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Research article

Beyond tokenism: Participatory governance deficits and community exclusion in South African heritage tourism

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the degree to which local communities exercise meaningful agency in tourism governance and equitable revenue distribution at South Africa heritage sites, drawing on Sudwala Caves (Mpumalanga) as an empirical case. A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating focus group discussions, structured questionnaires and polling among 44 residents of the Mankele community. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation guided the analysis of community involvement in tourism governance. The findings indicate that local residents derive limited direct economic benefits from tourism and have restricted influence in decision-making processes. Participants also expressed concerns regarding cultural and environmental impacts associated with tourism development. Although support for tourism remained strong, community participation was largely characterised by tokenistic engagement that seldom translated into meaningful influence over governance outcomes. The study concludes that existing governance arrangements inadequately promote community empowerment and equitable benefit-sharing. The findings argue for a reorientation of heritage tourism governance frameworks toward approaches that prioritise redistributive benefit-sharing, cultural reclamation and participatory co-management. By providing empirical evidence from a restitution-linked heritage tourism context, the study contributes to debates on participatory governance, decolonial tourism and heritage management. It further proposes a framework for advancing tourism justice through community self-determination, offering practical insights for policymakers and heritage practitioners.

KEYWORDS

Heritage tourism; participatory governance; tourism justice; community participation; and land restitution

Introduction

Tourism development in heritage contexts across the Global South embodies a persistent paradox. Promoted as a catalyst for poverty reduction, cultural preservation, and sustainable livelihoods, it frequently reproduces inequitable benefit distribution and entrenched local marginalization (Rogerson & Saarinen, 2018; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). Despite policy commitments to inclusive governance, host communities often remain peripheral to tourism decision-making and resource control. This disconnect between empowerment rhetoric and lived realities underscores a broader tension between development discourse and distributive justice, a tension that lies at the heart of sustainable tourism debates (Fletcher et al., 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles & Bianchi, 2024). Recent research further demonstrates that residents' sense of community and attitudes toward tourism can shape continued support for tourism development, highlighting the importance of understanding community support not simply as an indicator of acceptance but in relation to the social relationships and perceived benefits that underpin it (Payini et al., 2026). Recent scholarship has repositioned tourism not merely as an economic sector but as a site of social justice struggle. Higgins-Desbiolles (2018)

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advanced the concept of tourism justice, urging scholars and practitioners to confront how tourism systems reproduce colonial hierarchies of power, dispossession, and dependency. In parallel, Bellato et al. (2024) and Mkono (2019) call for decolonising tourism by centring indigenous epistemologies, community agency, and rights-based approaches that challenge the dominance of Western capitalist models. These perspectives reframe sustainable tourism as a political project, concerned less with technical inclusion mechanisms and more with structural transformation. Applying this lens to heritage tourism sites exposes how "participation" is often instrumentalised to legitimise exclusion, while local cultural and ecological knowledge remains subordinated to global market imperatives. Participatory governance remains a cornerstone of sustainability discourse, articulated through international frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Goals 8 and 11) and South Africa's National Tourism Sector Strategy (Department of Tourism, 2020). Yet empirical evidence reveals that participation often operates within narrow, state-sanctioned boundaries. Drawing on Arnstein's (1969) *ladder of citizen participation* and Tosun's (2006) typology, community engagement in tourism frequently falls within *tokenistic* or *induced* participation—symbolic gestures that maintain existing hierarchies rather than redistributing power. Within heritage contexts, these governance deficits manifest across interlinked domains: economic marginalization through unequal revenue capture, cultural suppression through restrictions on traditional practices, and environmental degradation without compensatory investment (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019).

In South Africa, these challenges intersect with enduring postcolonial inequalities. Since 1994, tourism has been positioned as both a developmental engine and a mechanism for social redress, particularly in former homeland areas marked by historical dispossession (Visser & Rogerson, 2004). Heritage tourism has thus carried a dual mandate, to generate revenue while advancing transformation and reconciliation (Fabricius et al., 2001). Recent evidence from rural South Africa similarly demonstrates that tourism development can generate complex relationships among economic development, local interests and environmental concerns, reinforcing the need to examine tourism not only as an economic activity but also as a negotiated community–environment relationship (Ramukumba, 2026). Yet the persistence of private concession models has often reproduced exclusionary power dynamics, limiting community participation and ownership. This raises critical questions about whether post-apartheid tourism represents a genuine break from colonial economic patterns or their neoliberal continuation (Bianchi et al., 2020). Recent research on the tourism entrepreneurial ecosystem surrounding Kruger National Park similarly demonstrates that tourism opportunities for local enterprises can be constrained by regulatory, infrastructural and institutional barriers, illustrating how the presence of tourism activity does not necessarily translate into accessible local economic opportunities (Nkogho-Beyeme et al., 2026). These contradictions are particularly visible in Mpumalanga Province, where tourism contributes significantly to regional GDP but benefits remain unevenly distributed (Mpumalanga Department of Economic Development and Tourism, 2022). The Sudwala Caves, one of the oldest known cave systems globally (Hattingh & Schoeman, 2023), exemplify this paradox. Although commercially operated since 1965, the adjacent Mankele community, whose ancestral lands encompass the caves and who maintain an active land restitution claim, report limited livelihood opportunities, cultural marginalization, and systematic exclusion from planning processes. This contested landscape renders Sudwala Caves not only an environmental and economic asset but also a decolonial frontier where questions of heritage, ownership, and justice converge.

