than an automatic result of participation. Research consistently distinguishes between the economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions of empowerment, and points out that progress in these dimensions is uneven and dependent on specific contexts (Rachmawati, 2020; Knight & Cottrell, 2016).

In multiple empirical contexts, psychological empowerment is regarded as a crucial enabling condition. Psychological empowerment, manifested as enhanced self-confidence, a sense of ownership, pride, and perceived agency, often precedes other forms of empowerment and mediates their effects. For instance, Yadav et al. (2025) found in a study on rural tourism in India that when community empowerment exists, tourism-driven income diversification is significantly enhanced, indicating that economic benefits are more fully realized when residents perceive themselves as capable and qualified actors. Similarly, Tong et al. (2024) provided evidence from research on rural China that institutional improvements alone do not guarantee participation; instead, perceived empowerment partially mediates the relationship between institutional development and community participation.

Importantly, in the context of tourism, psychological empowerment often represents the earliest and most accessible form of empowerment. Even when political or economic power remains restricted, communities may enhance their identity, pride, and cohesion through participation in tourism (Eluwole et al., 2022). These internal transformations can inspire collective action, negotiation, and advocacy. However, the literature also warns that empowerment can be uneven and exclusive. In some cases, tourism enhances the agency of specific individuals or groups while exacerbating inequalities within the community, leading to the so-called non-generative empowerment (Knight & Cottrell, 2016). This underscores that the distribution and quality of empowerment are as important as its existence itself.

4.3. How do benefit-sharing arrangements affect the outcomes of empowerment?

The third recurring issue concerns the distribution and institutionalization of tourism revenues, and how this affects the trajectory of empowerment. Examined research indicates that the forms and effects of benefit-sharing mechanisms vary significantly, encompassing community cooperatives, equity-based models, co-management arrangements, and compensatory transfers (Knight & Cottrell, 2016; Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Stoffelen et al., 2020; Matiku et al., 2020). The evidence unanimously suggests that institutionalized benefit-sharing mechanisms are crucial for sustained empowerment. Community-owned or cooperative models, such as the one documented in Langde Miao Village in China, demonstrate that when ownership, labor contributions, and income

distribution are formally regulated, communities are more likely to achieve economic, social, and political benefits (Chen et al., 2017). Similarly, in their study of community-driven tourism projects at the Makuleke contractual park in South Africa Matiku et al. (2020) illustrate how legally recognized community rights can transform tourism revenues into broader livelihood and capacity-building outcomes.

By contrast, when benefit sharing relies on informal arrangements, discretionary payments, or short-term compensation, the empowerment outcomes are limited (Xue et al., 2015). Direct cash transfers may alleviate immediate poverty or conflict, but they rarely build long-term capabilities or decision-making power (Zhang et al., 2025). This imperative is vividly corroborated by Su et al. (2019) in their study of livelihood sustainability in Hetu Town, a rural tourism destination adjacent to the Yaoluoping National Nature Reserve in Anhui Province, China. Their findings demonstrate that in the absence of effective institutional interventions, tourism development can inadvertently widen internal income disparities. Asset-rich households secure a disproportionate share of the economic benefits, while low-income families confront high barriers to entry. This stark reality reinforces a central tenet of the CARM framework: robust institutional empowerment mechanisms are an absolute necessity to safeguard livelihood sustainability and ensure equitable benefit-sharing across all community strata.

In addition to material outcomes, Eluwole et al. (2022) emphasized non-economic benefits, such as cultural revitalization, social cohesion, and collective identity, as equally important dimensions in benefit sharing. These findings further demonstrate that effective benefit sharing must be understood as an economic and institutional process embedded within governance structures that recognize community rights and agency.

4.4. Evidence weighting and resolution of conflicting findings (Vote-counting synthesis)

To transcend descriptive narrative and rigorously visualize the direction of effects across the included literature, a vote-counting matrix was constructed (*Table 2*). This matrix delineates how the empirical studies – categorized by methodological paradigm (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods) – support or complicate the core causal relationships governing community empowerment. Recognizing that empowerment dynamics are highly context-dependent, particular analytical attention was devoted to resolving conflicting findings and identifying boundary conditions.

Table 2. Vote-counting matrix of causal pathways between participation and empowerment

Key Causal Relationship	Supporting Evidence (n)	Conflicting / Nuanced Findings (n)	Contextual Resolution of Conflicts
P1: Nominal participation directly leads to substantive empowerment	Weak Support (4) Qual: 1, Quant: 2, Mixed: 1	Strong Conflict (26) Qual: 15, Quant: 7, Mixed: 4	In contexts with severe power asymmetries, participation without institutional safeguards merely serves a legitimizing function (tokenism), exacerbating marginalization
P2: Psychological empowerment acts as an antecedent / catalyst for structural empowerment	Strong Support (29) Qual: 13, Quant: 10, Mixed: 6	Nuanced Conflict (5) Qual: 4, Quant: 1, Mixed: 0	In highly stratified indigenous contexts, psychological empowerment can be exclusionary ("non-generative"), accruing primarily to local elites rather than the collective
P3: Institutional mechanisms (e.g., co-management rules) ensure equitable benefit-sharing	Strong Support (26) Qual: 14, Quant: 8, Mixed: 4	Nuanced Conflict (7) Qual: 5, Quant: 1, Mixed: 1	Imposing institutional participation without prior psychological capacity-building often induces "participation fatigue," particularly in authoritarian or strictly top-down regimes

Note: The conceptual papers and remaining studies primarily provided descriptive contexts without directly testing these specific causal pathways.