While extensive research has examined community-based tourism in southern Africa (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019; Spenceley & Meyer, 2012), few studies interrogate heritage tourism under conditions of active land restitution, a gap particularly significant in South Africa's postcolonial context. Existing frameworks often privilege institutional narratives over community epistemologies (Jamal & Stronza, 2009), thereby reproducing the very asymmetries decolonial scholarship seeks to dismantle. Responding to recent calls for justice-oriented tourism research (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018) and epistemic decolonisation (Mkono, 2019), this study foregrounds the lived experiences and local knowledge of the Mankele community, whose land restitution claim fundamentally shapes their relationship to Sudwala Cave tourism. Lodged in 1994 and partially settled in 2004 with the transfer of 600 hectares to 145 families, this claim establishes Mankele residents not as stakeholders seeking inclusion, but as dispossessed owners demanding restitution, a distinction that fundamentally alters the normative basis for participation and positions tourism governance questions within broader debates on postcolonial justice and self-determination. This study examines the Sudwala Caves as a case through which to explore the intersection of tourism, justice, and decolonisation. Specifically, it aimed: (1) to examine local residents' perceptions of tourism impacts on their community; (2) to evaluate the contribution of Sudwala Cave tourism to household and community livelihoods; and (3) to assess the depth and quality of community involvement in tourism planning and governance. Using a mixed-methods case study design, the research integrates focus group discussions, structured questionnaires, and polling data from 44 Mankele residents. Informed by Arnstein's (1969) participatory ladder and situated within decolonial and justice-oriented frameworks, the study interrogates not only what participation looks

like in practice, but how communities mobilise their land claims as leverage for structural governance change. By focusing on community voices rather than institutional rhetoric, this research contributes to theoretical debates on decolonial participatory governance and tourism justice. Empirically, it illuminates how tourism development unfolds within a context of contested heritage and unresolved restitution, offering insights for scholars and policymakers seeking to transform heritage tourism from an extractive industry into a restorative practice rooted in equity, recognition, and community self-determination.

Literature review

Community perceptions of tourism impacts: Framing lived experience

Research on host-community perceptions emphasises that local responses to tourism are plural, context dependent, and shaped by social position (age, gender, tenure and class) as much as by objective impacts (Sharpley, 2018; Tosun, 2006). Early works established that perceptions reflect both material effects (employment, infrastructure) and intangible outcomes (cultural change, loss of control) (Ap, 1992). More recent studies foreground the social construction of perceptions: tourism can be simultaneously perceived as opportunity and threat, what some authors term *ambivalent acceptance* or *paradoxical optimism* (Saarinen, 2019; Stone & Nyaupane, 2019). A recent study by Payini et al. (2026) reinforces the importance of residents' social and attitudinal relationships with tourism, demonstrating that a sense of community can shape residents' attitudes and their support for sustainable tourism development In heritage contexts, perceptions are especially mediated by identity and historical experience. Communities adjacent to heritage attractions often interpret tourism in relation to cultural recognition or dispossession; where historical injustices exist, tourism may reopen wounds rather than heal them (Giblin, 2014). Empirical work across Africa and the Global South shows recurring themes: enthusiasm for jobs and cash, anxiety about cultural commodification, and concern over environmental pressures (Akyeampong, 2011; Manyara & Jones, 2007; Taylor & Banda-Thole, 2013). Importantly, perception studies reveal intra-community differences, youth may prioritise income, elders' cultural continuity; women may emphasise household impacts (Mosedale & Voll, 2016; Scheyvens, 2011). However, there is less empirical work examining perceptions at *contested heritage sites* where land claims and restitution reshape meanings of tourism; nor is there consistent linking of demographic positioning (age, gender, tenure) with perception dynamics in such contested settings.

Tourism and livelihoods: Who benefits, who loses?

A substantive body of work examines tourism's livelihood impacts. Proponents argue tourism can diversify incomes, create jobs and stimulate local enterprise (Li et al., 2025; UNWTO, 2017). Critics, however, emphasise uneven benefit distribution, leakage, and the reproduction of low-value, precarious employment (Mowforth & Munt, 2015; Saarinen, 2019). Studies in southern Africa show mixed results: some community-based initiatives yield local income and empowerment (Spenceley & Meyer, 2012), while many projects remain enclave economies that provide seasonal, low-paid work rather than sustainable livelihoods (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012; Mbaiwa, 2017). Livelihood scholarship highlights mechanisms that mediate outcomes: ownership structures, access to capital and markets, skills and education, and institutional linkages (Ashley & Roe, 2002). Value-chain approaches show how upstream control (land, concessions, marketing) determines whether benefits are retained locally (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2017). Cultural livelihoods, such as performance, craft, storytelling, are also income sources when supported; but when restricted or commodified, they can result in both cultural loss and lost economic opportunity (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Cole, 2006). Recent evidence from South Africa reinforces this structural perspective. A study by Nkogho-Beyeme et al., (2026) around Kruger National Park found that tourism entrepreneurship can generate opportunities for local enterprises while remaining constrained by regulatory, infrastructural and institutional barriers. This suggests that the existence of tourism opportunities alone is insufficient to ensure meaningful local economic participation, and implies that access to the institutional and material conditions required to capture value is equally important. Collectively, existing literature maps the structural reasons for limited livelihood benefits but rarely situates these dynamics in sites where land restitution claims introduce legal and moral claims to resource control. There is a need to connect livelihood analyses explicitly with contested property regimes and restitution processes to understand distributional justice at heritage sites.

Participation and governance: From tokenism to co-management

Participation is a central tenet of sustainable development discourse, yet scholarship has long problematised its implementation. Arnstein's (1969) ladder remains a foundational heuristic, distinguishing tokenistic consultation from genuine citizen control. Tosun (2006) and others have refined this by typologising participation as spontaneous, induced or coercive, exposing how institutional design channels community

involvement. Empirical studies across the Global South routinely find participation processes constrained by information asymmetries, elite capture, short-term project cycles, and lack of legal rights (Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Tosun, 2006). Recent work on sustainable tourism governance further emphasises that governance effectiveness depends on human-centred management processes and the conditions under which stakeholders participate in destination decision-making (Suarbawa et al., 2026). In heritage and conservation arenas, participatory deficits often intersect with technocratic conservation models that privilege scientific or managerial expertise over local knowledge (Agrawal, 2020; Buscher & Fletcher, 2020). Where private concessions control heritage assets, communities frequently experience exclusion from management and planning, their role limited to labour provision or performative consultation (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). While governance literature clearly identifies mechanisms of exclusion, empirical studies seldom examine participation practices in the context of active land restitution and unresolved property claims, conditions that potentially alter the normative basis for participation (from stakeholder engagement to rights-based claims). There is limited evidence on how communities mobilise claims to transform governance arrangements at concessioned heritage sites.

Tourism justice and decolonising tourism: Conceptual advances

Recent scholarship reframes tourism through the lenses of social justice and decolonisation. Tourism justice (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018) calls for redistribution, recognition, and representation: not only who benefits economically, but whose knowledge, narratives, and rights count. Decolonising tourism (Mkono, 2019; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020) critiques the epistemic dominance of Western managerial paradigms and advocates centring indigenous ontologies, reparative measures, and legal recognition of land rights. These approaches shift emphasis from technical participation (consultations, trainings) to structural transformation (co-ownership, co-management, legal restitution). Empirical work applying these frameworks is growing but remains nascent. Cases where decolonial praxis is pursued, through community land trusts, legal restitution, or community-led co-management, provide tentative evidence that redistributive models can enhance both livelihood and cultural outcomes (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Yet the transition from rhetorical commitment to durable institutional change is challenging, especially where private concessions and commercial interests are entrenched. Hence, justice and decolonial frameworks offer valuable normative and analytical tools, but empirical research applying them to contested heritage tourism, linking legal restitution, governance reform, and livelihood transformation, is limited. There is a pressing need for case studies that document processes, barriers, and outcomes when communities press for co-management and legal recognition.

Heritage tourism, land restitution and post-apartheid South Africa

South Africa's post-apartheid restitution processes position land claims at the centre of social justice. Scholarship on tourism and land reform highlights tensions: tourism can be used to support restitution claims and community development, but concession arrangements and neoliberal policy create barriers to meaningful restitution (Fabricius et al., 2001; Visser & Rogerson, 2004). In Mpumalanga and similar provinces, heritage attractions operating under private concessions raise specific dilemmas: how to reconcile concession contracts with communal land claims, how to share revenues equitably, and how to protect intangible heritage practices (Mpumalanga Department of Economic Development and Tourism, 2022; Hattingh & Schoeman, 2023). However, empirical studies explicitly examining tourism governance at restitution-linked heritage sites are rare. Research tracking how land claims interact with participation, livelihoods, and heritage representation remains limited. This lacuna undermines policy prescription: without grounded evidence, recommendations for co-management, benefit-sharing, or legal reform remain abstract.

Research framing and contribution

Collectively, the literature establishes three critical insights: (1) perceptions of tourism are multidimensional and socially stratified; (2) tourism's livelihood benefits are mediated by structure (ownership, skills, markets); and (3) participation often defaults on tokenism unless power relations are reformed. However, gaps persist regarding how these dynamics play out where heritage tourism is situated on land subject to active restitution claims and under private concession regimes. There is limited empirical work that (a) links demographic differences within communities to perception and livelihood outcomes in contested sites, and (b) documents processes through which communities seek to translate claims into governance change. This study addresses these gaps by empirically interrogating the Sudwala Caves, an archetypal contested heritage site, to answer: How do residents perceive tourism impacts? To what extent does tourism contribute to livelihoods? And how are residents included (or excluded) from planning and governance? By centring

community voices and situating findings within tourism justice and decolonial frameworks, the research aims to advance both theory and practice on equitable heritage tourism.

Study context: The Mankele–Sudwala land restitution case

The land rights dispute surrounding the Sudwala Caves, situated within what is locally known as the Mankele–Sudwala area, embodies the complex intersections of heritage, justice, and postcolonial development in South Africa. The Mankele clan, whose ancestral territory encompasses the Sudwala Caves and surrounding farmland, successfully lodged a restitution claim under South Africa's *Restitution of Land Rights Act (1994)*. In 2004, the Land Claims Commission awarded approximately 600 hectares of land and orchards to 145 families who had been dispossessed under colonial and apartheid-era land policies (South African History Online, 2014). The restored property, valued at approximately R2.4 million, included productive farmland, subtropical orchards, and sections of the forested terrain now occupied by both Mankele Adventures and the Sudwala Caves tourist concession. The site itself holds deep cultural significance: the caves derive their name from the clan's legendary leader, Sudwala, symbolising both ancestral continuity and the contemporary struggle for recognition. Despite this legal restitution, tensions persist regarding the distribution of tourism revenues and the exercise of effective ownership rights. While title has been restored, operational control remains largely with private tourism enterprises, resulting in ongoing contestations over access, governance, and benefit sharing. Currently, private operators hold long-term concessions granted prior to the land claim settlement, creating legal and operational complexity around community authority and benefit entitlements. This paradox, formal restitution without functional empowerment, mirrors broader post-apartheid challenges in aligning land reform with inclusive economic transformation (Cliffe, 2000; Spierenburg, 2011). Consequently, the Mankele–Sudwala case provides a revealing empirical lens for examining how heritage tourism development intersects with land justice and community self-determination in postcolonial contexts.

Research methodology

Study site: Geographic, demographic and tourism context

Research was conducted in Mankele village (25°43'S, 30°75'E), situated approximately 30 km northwest of Mbombela (formerly Nelspruit) in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Mankele is located adjacent to the Sudwala Caves, one of the province's most prominent natural and cultural heritage tourism attractions within the Mbombela Local Municipality (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Location of Mankele Village and Sudwala Caves in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa.
Source: Author compilation using Bing Maps

Mankele is a small rural settlement characterised by subsistence agriculture, limited formal employment, and inadequate basic infrastructure. The village's proximity to the Sudwala Caves places it at the interface of rural livelihoods and tourism development, making it a suitable site for examining community–tourism interactions. The Sudwala Caves, formed in Precambrian dolomite approximately 240 million years ago, have operated as a commercial tourist attraction since 1965 (Hattingh & Schoeman, 2023). Although official attendance records are not publicly available, the location is estimated to draw tens of thousands of visitors

annually, primarily from within the country and neighbouring regions. Tourism activities are operated by a private entity through a concession system, leaving the local Mankele community with minimal formal participation in the site's ownership, administration, or strategic development. Consequently, this administrative structure highlights the importance of investigating how effectively local residents are integrated into, or marginalized from, the advantages of heritage tourism.