Source: Edited by the authors

As illustrated in Table 2, the evidence base refutes the assumption that nominal participation inherently yields empowerment (P1). Crucially, while 29 studies strongly supported the premise that psychological empowerment – manifested as self-efficacy and cultural pride – acts as a crucial catalyst for broader socio-political agency (P2), five primarily qualitative studies reported conflicting findings. These divergent cases reveal that in highly stratified communities, psychological empowerment can be exclusionary, resulting in "non-generative empowerment" (Knight & Cottrell, 2016) that benefits local elites while blocking collective structural empowerment.

Furthermore, regarding institutional safeguards (P3), while the majority verified that legally recognized rights stabilize empowerment outcomes, seven studies presented a critical paradox. In certain top-down governance contexts, imposing institutional participation mechanisms (e.g., formal meetings) without first cultivating the community's psychological readiness did not foster empowerment. Instead, as Wondirad & Ewnetu

(2019) noted, it triggered "participation fatigue" and deep disillusionment, as locals recognized their presence in governance structures was merely perfunctory. Resolving these conflicting findings underscores a central theoretical tenet of this review: neither psychological awakening nor institutional reform is sufficient in isolation; they must function synchronously, a dynamic that directly informs the dual-mechanism approach of the CARM framework presented below.

4.5. The integrative significance of comprehensive analysis

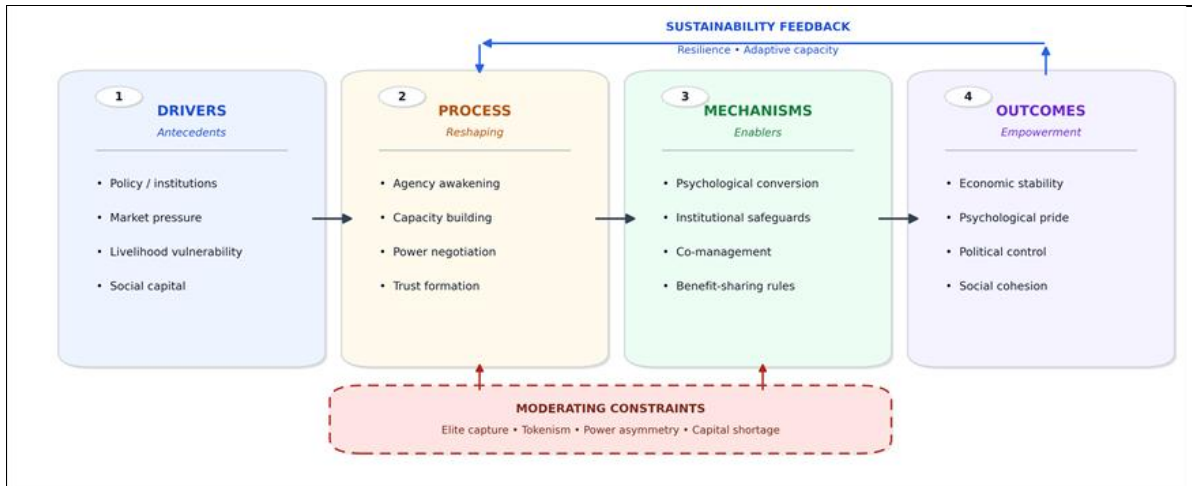
Overall, this comprehensive analysis indicates that the relationship between participation and empowerment in sustainable tourism is neither linear nor automatic. Participation alone cannot guarantee empowerment; rather, empowerment arises from the interaction between internal transformation (especially psychological empowerment) and external structures (particularly institutionalized governance and benefit-sharing mechanisms). If any of these elements is missing, participation often becomes merely symbolic, and the results of empowerment appear fragile or uneven.

Therefore, this interpretive meta-analysis redefines the participation-empowerment relationship as a dynamic, mechanism-dependent process, providing empirical evidence for the conceptual framework constructed in the next section. By shifting the focus of analysis from the existence of participation to the conditions under which participation reshapes community agency, this meta-analysis bridges the gap between fragmented empirical findings and theoretical construction in sustainable tourism research.