Data collection

To investigate local viewpoints regarding tourism expansion and community involvement in the governance of heritage tourism at the Sudwala Caves, this research utilised a mixed-methods case study approach. This design enabled methodological triangulation, combining the comprehensive nature of quantitative data with the detailed insights of qualitative research. Fieldwork took place in Mankele Village, located in the Mpumalanga Province, during September 2024. The study focused on adult residents (18 years or older) who had resided in Mankele for at least two years, a criterion chosen to guarantee participants had sufficient knowledge of local governance and tourism operations. To ensure a diverse sample regarding age, gender, educational background, and length of residence, purposive sampling was utilised. Working alongside the Ward Councillor and Community Leader, researchers identified and extended voluntary invitations to prospective participants. Out of roughly 60 individuals approached, 44 agreed to take part, yielding a 73% response rate. This sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve thematic saturation and qualitative depth (Guest et al., 2006). Participant recruitment occurred at community gatherings, during which the research goals, methodologies, and ethical protocols were outlined in indigenous languages. All participants provided written informed consent, except for those with low literacy levels, who provided recorded verbal consent. Data were gathered using a triad of complementary techniques: structured questionnaires, real-time polling, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The study involved four FGDs, each consisting of 10 to 12 individuals (totaling 44 participants). To foster a comfortable environment that promoted candid conversation, groups were segmented by demographics such as gender and age. These sessions, which ran for 90 to 120 minutes, centred on three core themes: (1) the perceived impacts of tourism; (2) the economic and livelihood benefits derived from tourism; and (3) the community's role in tourism governance. Every FGD was led by a pair of trained researchers; one acted as the moderator while the other handled note-taking, audio recording, and observational duties.

Immediately after the FGDs, attendees filled out a structured survey featuring open-ended prompts, Likert-scale items, and demographic questions. Bilingual research assistants facilitated the survey process, offering translations and clarifications in the participants' languages of choice (isiZulu, siSwati, or English). Additionally, to gauge instant group consensus, three live polling questions were integrated into the FGDs. Participants indicated their answers by holding up coloured cards (green for "yes," red for "no"), providing a clear visual metric of agreement or dissent. These polling outcomes were counted by hand and subsequently cross-referenced with the qualitative data to ensure triangulation. The data collection phase spanned two days, September 16 and 17, 2024, at the Mankele Community Hall. A team of six fieldworkers, comprising postgraduate students and university personnel, supported the research team with data handling and facilitation. Prior to the fieldwork, these assistants underwent training in cultural competence, interview strategies, and research ethics. To maintain confidentiality, all field notes and audio files were saved in password-protected, encrypted directories. Bilingual academics translated the audio transcripts into English, and the accuracy of this translation was confirmed by back-translating a random 20% subset of the data. Finally, both the qualitative and quantitative datasets underwent rigorous cleaning and validation procedures before the analytical phase began.

Data analysis

Qualitative data from FGDs and open-ended questionnaire responses were analysed thematically following Naeem et al., (2023) step-by-step process. Transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity, then coded inductively and deductively using NVivo 15. Coding was guided by Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, allowing interpretation of community empowerment levels in tourism governance. Codes were consolidated into broader categories and themes through iterative comparison. Themes were refined for internal consistency and distinctiveness, then defined and illustrated using representative participant quotations. Inter-coder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$) indicated substantial agreement, enhancing analytical credibility. Quantitative data derived from structured questionnaires and real-time polling were analyse using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation, were employed to summarise participant demographics and overall response trends. Inferential tests were then conducted to examine associations between demographic characteristics and key perception variables. Specifically, chi-square (χ^2) tests of independence were used to assess relationships between residency duration, gender, and perceived economic or cultural impacts of tourism,

while Fisher's exact tests were applied where expected cell counts were small (e.g., for education-related differences in governance participation). Likert-scale items were analyse to determine mean levels of agreement with statements regarding tourism's economic, environmental, and sociocultural effects. Open-ended quantitative responses (e.g., "specify environmental concerns") were content-coded to identify the frequency of specific issues such as water scarcity, waste accumulation, and river pollution. Cross-tabulations were used to visualize the distribution of perceived benefits and participation patterns across demographic categories. To complement these descriptive and inferential analyses, results from the real-time polling exercises were used to capture community sentiment regarding the future potential of tourism development. Data integration followed a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Qualitative and quantitative findings were analyse in parallel, then compared to identify convergence (mutual support), complementarity (different but reinforcing insights), and divergence (contradictory patterns). Integration matrices were developed to link FGD themes with survey and polling results, ensuring a comprehensive interpretation of community perspectives.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

As university-based researchers from a historically advantaged institution (UNISA) conducting research in a marginalized community, we acknowledge our positionality as both partial insiders (South African nationals familiar with apartheid legacies) and outsiders (not members of the Mankele community). This positioning required ongoing reflexive practice. Our research team comprised environmental scientists rather than tourism specialists, bringing interdisciplinary perspectives but also requiring conscious effort to centre community knowledge over technical expertise. We approached the study through a justice-oriented lens, explicitly sympathetic to community empowerment, which shaped our interpretation of governance deficits. However, we actively sought disconfirming evidence and remained attentive to expressions of agency and hope alongside accounts of exclusion. The commitment to a post-research feedback workshop and collaborative interpretation of findings aimed to mitigate extractive research dynamics, though we recognise that even participatory research can reproduce power asymmetries when conducted by external academics (Mistry et al., 2015).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA), College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (CAES-HREC) (Ref. No. 2024/CAES_HREC/6131). Written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Mankele Community Leader and the Mbombela Local Municipality. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of participant codes and the exclusion of identifying information from transcripts and reports. All digital records were securely stored in password-protected and encrypted folders accessible only to the research team. To promote transparency and reciprocity, preliminary findings were shared with community representatives following data analysis.

Limitations of the study

Several methodological limitations merit acknowledgement. The small, non-random sample, while sufficient for thematic saturation, may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives within Mankele, particularly among residents unable to attend FGDs. The condensed two-day fieldwork period may have constrained deeper engagement with certain sub-groups. Social desirability bias may have influenced responses, especially during group discussions where consensus pressures exist. The absence of data from tourism operators and government officials additionally restricts cross-institutional verification of community accounts. The study's cross-sectional design further precludes assessment of attitudinal change over time. Future research could productively adopt longitudinal or multi-stakeholder designs to strengthen the explanatory power and policy relevance of findings.

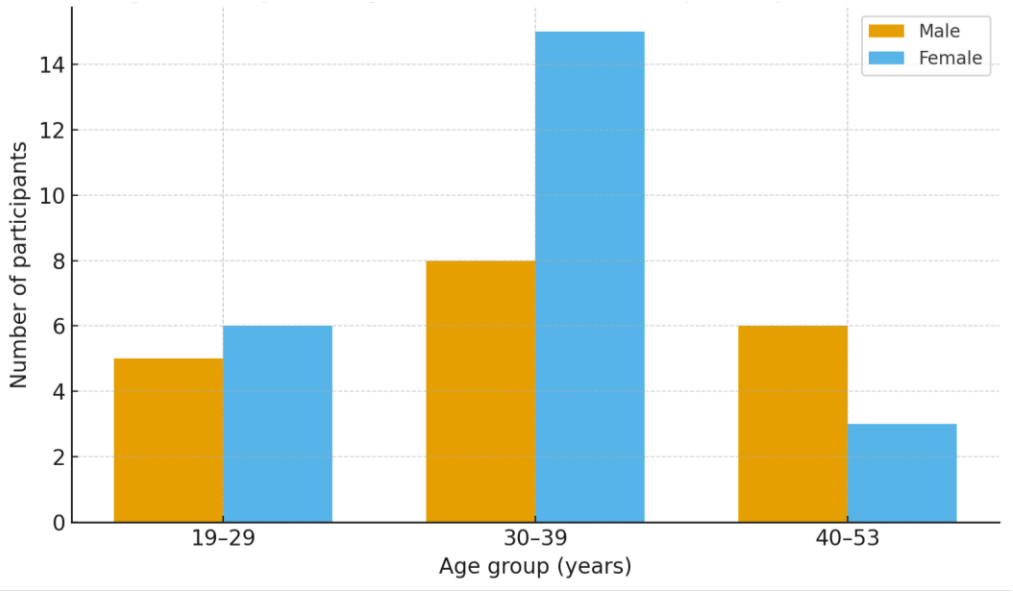
Results

Demographic profile of participants

The demographic composition, consisting of 57% women and 43% men, indicates that female viewpoints are likely to be highly visible in the community's accounts. This distribution aligns with the significant involvement women typically have in sustaining household economies and structuring local social networks.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants (N = 44)

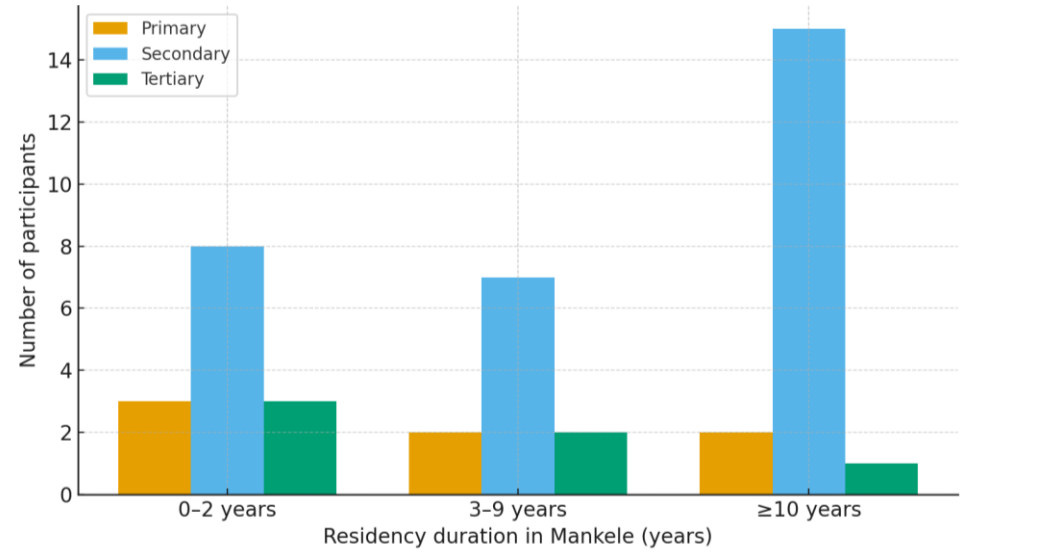
Variable	Category	n	%
Age (Years)	19–29	11	25.0
	30–39	23	52.3
	40–53	9	20.5
	Not stated	1	2.3
Gender	Male	19	43.2
	Female	25	56.8
Years in Community	0-2	14	31.8
	3–9	11	25.0
	≥10	19	43.2
Education Level	None	1	2.3
	Primary	7	15.9
	Secondary	30	68.2%
	Tertiary	6	13.6%



*Grouped bar chart showing that most participants were aged 30–39 years, with women outnumbering men in all age groups

Figure 2. Age and gender distribution of participants (N = 44). Source: Authors

Participants' length of residency in Mankele varied considerably: 32 % had lived there for fewer than 3 years, 25 % for 3–9 years, and 43 % for 10 years or more. Educational attainment was generally moderate, with most respondents (68 %) having completed secondary education, and a small proportion (14 %) holding tertiary qualifications. Figure 3 presents the intersection of education level and residency duration, indicating that tertiary-educated participants were somewhat more common among recent arrivals, whereas long-term residents tended to have completed only secondary schooling.



Grouped bar chart illustrating that long-term residents mainly held secondary-level education, while tertiary qualifications were more common among newer residents.

Figure 3. Education level by residency duration among participants (N = 44). Source: Authors

Quantitative patterns in tourism perceptions

Prior to a detailed exploration of the qualitative themes, the structured survey data was analysed to outline residents' views on the local effects of tourism (Table 2). The findings highlight a distinct contrast between the community's desire for inclusion and their actual experiences of marginalization, which serves as the empirical basis for the thematic analysis that follows.

Table 2: Summary of quantitative tourism perception patterns

Measure	n (%)	Statistical Test	Interpretation
Direct economic benefit	8 (18%)	χ^2=2.34, p =0.31	Minimal livelihood integration
Consulted on decisions	4 (9%)	Fisher's p=0.02*	Education-stratified access
Cultural restrictions	28 (64%)	χ^2=1.74, p=0.19	Widespread suppression
Environmental harm (M±SD)	4.1±0.9	—	Strong negative perception
Conditional support	44 (100%)	—	Paradoxical optimism