4.5.1. Conceptual framework construction: The Community Agency Reshaping Model (CARM)

Drawing insights from the aforementioned analysis, we propose a new comprehensive framework, the Community Agency Reshaping Model (CARM), to explain how tourism participation translates into genuine community empowerment and equitable benefit sharing, as illustrated in *Figure 2*. The CARM framework is built around four interrelated components: drivers, processes, mechanisms, and outcomes. These components collectively capture the dynamic process from initial community participation to sustained empowerment, identifying factors that drive or hinder progress and the channels through which it occurs.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Construction: The Community Agency Reshaping Model (CARM)



Source: Edited by the authors

Essentially, CARM demonstrates how to reshape community agency in tourism – from passive participation to active empowerment – and how to ensure that empowerment translates into shared benefits. The detailed content of each component is as follows.

4.5.2. Driving factors

Driving factors are conditions that promote or inhibit community empowerment, laying the foundation for it. The literature indicates that there are both external driving factors (macro-level factors) and internal ones (intrinsic factors of the community). External driving factors encompass policy frameworks, market forces, and the complex governance network of external stakeholders. As Roxas et al. (2020) elucidate in their mapping of sustainable destination governance, the synergistic roles and power dynamics among multi-level stakeholders – ranging from state authorities to private operators – act as critical external drivers. These structural networks determine whether a community remains marginalized or is successfully integrated into the tourism value chain. For instance, Stoffelen et al. (2020) noted that post-apartheid tourism policies in South Africa created momentum for community participation, but without strong programmatic support, policies alone are insufficient to empower locals. Another external driving factor is investment and the economic environment – communities in high-demand tourist areas may have more opportunities and external interests to contend with than those in remote areas (Su et al., 2019). Internal driving factors encompass community leadership, social capital, and capabilities. Research suggests that strong local leadership and unity can change the game. Thananusak and Suriyankietkaew (2023) argue that leadership and local participation are key drivers of success for community enterprises in Thailand, with a visionary local leader mobilizing residents and external support. Prayitno et al. (2025) similarly point out that high levels of social capital – trust, networks, and reciprocal norms – are favorable driving factors because they facilitate collective action and manage internal conflicts. Conversely, even when opportunities exist, internal divisions or a lack of skills can

hinder empowerment. In the CARM model, driving factors are essentially situational prerequisites: they determine the ease with which communities can climb up the empowerment ladder. Importantly, driving factors are not static; they are influenced over time (for example, capacity-building can strengthen internal driving factors, and policy advocacy can improve external driving factors). The CARM framework posits that identifying and actively managing these driving factors (through interventions such as leadership training, policy reform, legal empowerment, etc.) is the first step in transforming participation into empowerment.

4.5.3. Process

The process component of CARM describes the trajectory or evolution from initial engagement to the ultimate empowerment outcomes. Our comprehensive analysis indicates that this process is not a simple linear path, but rather an iterative, feedback loop. Under appropriate conditions, early involvement in tourism, even at the lowest level, can yield modest empowerment benefits, which in turn can foster deeper engagement, forming a reinforced cycle. This aligns with Gutierrez's (2023) perspective that communities often require a degree of empowerment to engage effectively, and through continuous interaction, both community engagement and empowerment levels can be simultaneously enhanced. We conceptualize this process as consisting of multiple stages:

1) Entry: the community begins to engage in tourism (possibly through community-based tourism projects or stakeholder meetings). In this stage, the level of empowerment is low, and engagement may primarily be induced (top-down).

2) Accumulation: through participation, the community acquires knowledge, social networks, and voice; these gradual changes represent early empowerment (especially psychological and social empowerment).

3) Expansion: driven by initial successes (or lessons learned from failures), the community seeks a greater role, striving for more discourse power or equity; community engagement becomes more active, even initiated by the community itself (bottom-up projects, cooperative ventures). As the community gains tangible benefits and formal influence, empowerment extends to economic and political levels.

4) Consolidation: the community's agency in tourism is institutionalized (e.g., seats in governance, ownership stakes, recognized rights), and empowerment is maintained through structures that safeguard its interests.

Not every case follows these stages neatly. If support is withdrawn or internal conflicts arise, some cases may stagnate or regress. However, the overall empowerment process is gradual, characterized by feedback loops. For example, the enhancement of psychological empowerment (confidence) at the accumulation stage may drive more engagement (expansion stage), which, if successful, further promotes empowerment, and so on. CARM emphasizes that this process does not occur automatically; it requires mechanisms (the next component) at each step to transform engagement into actual benefits. Nevertheless, viewing empowerment as continuously evolving helps to address the gap

between participation and empowerment: it is not a toggle switch, but rather a gradual reshaping of agency through repeated participation, learning, and negotiation.