*Significant difference between tertiary vs. secondary/primary education

In terms of economic involvement, engagement with the tourism sector is remarkably low. A mere 18% of the sample (n = 8) indicated that their households received any direct financial advantages from the Sudwala Caves, largely restricted to informal or transient roles such as selling crafts or casual labour. Not a single participant reported holding a formal job with a tourism business. Furthermore, cross-tabulation analysis revealed no statistically significant relationship between the length of residence and the perception of economic benefit ($\chi^2 = 2.34$, $p = 0.31$). This suggests that economic exclusion is a widespread issue that affects the community across all demographic lines. Involvement in governance was equally scarce. Only 9% of the participants (n = 4) stated they had been consulted regarding decisions about tourism development. Moreover, those who were consulted characterised these interactions as isolated, informational briefings rather than continuous, meaningful engagement. Notably, tertiary-educated participants were more likely to report consultation (50%) compared with those holding only secondary or primary education (5%), a statistically significant disparity (Fisher's exact $p = 0.02$). This suggests education-based stratification in governance access. Cultural dimensions revealed pronounced tensions: 64% (n = 28) reported negative effects of tourism on their ability to practise traditional customs. Restrictions on rituals near the caves, noise complaints during ceremonies, and limitations on traditional performances were commonly cited. Women reported higher perceived cultural restrictions (72%) than men (53%), though the difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.74$, $p = 0.19$). Participants also held strongly negative views regarding the environmental impact of the industry. On a five-point Likert scale, there was a high level of agreement (M = 4.1, SD = 0.9) that local natural resources have been degraded by tourism activities. The primary ecological issues cited by the respondents were water shortages (73%), the buildup of solid waste (55%), and the contamination of rivers (36%). Nevertheless, in a display of what can be described as "paradoxical optimism," every single participant (n = 44, 100%) indicated they would conditionally support the tourism sector, provided it is managed with fairness and equity.

Overview of thematic findings

This section provides a brief, evidence-based summary of the three primary sub-themes identified during data analysis: (1) how residents perceive the impacts of tourism, (2) the role of tourism in supporting local livelihoods, and (3) the extent of community involvement in tourism governance.

Navigating exclusion and optimism: Community perceptions of tourism impacts

Participants expressed a nuanced mixture of hope and frustration regarding the effects of tourism on their community. Although some acknowledged the sector's potential to generate economic opportunities, the dominant narratives highlighted profound feelings of being sidelined and treated unfairly. For instance, one resident summarised this dynamic by stating, "*Tourists bring money for the owner, not the community*" (Group 2), reflecting a common belief that financial gains are extracted externally with little trickling down to locals. This sentiment was reinforced by another participant who noted, "*we see the cars and the visitors, but nothing changes here for us*" (Group 3). In addition to economic marginalization, participants voiced anxieties about the deterioration of cultural heritage and social cohesion. Several individuals pointed out that tourism management actively restricts indigenous customs. As one participant explained, "*We are told not to dance when tourists are around…as it makes them uncomfortable*" (Group 1). Similarly, another shared, "*Our rituals and initiation ceremonies are stopped because the owners say it disturbs tourists*" (Group 3). These accounts demonstrate how the spatial and social management of tourism can unintentionally stifle active cultural practices, thereby deepening feelings of marginalization.

Environmental decline was another prominent issue. Respondents directly connected the rise in tourist numbers to challenges like water shortages and inadequate waste disposal. Highlighting this disparity, one participant remarked, "*The caves get clean water, but our taps are dry*," (Group 2), while another pointed out that "*Rubbish from the visitors ends up in our river*" (Group 4). Nevertheless, the community did not advocate for the complete cessation of tourism. Instead, they demanded a more equitable and sustainable framework, as captured by the statement: "*We want tourism to help everyone, not just the cave owners*" (Group 1). This conditional optimism highlights a practical desire for tourism to be restructured into a tool for community empowerment rather than a source of alienation.

Tourism and community livelihoods

The analysis revealed that tourism's contribution to local livelihoods is highly restricted, uneven, and bound by structural limitations. The majority of participants remain heavily dependent on subsistence farming; as one resident stated, "*Cabbages, spinach, peppers, lettuce, and mielies; that's how we survive*" (Group 4), alongside small-scale livestock rearing to fulfil basic needs. These traditional survival strategies operate largely in isolation from the formal tourism sector. Although sporadic employment exists, participants characterised these roles as unstable, temporary, and low-paying: "*We only get called when tourists come in numbers, and the pay is small*" (Group 2). Furthermore, residents voiced frustration over the failure of tourism development to catalyze meaningful secondary industries or infrastructural upgrades. One respondent lamented, "*We have tourists every week, but still no proper roads or clinics*," (Group 3), while another noted, "*They say tourism brings development, but our children still walk far to school*" (Group 1). These observations suggest that the current tourism model operates as an enclave economy, generating visible external activity but failing to circulate benefits within the local community. Cultural livelihoods have similarly suffered. Participants highlighted missed opportunities for cultural entrepreneurship and expression: "*We used to perform dances for visitors, but now we are told not to*" (Group 2). Another resident observed, "*Our stories and traditions could attract tourists, but no one asks us to share them*" (Group 4). The suppression of these cultural practices not only restricts income-generating possibilities but also jeopardizes the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Nevertheless, despite these economic barriers, residents displayed adaptive resilience by proposing alternative livelihood strategies, such as the idea to "*Start small markets for local food and crafts near the caves*" (Group 1). This ingenuity points to untapped potential for integrating local productive systems with tourism through inclusive planning.

Community participation in tourism governance

The final sub-theme highlighted deep-seated dissatisfaction regarding community involvement in tourism planning and governance. Across all focus groups, residents characterised their inclusion as merely "tokenistic" and symbolic. One participant pointed out, "*They only call us when there's funding or when they need labour*" (Group 2), while another emphasised, "*We are not informed when decisions are made about the caves*" (Group 1). These remarks highlight a persistent procedural disconnect between inclusive policy rhetoric and actual practice. Environmental management initiatives provided a clear example of this selective engagement. Residents noted that "*a Canadian company brought people to remove Lantana, but only for a few weeks*" (Group 1), adding that "*They hire us only when projects have money*" (Group 2). Furthermore, traditional ecological knowledge was sidelined in these conservation efforts, as one traditional healer explained, "*They ignore that some alien plants we use for medicine*" (Group 3). This exclusion demonstrates how conservation projects frequently prioritise external technical expertise over indigenous knowledge systems, thereby missing opportunities for co-produced conservation that bridges scientific and local wisdom. Cultural governance further exposed stark power asymmetries. Participants reported that "*Owners complain about lobola or initiation noise*" (Group 2) and "*White people stop our rituals*" (Group 3), illustrating a clear prioritization of tourist comfort over indigenous rights. These barriers to participation are not merely symbolic but also physical, as evidenced by the observation that "*Sometimes the gates are locked when we want to meet the managers*" (Group 3). This demonstrates how power imbalances are enforced both literally and metaphorically. Despite these systemic challenges, the community exhibited remarkable resilience and collective agency. Several participants stressed the necessity of self-reliance, noting, "*Our leaders don't help, so we plan ourselves*" (Group 3). Others proposed proactive solutions, such as, "*We should have a youth committee to work with the cave management*" (Group 4), and "*We need to stand together to get our concerns addressed*" (Group 2). Although frustration regarding governance exclusion was pervasive, a sense of hope remained: "*Change is possible if they listen to us*" (Group 1). This indicates an enduring commitment to participatory reform and co-management, demonstrating a community that actively seeks genuine partnership rather than mere patronage in tourism governance.

Discussion

The paradox of enclave tourism and community marginalization

The results of this research corroborate a substantial body of literature that critiques the systemic marginalization of rural populations within tourism-driven development frameworks (Scheyvens, 2011; Tosun, 2006). The evident gap between tourism growth and local economic gains at the Sudwala Caves illustrates what Mowforth & Munt (2015) term the "*paradox of development through tourism*," a scenario where external wealth generation occurs alongside persistent local deprivation. This pattern of economic exclusion is consistent with observations in other African heritage tourism sites, such as Kakum National Park in Ghana (Akyeampong, 2011) and the Maasai Mara in Kenya (Manyara & Jones, 2007), where local populations shoulder the socio-environmental burdens while reaping minimal financial rewards. Furthermore, the curtailment of cultural practices aligns with theoretical critiques regarding "*staged authenticity*" (Chhabra et al., 2003) and "*cultural dissonance*" (Cole, 2006), demonstrating that commodified heritage frequently prioritises visitor satisfaction over indigenous self-determination. The strong support for tourism despite limited participation and uneven benefits represents an important dimension of what this study conceptualises as "paradoxical optimism." This finding is consistent with recent evidence that residents' support for sustainable tourism is shaped not only by material outcomes but also by their sense of community and attitudes toward tourism development (Payini et al., 2026). In the Mankele context, however, this support should not be interpreted as evidence that existing governance arrangements are satisfactory. Rather, it may reflect residents' continued expectation that tourism can contribute to community development if decision-making, benefit-sharing and ownership arrangements become more equitable. The weak integration of tourism into local livelihoods in Mankele reflects similar dynamics documented in rural South Africa (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012) and Botswana (Mbaiwa, 2017), where traditional agriculture and micro-enterprises are systematically isolated from tourism supply chains. This structural divide fosters economic dependency and entrenches enclave tourism, directly opposing the foundational sustainable tourism tenets of resilience and inclusivity (UNWTO, 2017). The findings also resonate with recent South African evidence showing that tourism may generate substantial entrepreneurial opportunities while institutional, infrastructural and regulatory barriers constrain local actors' ability to capture those opportunities (Nkogho-Beyeme et al., 2026). In Mankele, however, these constraints are compounded by the historical and legal dimensions of land restitution and the persistence of private concession arrangements.

From a governance perspective, the residents' experiences closely mirror the lower rungs of Arnstein's (1969) "*ladder of participation*," hovering between tokenism and outright exclusion. Comparable criticisms have been raised throughout sub-Saharan Africa, where policies promoting community participation often prove to be rhetorical rather than genuinely redistributive (Tosun, 2006; Saarinen, 2019). This pattern is also consistent with recent tourism governance scholarship emphasising that meaningful participation requires human-centred institutional processes rather than participation that is limited to consultation (Suarbawa et al., 2026). In Mankele, therefore, the central problem is not simply the absence of participation, but the limited capacity of existing governance arrangements to translate participation into decision-making authority and material influence. These findings position the Sudwala Caves case within the wider discourse on the decolonisation of tourism governance, emphasising the need for bottom-up, rights-based approaches that centre local epistemologies, cultural authority, and community voices (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). The cultural dimension is particularly important because tourism can also generate positive socio-cultural outcomes when communities are meaningfully engaged in the development and representation of their cultural resources. Recent South African evidence from the Cape Town Carnival, for example, highlights the potential of tourism-related cultural activities to contribute to social inclusion, belonging, cultural diversity, and community engagement (Bama et al., 2026). However, such outcomes depend on how communities are represented and involved, reinforcing the importance of participation and cultural control in evaluating the sustainability of heritage tourism.

Towards a triadic framework for equitable heritage tourism

Bringing together the findings across all sub-themes uncovers a consistent narrative of structural exclusion and stifled potential. Tourism at the Sudwala Caves represents a duality of aspiration and alienation: while residents view it as a possible engine for development, they experience its advantages as remote and inequitably shared. The quantitative data reinforces this contradiction; merely 18% of respondents noted any direct financial gain, yet all 44 participants maintained that tourism could enhance their livelihoods if governed fairly. This "paradoxical optimism" captures the community's dual reality as both hopeful stakeholders and sidelined spectators within a tourism economy controlled by external actors (Scheyvens, 2011). The demographic characteristics of the Mankele community provide further context for these

outcomes. Predominantly composed of working-age adults with limited formal education, the community's dependence on informal, low-skilled labour restricts their access to the formal tourism sector (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). This socio-economic marginalization intensifies the feelings of exclusion identified in the qualitative themes. The lack of formal jobs, coupled with the prevalence of transient or exploitative work, highlights the extractive nature of current tourism practices, which centralize profits while offloading social and environmental burdens onto the community (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Culturally, the limitations placed on traditional storytelling, rituals, and performances point to a profound crisis of recognition. The community's inability to monetise or freely express their heritage within the tourism sphere reflects a lingering coloniality of representation, wherein local culture is policed rather than honoured (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Concurrently, environmental degradation, evident in water shortages and unmanaged waste, deepens existing livelihood vulnerabilities, especially for households reliant on farming and riverine resources. Synthesising these dynamics indicates that achieving equitable and sustainable tourism at the Sudwala Caves requires a three-pronged transformative framework, aligning with broader calls for restorative justice in tourism- (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Rastegar, 2025):

1. *Redistributive Mechanisms:* Implementing formalized revenue-sharing and inclusive procurement policies to guarantee that community members directly benefit from tourism revenues.
2. *Cultural Reclamation:* Restoring traditional practices to the core of the visitor experience through collaboratively designed cultural programming and interpretive storytelling.
3. *Participatory Governance:* Creating co-decision-making structures that elevate residents to the status of rights-holders rather than treating them as passive recipients of aid.