4.5.4. Mechanisms (Psychological and institutional)

Mechanisms are the pathways or means through which participation is transformed into empowerment and benefits. Our review emphasizes two fundamental types of mechanisms that must work in concert: psychological and institutional. Psychological mechanisms refer to the development of "inner power" – that is, empowering individuals and communities at the cognitive and emotional levels. This includes enhancing the knowledge, skills, self-efficacy, cultural pride, and aspirations of local people. For example, when community members receive training in tourism management or see their cultural heritage appreciated by tourists, it enhances their confidence and sense of ownership. This, in turn, encourages them to take more proactive steps (such as starting businesses or voicing opinions in meetings). Studies by Tong et al. (2024) and Eluwole et al. (2022) indicate that residents who feel more empowered and informed are more likely to actively participate and claim their rights. Psychological empowerment also helps break the dependency or inferiority complex that often hinders marginalized groups. Institutional mechanisms are structural arrangements embedded in community power and ensuring fair distribution of benefits, essentially, the integration of "having power" and "having rights" in rules, organizations, and agreements. These include legal rights (land ownership, profit-sharing agreements, representation quotas in decision-making bodies), community organizations (cooperatives, trusts, associations), and governance processes (such as co-management frameworks, joint planning committees). Institutional mechanisms provide channels and guarantees for empowerment: they formalize the roles and interests of communities. For example, a community that legally owns a hotel or has a certain percentage of tourism revenue stipulated by law is institutionally empowered to advocate for its interests, whereas without such mechanisms, any benefits rely on informal goodwill. Lasting community empowerment not only relies on the subjective initiative of residents but also requires institutional arrangements as support. Research has shown that only when empowerment is formally embedded in the tourism governance system through mechanisms such as cooperatives, co-management agreements, or statutory governance seats can communities truly control resources and benefits, avoiding the pitfall of symbolic participation (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019; Knight & Cottrell, 2016).

The core argument of CARM is that both psychological and institutional mechanisms are necessary. Psychological empowerment without adequate institutional support may generate frustration, as individuals perceive themselves as capable and entitled actors but lack effective channels to exercise influence, resulting in blocked agency and disillusionment (Stoffelen et al., 2020; Tong et al., 2024). Conversely, institutional mechanisms without psychological empowerment may be underutilized or exploited by elites. These two mechanisms complement each other: psychological empowerment prepares communities to take advantage of institutional opportunities, while robust

institutions validate and further encourage psychological empowerment by granting real power. This dual mechanism directly addresses the gaps identified in previous topics; for example, it responds to symbolic participation by institutionalizing power and promotes benefit sharing by equipping people with the ability to effectively utilize these institutions.

4.6. Outcomes

The outcomes in the CARM framework represent the final results achieved through genuine community empowerment and effective revenue sharing. These outcomes encompass both the empowerment of the community and its sustainable development. Empowerment outcomes signify that the community has gained meaningful control and agency in the context of tourism. This can be evidenced by community representatives collectively deciding on tourism plans, thriving community-owned businesses, or having veto power over tourism projects that affect them. It also implies resilience. Empowered communities are better equipped to withstand external shocks or negotiate with powerful stakeholders on more equal terms. In terms of revenue sharing, outcomes are reflected in improved livelihoods and greater equity. Ideally, the economic benefits brought by tourism (employment, income, infrastructure) should be widely distributed rather than owned by a minority. Tiwari et al. (2024) provide an encouraging example from Nepal: in villages along the Annapurna Trail, they found that ecotourism contributed to social equity and economic prosperity, especially by empowering marginalized groups (women, lower castes) – for instance, narrowing the gender income gap and increasing access to microfinance for the poor. These are tangible outcomes of empowerment in action: previously excluded groups have gained livelihoods and voice through tourism, not just the traditional elite. Other outcome indicators from the literature include improved community well-being and quality of life, preservation of cultural and social capital, and more sustainable environmental management by locals, as empowered communities often feel proud of and take responsibility for their environment (Lara-Morales & Clarke, 2024).

Ultimately, the outcome of the CARM process is the reconfiguration of community agency in tourism: communities are no longer passive beneficiaries or symbolic participants, but active shapers of tourism development, sharing its benefits. Such communities can be regarded as genuine partners in sustainable development, an ideal state envisioned in many policy statements but rarely achieved. Achieving these outcomes also feeds back (in a virtuous cycle) to the driving factors: for example, successful empowerment outcomes can enhance internal driving factors such as community confidence and solidarity, and can attract more supportive external driving factors, such as government recognition or additional resources. In short, the achieved empowerment outcomes and revenue sharing serve as proof of concept, further validating and encouraging participatory approaches.

Overall, CARM bridges the gap between engagement and empowerment by explaining how passive engagement evolves into active empowerment. The model achieves this goal by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives: Arnstein's concept of

engagement levels is incorporated into the process (stages of power enhancement); Scheyvens' dimensions of empowerment are reflected in mechanisms and outcomes (psychological, economic, social, and political empowerment are all reflected); the perspective of social exchange theory on the impact of perceived benefits is incorporated into the outcomes fed back to driving factors (when communities see benefits, their support and participation increase, forming a positive feedback loop). CARM is also consistent with sustainable livelihood approaches, as it emphasizes institutional structures and human capital (psychological empowerment) to transform assets into outcomes. By explicitly incorporating psychological and institutional mechanisms, the model bridges a critical gap: early frameworks often focused either on community attitudes (such as social exchange theory emphasizing perception) or on structures (such as co-management frameworks) but did not address both simultaneously. Our comprehensive analysis of the literature indicates that bridging this gap requires both intrinsic and structural changes.

In practice, the CARM model can guide stakeholders in designing intervention measures. For instance, if a community tourism project is in its early stages (entry/accumulation phase), CARM suggests investing in psychological empowerment (training, building confidence) and ensuring institutional support (possibly through formal agreements that grant community decision-making roles). If the project encounters difficulties in symbolic participation, CARM will point to drivers such as strengthening institutional mechanisms (perhaps formalizing community consent requirements) and leadership. Essentially, this model provides a diagnostic and normative tool based on the extensive evidence base we have reviewed. Of course, the effectiveness of CARM needs to be tested in future studies across different contexts; we outline this is the agenda in the next section.

5. Operationalization of the CARM framework and practical implications

For CARM to transition from a conceptual framework to an empirically testable paradigm, it is imperative to explicitly operationalize its core components. *Table 3* delineates the latent constructs, operational definitions, and corresponding measurable indicators for the framework. This construct table directly responds to the scholarly need for standardized measurement tools in sustainable tourism, enabling future researchers to quantitatively test the causal pathways and propositions (e.g., via structural equation modeling) proposed in this review.

Furthermore, this operationalization explicitly outlines the sequential steps marginalized communities must take to strengthen their participation (as mapped in the "Process" stage), and the concrete outcomes they stand to achieve when dual mechanisms are successfully activated (as mapped in the "Outcomes" stage).

Table 3. Construct operationalization and measurable indicators of the CARM framework

CARM Component	Key Constructs / Dimensions	Operational Definition	Example Measurable Indicators (for empirical testing)
1. Drivers (Antecedents)	External Drivers (policy, market) Internal Drivers (vulnerability, social capital)	Pre-existing macro-structural and community-level conditions that catalyze or hinder initial engagement in tourism	- Presence of supportive NGO/ state policy frameworks (Binary: Y/N) - Household vulnerability index - Baseline community trust and reciprocal norm scores
2. Process (Actionable Steps)	Agency Awakening & Capacity Building Power Negotiation & Consolidation	The iterative, bottom-up steps communities take to transition from passive presence to active governance	- Number of residents completing targeted capacity-building/leadership training - Frequency of community-initiated (bottom-up) agenda items in planning meetings - Documented instances of local veto power being exercised
3. Mechanisms (Enablers)	Psychological Conversion Institutional Safeguards & Co-management	The dual internalization and formalization processes required to lock in empowerment and prevent tokenism	- Psychological: Self-efficacy scales, perceived cultural pride index, perceived local agency score - Institutional: % of formal voting seats held by locals on tourism boards, existence of legally binding revenue-sharing contracts
4. Outcomes (Empowerment Dividends)	Substantive Empowerment (political, social, psych.) Benefit-Sharing (economic)	The concrete, multidimensional dividends and sustained equity resulting from genuine community agency	- Gini coefficient of tourism income within the community - Retention rate of local cultural heritage practices - Community well-being and resilience index - % of tourism revenue directly reinvested into local public goods
5. Moderating Constraints	Tokenism & Elite Capture	Contextual barriers that hijack participation, concentrating power among a few and generating participation fatigue	- Income disparity ratio between local elites (e.g., village heads) and average residents - Perceived power asymmetry scales

Source: Edited by the authors

5.1. Concrete outcomes and community action steps

By formalizing these indicators, the CARM framework clarifies that the ultimate outcomes offered to local communities extend far beyond mere employment. They encompass guaranteed economic equity (e.g., formalized revenue-sharing percentages), political control (e.g., veto rights over external developers), and deep psychological resilience (e.g., cultural pride). To achieve these outcomes, the structural steps communities need to take involve: 1) capitalizing on initial market or policy drivers to enter the tourism space; 2) actively demanding capacity-building resources to overcome psychological barriers; 3) forming internal coalitions to enhance social capital; and, most critically, 4) leveraging their awakened agency to negotiate legally binding institutional safeguards (e.g., co-management agreements, cooperative ownership) rather than settling for informal advisory roles.

5.2. Transferability and boundary conditions: Insights for European and Hungarian rural contexts

While the empirical evidence base of this systematic review heavily features the Global South – where community participation is frequently catalyzed by poverty alleviation imperatives – the theoretical mechanisms of CARM demonstrate robust transferability to European, specifically Hungarian, rural contexts. In Europe, tourism participation is typically driven by endogenous rural development. However, despite the Global North's relatively mature institutional frameworks, marginalized communities in these regions frequently encounter similar dilemmas of "symbolic participation" regarding cross-sectoral governance.