Collectively, these proposed interventions provide an empirical basis for reimagining tourism justice at heritage sites undergoing restitution. They also shift the emphasis from participation as consultation towards participation as institutionalised community influence and shared decision-making. The subsequent section applies these findings to Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, illustrating how the current reality in Mankele fluctuates between tokenism and non-participation, and identifying the structural reforms required to achieve genuine partnership and community self-determination. The proposed shift towards participatory co-management is consistent with recent tourism governance scholarship emphasising human-centred management processes as an important condition for effective governance in community-based destinations (Suarbawa et al., 2026). For the Mankele–Sudwala context, however, co-management must extend beyond consultation to provide institutionalised mechanisms through which residents can exercise meaningful influence over access, revenue distribution, cultural representation, and future tourism development. Such arrangements would move participation beyond symbolic inclusion towards a more substantive redistribution of decision-making power.

Situating Mankele on Arnstein's ladder: Between tokenism and non-participation

Building upon the preceding thematic synthesis, this section applies Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation as an analytical framework to evaluate the depth and quality of community involvement in the governance of Sudwala Cave tourism. The analysis demonstrates that the Mankele community's involvement hovers between tokenism and non-participation, highlighting the endurance of colonial power dynamics within supposedly progressive development models. Several findings align with the lowest rungs of Arnstein's ladder, manipulation and therapy, where community involvement is utilised to validate predetermined agendas rather than foster genuine empowerment. Residents noted being summoned solely "*when funding is available*" or when "*manual labour is required*," pointing to instrumentalised rather than meaningful engagement. Furthermore, physical obstacles, such as "*locked gates*" that block access to site management, symbolize a facade of inclusion that actually masks deep exclusion. These dynamics exemplify what Bianchi (2010) describes as performative participation, wherein community presence is merely staged to meet procedural checkboxes while authority remains centralized externally. At the slightly higher tier of tokenism, engagement was characterised by intermittent information dissemination and highly selective consultation. A mere 9% of participants indicated they had been consulted on tourism-related decisions, and these encounters functioned as unilateral briefings rather than collaborative dialogues. This aligns with the "informing" stage (Rung 3), which provides awareness but no actual influence. Additionally, access to these rare consultations was skewed by educational background, with tertiary-educated individuals being significantly more likely to be included. This reveals internal hierarchies that perpetuate exclusion even within nominally participatory structures, echoing Tosun's (2006) concept of induced participation, where communities are visibly present but fundamentally powerless to alter outcomes. The analysis found no evidence of genuine partnership (Rung 6), delegated power (Rung 7), or citizen control (Rung 8). Decision-making authority is firmly concentrated in the hands of private operators, while governmental oversight is restricted to basic regulatory compliance rather than fostering community empowerment. This governance

void perfectly illustrates the "participation paradox" described by Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011), wherein policy rhetoric champions community inclusion, but institutional realities sustain dependency and disenfranchisement. When viewed across different domains of governance, Mankele's involvement is best characterised as variable-intensity tokenism. It shifts from manipulation in strategic planning, to mere informing regarding employment, to outright non-participation in environmental management. This fragmented dynamic reinforces the "coloniality of power" in heritage tourism (Mkono, 2019), wherein communities are assimilated into tourism frameworks strictly on terms dictated by external actors. However, the residents' enduring conviction that "tourism could benefit the community if properly managed" aligns with Higgins-Desbiolles' (2018) concept of the pursuit of tourism justice: a fundamental demand for equitable participation, cultural recognition, and systemic redress.

Towards transformative governance: Policy pathways for equitable tourism

Elevating Mankele's status on Arnstein's ladder necessitates transformative, rather than merely incremental, structural reforms. Essential policy interventions must include:

1. Co-management frameworks that grant community representatives binding voting power on tourism planning committees;
2. Legally mandated benefit-sharing agreements that direct a fixed percentage of revenues into community-controlled development funds;
3. Cultural impact assessments to ensure tourism regulations actively protect, rather than restrict, traditional practices; and
4. Knowledge integration protocols that validate indigenous ecological knowledge as equal to conventional scientific expertise.

Overall, this research enriches contemporary debates on decolonial and justice-oriented tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Mkono, 2019; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018) by revealing how post-apartheid governance structures can perpetuate colonial dispossession. This occurs when local populations are framed as mere stakeholders rather than inherent rights-holders. Lacking fundamental structural reforms, participatory initiatives devolve into rhetorical exercises that maintain the status quo under a facade of inclusion. Aligning with Scheyvens & Biddulph (2018), achieving true sustainability requires a holistic redistribution of wealth, epistemic authority, and decision-making power. This shift is vital for empowering communities like Mankele to actively shape their tourism landscapes, rather than serving as passive subjects to outside development paradigms.

Conclusion

This study concludes that while Sudwala Cave tourism offers significant developmental potential, its benefits remain structurally constrained and unevenly shared. Residents recognise this potential but express deep frustration over their exclusion from decision-making, poor livelihood integration, and inequitable financial flows, encapsulated by the sentiment that "tourists bring money for the owner, not the community." Coupled with cultural restrictions and tokenistic engagement, these factors entrench marginalization and erode trust in governance. Theoretically, this research advances participatory governance scholarship in three key ways. First, "*paradoxical optimism*" explains how communities maintain conditional support for tourism despite systemic exclusion, challenging simple acceptance-resistance binaries. Second, "*variable-intensity tokenism*" extends Arnstein's ladder by showing how fluctuating participation levels across different domains cause cumulative marginalization missed by single-dimension assessments. Third, the "*triadic framework*" (redistributive mechanisms, cultural reclamation, and participatory governance) offers a holistic model for addressing heritage site exclusion, providing analytical tools relevant to global postcolonial tourism contexts. Future research should pursue three directions. First, longitudinal studies are needed to track whether governance reforms yield measurable empowerment gains. Second, comparative research across multiple restitution-linked heritage sites in South Africa and abroad would test the generalizability of these findings. Third, incorporating the perspectives of tourism operators and government officials would enable fuller triangulation, revealing co-management barriers and opportunities from all stakeholder angles to help shift tourism from extractive to restorative models. Overall, this study underscores that sustainability without justice is an illusion. Only when communities exercise substantive control over the cultural and natural resources defining their heritage can tourism truly function as a vehicle for equity, restitution, and self-determined development in postcolonial contexts.

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