For instance, empirical research on tourism in Hungarian national parks reveals a critical bottleneck (Kovács et al., 2021): despite the strong potential of nature-based tourism for rural development, inadequate sectoral partnerships and weak policy coordination have limited its broader benefits for local communities and farmers. This European reality perfectly corroborates a core tenet of the CARM framework: weak institutional safeguards inevitably stifle substantive empowerment, an institutional barrier applicable equally to protected areas in Ethiopia, China, and Central Europe.

Furthermore, the dual-mechanism approach of CARM – particularly the necessity of psychological empowerment – is highly pertinent to the inclusion of marginalized groups in the European context, such as the Roma communities in Hungary. Baseline studies in regions like Somogy and Baranya counties demonstrate that integrating the Romas' unique cultural heritage and local natural resources into a community-based tourism framework offers significant economic potential. More importantly, it serves as a critical pathway for their psychological and social empowerment. Mapping this onto CARM's "Expansion stage," it becomes evident that rebuilding the psychological self-efficacy and cultural pride of marginalized populations is a universal prerequisite for inclusive sustainable tourism, transcending the Global North–South divide.

Regarding benefit-sharing and capacity building, the Hungarian experience offers a compelling benchmark for the "Consolidation stage" of the CARM model. Unlike many Global South initiatives that rely heavily on external NGOs, rural tourism success in Hungary is increasingly driven by endogenous "experience management" – transforming ubiquitous basic services (ubiquity) into unique, localized products (uniqueness). The Hungarian National Association of Rural and Agrotourism (FATOSZ) serves as a prime institutional benchmark here. By establishing rigorous quality standards and facilitating the networking of local micro-enterprises, FATOSZ effectively functions as a macro-level "institutional empowerment mechanism." This organized structure ensures that individual rural households maintain market competitiveness and negotiating voice, providing a sophisticated European policy template for institutionalizing community agency and securing equitable benefit-sharing in the final stages of the CARM continuum.

5.3. Theoretical propositions for future empirical testing

Derived directly from the CARM framework and explicitly tied to the measurable indicators outlined in *Table 3*, we advance five testable propositions to guide future quantitative and mixed-methods research. Integrating these propositions here immediately underscores the explanatory power and empirical utility of the model:

Proposition 1 (Path dependence): Communities that achieve early-stage psychological empowerment (e.g., measured via self-efficacy scales) will accelerate their progression toward structural, institutionalized empowerment compared to communities locked in tokenistic participation.

Proposition 2 (Mediation): Residents' psychological empowerment acts as a critical positive mediator between their nominal tourism participation level and the achievement of equitable benefit-sharing outcomes.

Proposition 3 (Institutionalization): Tourism initiatives incorporating formal, legally binding benefit-sharing mechanisms (e.g., community equity funds or cooperative agreements) will yield significantly higher objective community well-being metrics than those relying on informal arrangements.

Proposition 4 (Contextual boundary): The relative efficacy of CARM's drivers and mechanisms is heavily moderated by the macro-political context; decentralized governance amplifies internal social capital drivers, whereas centralized regimes rely more heavily on top-down policy interventions.

Proposition 5 (Sustainability dividend): Empowered communities exhibit demonstrably superior performance in sustainable resource management and cultural heritage preservation compared to non-empowered counterparts with lower agency.

6. Conclusion and future research directions

6.1. Conclusion

This review has examined the evolution of communities from "participation" to "empowerment" in sustainable tourism, emphasizing why the increase in community engagement has not automatically led to deep empowerment and fair benefits of long-term sustainability commitments. Our work has made several contributions. Firstly, by systematically synthesizing 51 studies on community participation, empowerment, and benefit sharing (2015–2025), we provide a panorama of current knowledge. We have identified common issues such as symbolic participation, where communities only participate superficially, and discussed the limitations of classic models such as the Arnstein ladder in capturing the complexity of tourism contexts. Secondly, we have delved into the multidimensional nature of empowerment and emphasized the important role of psychological empowerment as a result and catalyst for further benefits. This adds a nuance to the field: we do not view empowerment as a singular concept but rather demonstrate the interactions between its various levels (economic, social, political, psychological), particularly how psychological empowerment supports other forms. Thirdly, we have compared the benefit sharing mechanisms from community operated cooperatives to joint ventures, revealing the institutional innovations needed to ensure that communities truly benefit from tourism. We emphasize that without sound mechanisms (community fairness, legitimate rights, transparent governance), even well-intentioned projects may marginalize local people.

Most importantly, we propose the Community Agency Reshaping Model (CARM) as a conceptual framework to integrate these insights. CARM fills the gap in tourism theory by explaining how passive participation can transform into active empowerment under appropriate driving factors and mechanisms. It emphasizes that empowerment is an evolutionary process driven by both psychological and institutional changes. In this way, the model addresses the long-standing disconnect between participation and empowerment: simply involving the community is not enough; they must also be empowered internally and structurally to transform participation into tangible benefits and authority. We believe that CARM provides a more comprehensive and process-oriented model than ever before, integrating elements of stakeholder theory, empowerment theory, and sustainable livelihood thinking into a coherent whole.

For practitioners and policy makers, our research findings further emphasize that community empowerment is crucial for truly achieving sustainable tourism and provide guidance on how to promote community empowerment. Symbolic participation should be replaced by power sharing arrangements; while strengthening community psychological capacity building (education, confidence, leadership skills), formal benefits (ownership, income sharing, decision-making roles) should be given to the community. Neglecting sustainable tourism initiatives in these areas may achieve short-term goals, but it may be difficult to achieve long-term community well-being and support. On the other hand,

projects that truly empower communities often generate multiple dividends: economic development, social cohesion, cultural vitality, and stronger protection and management capabilities of local people.

6.2. Practical implications: An actionable roadmap for community empowerment

Addressing the persistent gap between theoretical models and grassroots application, the CARM framework translates into a concrete, actionable roadmap for local community leaders, policymakers, and NGO facilitators. To dismantle the pervasive facade of "symbolic participation" and secure substantive outcomes, marginalized communities must undertake four sequential, strategic steps:

- Step 1: Cognitive breakthrough and psychological awakening. Communities must first shatter the illusion of passive, tokenistic engagement by investing in psychological capacity building. Through targeted educational workshops and local heritage valorization, residents must collectively recognize the intrinsic socio-cultural and environmental value of their assets. This psychological empowerment fosters the indispensable self-efficacy and cultural pride required to transition from passive beneficiaries to proactive stakeholders.

- Step 2: Structural organization and collective action. Atomized individual participation is inherently weak against external market forces. Communities must transition to structured collective action by establishing formal community-based tourism cooperatives or local micro-enterprise networks. Drawing inspiration from successful European benchmarks like the Hungarian FATOSZ network, this organizational phase aggregates fragmented local resources, sets internal quality standards, and builds the macro-level institutional mass necessary for effective market competition.

- Step 3: Contractual negotiation and institutionalization. Leveraging their newly organized collective power, communities must engage in hard negotiations with state authorities and private capital. The objective is to institutionalize their agency by codifying benefit-sharing rules into legally binding contracts. This includes securing formal veto rights over detrimental developments, guaranteed quotas for local representation on tourism governance boards, and fixed, transparent percentages for revenue sharing.

- Step 4: Closed-loop feedback and resilience building. To sustain the CARM continuum, the tangible material and financial dividends secured through institutional empowerment must not be entirely consumed by individuals. A mandated portion of tourism revenues must be systematically reinvested into local public goods, community education, and infrastructure. This closed-loop reinvestment mechanism solidifies local socio-economic resilience, continually reinforcing the internal drivers of capacity and trust needed to weather future market shocks and maintain long-term intergenerational sustainability.

6.3. Future research agenda

While this systematic review conceptualizes the pathway from symbolic participation to genuine empowerment, advancing this domain requires rigorous empirical validation of the CARM framework. Future research must prioritize longitudinal and comparative designs. Tracking communities over the entire lifecycle of tourism development will allow researchers to observe the iterative feedback loops between psychological awakening and institutional negotiation over time, moving beyond current cross-sectional limitations.

Furthermore, rigorously testing the mediating role of psychological empowerment across diverse cross-cultural contexts remains a critical priority. Future research could examine whether these mechanisms vary across different cultural and societal contexts, using approaches such as structural equation modeling where appropriate. Finally, future studies must critically evaluate different institutional designs for benefit-sharing under controlled conditions. By systematically comparing community cooperatives against joint ventures or private models, scholars can provide definitive, evidence-based policy guidance on which structural arrangements most effectively prevent elite capture and guarantee equitable sustainability outcomes for marginalized host communities.

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Appendix A: Detailed PRISMA Methodological Protocol

1. Exact date ranges and full search strings

To ensure complete transparency and replicability, the systematic literature retrieval was executed across the selected databases with a final search cut-off date of January 15, 2025. To capture all morphological variations of key concepts, truncation (*) and precise Boolean logic strings were applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields:

- Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection (TS): (("community participat*" OR "community involve*" OR "community engage*") AND ("sustainab* tourism" OR "rural tourism" OR "ecotourism" OR "community-based tourism") AND ("empowerment" OR "benefit sharing" OR "agency" OR "capacity building"))

- Scopus (TITLE-ABS-KEY): (("community participat*" OR "local engage*") AND ("tourism development" OR "sustainab* tourism") AND ("empowerment" OR "benefit sharing" OR "power dynamics"))

2. PICOS-based inclusion and exclusion criteria

To rigorously govern the eligibility of the 154 full-text reports retrieved, an explicit criteria checklist was formulated based on the PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes, Study Design) framework. The exclusion logic strictly corresponds to the 103 reports excluded in the PRISMA flow *Table A1*:

Table A1. PICOS-based inclusion and exclusion criteria for full-text screening

PICOS Dimension	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Population	Studies examining local communities, residents, indigenous groups, or community-based organizations within tourism destinations	Studies focusing only on tourists, firms, or government actors without community-level evidence
Intervention / Phenomenon	Tourism-related participation, empowerment, benefit-sharing, co-management, community-based tourism, ecotourism, or sustainable tourism governance	Studies unrelated to participation, empowerment, or governance in tourism contexts
Outcomes / Relevance	Evidence on agency, empowerment, livelihood improvement, decision-making power, revenue distribution, social capital, or institutional change	Studies reporting only marketing, destination image, or visitor satisfaction outcomes with no empowerment/governance relevance
Study Design / Eligibility	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, or review studies with accessible full texts and extractable evidence relevant to the review objectives	Editorials, book reviews, news items, duplicate records, inaccessible full texts, or studies lacking sufficient empirical/theoretical detail for synthesis

Source: Edited by the authors

3. Screening workflow and inter-rater agreement

The literature screening workflow was managed using the systematic review software Rayyan (or Covidence) to ensure a blinded, unbiased selection process. The screening was conducted independently by two primary researchers. Initially, titles and abstracts were screened (n=563), followed by a rigorous full-text assessment of the remaining 154 articles. To quantitatively measure the consistency of the selection process, Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated. The inter-rater agreement was highly robust at both the title/abstract screening stage (Kappa = 0.86) and the full-text eligibility stage (Kappa = 0.93). Any discrepancies or conflicting judgments between the two primary reviewers were resolved through iterative discussion and, when necessary, arbitration by a third independent senior reviewer.

4. Quality appraisal strategy and its Impact on data synthesis

Given the methodological diversity of the included evidence base, the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklists were utilized for qualitative studies, and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for quantitative and mixed-methods research. Studies were assessed based on the clarity of research questions, the appropriateness of data collection, and the logical alignment between empirical findings and conclusions.

Crucially, while no studies were excluded solely on the basis of moderate appraisal scores (to ensure a comprehensive thematic synthesis and capture marginalized contexts), the appraisal results directly dictated the evidence weighting in the thematic synthesis. Specifically, causal claims and theoretical propositions within the Community Agency Reshaping Model (CARM) – such as the mediating role of psychological empowerment – were exclusively anchored by studies demonstrating high methodological rigor (e.g., longitudinal designs, triangulated data, robust structural equation modeling). Conversely, evidence drawn from lower-scoring studies was utilized strictly for providing descriptive context or identifying "Moderating Constraints" (e.g., instances of tokenism or elite capture).

Appendix B: PRISMA-Style Summary of Included Studies and Mapping to CARM

The *Table A2* presents a structured synthesis of the 51 empirical studies included in this review, outlining their key methodological characteristics and demonstrating how their findings directly informed the theoretical components of the Community Agency Reshaping Model (CARM).

Table A2. PRISMA-style summary of included studies and mapping to CARM

Study (Author, Year)	Country / Region	Method & Sample	Key Findings regarding Participation & Empowerment	Mapping to CARM Components
Liu et al. (2025)	China (East Asia)	Qualitative (Decade-long longitudinal field study, comparative case study)	Highly participatory models do not inherently empower locals; a "sustainable tourism paradox" exists where centralized governance sometimes yields better material outcomes without nominal participation	Moderating Constraints: Tokenism; Mechanisms: Lack of institutional safeguards limits empowerment
Wondirad & Ewnetu (2019)	Ethiopia (Africa)	Mixed Methods (surveys, interviews, focus groups)	Locals were mostly limited to symbolic participation ("deceived by symbolic participation", resulting in unequal revenue distribution, participation fatigue, and growing disillusionment	Process: Agency awakening blocked; Constraints: Elite capture; Outcomes: Unequal benefit-sharing
Su et al. (2019)	China (East Asia)	Quantitative (household surveys, statistical analysis)	Asset-driven participation without adequate governance regulation exacerbates internal economic inequalities, favoring asset-rich households over marginalized residents	Drivers: Livelihood vulnerability; Mechanisms: Benefit-sharing rules required for equitable outcomes
Knight & Cottrell (2016)	Peru (Latin America)	Qualitative (ethnography, participant observation, interviews)	Empowerment is uneven and can be exclusionary ("non-generative empowerment"); Psychological empowerment often precedes other forms but requires structural support	Mechanisms: Psychological conversion vs. Institutional safeguards; Outcomes: Psychological pride

Li Ziming – Zhang Jiahao – Yang Jie: Rethinking community empowerment in tourism: A systematic review

Matiku et al. (2020)	South Africa (Africa)	Qualitative (case study, stakeholder interviews)	Legally recognized community rights in co-management arrangements effectively transform tourism revenues into broader livelihood and capacity-building outcomes	Mechanisms: Co-management, Institutional safeguards; Outcomes: Economic stability, Political control
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Source: Edited by the authors