



## Journal of Management, and Development Research (JMDR)

ISSN: 3079-2568 (Online)

Volume 2 Issue 1, (2025)

 <https://doi.org/10.69739/jmdr.v2i1.232>

 <https://journals.stecab.com/jmdr>



Published by  
Stecab Publishing

### Research Article

## Empowering Communities and Advancing Sustainable Eco-Tourism: The Intermediary Function of Community Support for Eco-Tourism

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### About Article

#### Article History

Submission: January 02, 2025

Acceptance : February 09, 2025

Publication : February 16, 2025

#### Keywords

*Community-Based Tourism, Community Empowerment, Community Support, Eco-Tourism, Sustainable Development, Tanzania*

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the literature on community empowerment and sustainable eco-tourism development (SETD), few studies have examined the mechanisms that connect these factors. This study explores the relationship between community empowerment and SETD while assessing the mediating role of community support for tourism. Social exchange theory provides the framework for understanding key factors in SETD. An empirical survey was conducted with 392 northern Tanzania residents from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA). The analysis revealed a significant correlation between community empowerment and sustainable eco-tourism activities, with community support partially mediating the relationship. Findings suggest that enhanced community empowerment fosters successful eco-tourism development, primarily through local support for eco-tourism initiatives. This study contributes to the theory by highlighting the crucial role of community support in linking empowerment to sustainable tourism practices in local contexts.

### Citation Style:

Chale, H. A., Ding, X. H., Ahmed, S. M., & Liu, R. (2025). Empowering Communities and Advancing Sustainable Eco-Tourism: The Intermediary Function of Community Support for Eco-Tourism. *Journal of Management, and Development Research*, 2(1), 22-33. <https://doi.org/10.69739/jmdr.v2i1.232>



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, the World Tourism Organization has launched numerous campaigns and sustainable eco-tourism initiatives to mitigate poverty and augment economic advantages in disadvantaged communities (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019; Gius, 2017; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Zhao & Timothy, 2015). Community-based tourism has been widely acknowledged for its potential to elevate the economic status of these communities (Dodds *et al.*, 2018). This approach allows local populations to maintain their traditional cultures, increasing tourist interest in local customs and practices. Furthermore, unique and rare species have heightened residents' environmental awareness, fostering a commitment to preserving natural resources to improve the eco-tourism experience (Lee & Jan, 2019). Thus, community-based tourism emerges as a viable strategy for promoting sustainable eco-tourism development (SETD) by ensuring equitable benefit-sharing among community members and preserving natural resources (Ellis & Sheridan, 2015; Mangion *et al.*, 2005). In less developed nations, community-based tourism acts as a substitute for mass tourism, which Wang *et al.* (2022) contend generates financial resources and helps mitigate the negative effects of mass tourism, such as environmental damage. Ultimately, effective community-based tourism can improve the superiority of life for residents by reducing deficiency and safeguarding both natural and cultural resources within the community (Kapoor *et al.*, 2021; Sebele, 2010).

In many underdeveloped regions, eco-tourism projects are primarily driven by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or government agencies. However, the risk of failure for eco-tourism projects is significantly higher when the local community does not actively participate in or support the post-implementation phase (Manyara & Jones, 2007). Consequently, resident involvement in sustainable eco-tourism development (SETD) is critical. Furthermore, the empowerment of residents must be an integral part of this process (Kumar, 2023; Li *et al.*, 2023; Scheyvens, 2002; Telfer & Sharpley, 2002).

Over the past three decades, there has been a growing consensus in the eco-tourism literature on the importance of resident participation in eco-tourism initiatives to ensure long-term sustainability (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019; Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Kline *et al.*, 2019). Local communities are central in planning and implementing sustainable and socially responsible eco-tourism strategies (Hall *et al.*, 2010). While prior research has underscored the importance of local inhabitants' collaboration, support, goodwill, and active involvement for the success of eco-tourism initiatives, experts persist in examining and classifying the varied citizen attitudes documented in many contexts. Consequently, it is imperative to elucidate the causal relationship between community empowerment and active resident participation, as this connection directly influences the efficacy of eco-tourism development activities.

Recent studies in community-based tourism have highlighted the significance of community power and empowerment as pivotal factors. Although empowerment has been recognized as crucial for the success of eco-tourism, since Tanzania is a potential and emerging country in eco-tourism, several conceptual and qualitative studies have explored the subject of

residents' empowerment but have not genuinely empowered community members for SETD. Various communities in the country still face complex economic and environmental social problems (Mgonja, 2015), while empirical research offering measurable frameworks remains scarce (Boley *et al.*, 2015; Kimaro, 2022). In the context of African countries, particularly Tanzania, specifically in NCA, a more creative approach to citizen participation in ecotourism projects should be adopted, and robust models developed to ensure sustainable development; for instance, Li *et al.* (2023) explored the implementation of community-oriented eco-tourism principles in Asian countries such as China (Lwoga, 2018; Mgonja, 2015; Muganda *et al.*, 2013), noting that while studies often highlight the economic benefits of ecotourism, other critical aspects, such as environmental sustainability and cultural preservation, tend to be overlooked.

While the relationship between community empowerment and sustainable eco-tourism development has been widely discussed, few studies have examined the intricate mechanisms connecting these concepts. This study highlights the necessity for further investigation into resident empowerment and its role in supporting the effective execution of sustainable eco-tourism plans. However, focusing specifically on the mediating influence of community support for eco-tourism efforts, the study examines the relationship between community empowerment and sustainable eco-tourism development.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Community-based tourism and SETD

While eco-tourism has the potential to reduce poverty by generating economic benefits for local communities, its development has often resulted in the erosion of traditional cultures and shifts in residents' livelihoods. In the initial phases of eco-tourism development, local communities frequently face negative social, cultural, and environmental impacts rather than reaping immediate economic rewards (Khalid *et al.*, 2019; Lee & Jan, 2019). As a response to these challenges, scholars have advocated for community-based tourism as a strategy to enhance the quality of life for residents, strengthen the value of traditional cultures, and promote the conservation of natural resources through effective tourism planning and management (Gurung & Seeland, 2008; Melita & Mendlinger, 2013; Sebastian & Rajagopalan, 2009). This approach ensures that eco-tourism contributes to community empowerment and sustainable development, a more balanced and mutually beneficial relationship between eco-tourism and local communities.

SETD has been extensively studied in the domains of eco-tourism planning and development. In contrast to the initial phases of eco-tourism development, SETD fosters economic advancement in communities, satisfies tourists' requirements, improves inhabitants' living satisfaction, and safeguards the physical environment for future generations (Din, 2018; Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017). That is to say, Community-based tourism is regarded as an essential method for achieving successful SETD (Lee, 2013; Sebele, 2010).

In developing and managing community-based tourism, people must use the social exchange theory, which posits that citizens assess their support for tourism development based



on their perceptions of its positive or negative benefits (Lee, 2013). Empowerment shapes locals' perceptions of tourism's influence and attitudes towards it (Boley & McGehee, 2014). Consequently, in the context of SETD inside communities, it is essential to equilibrate the dynamics of the eco-tourist–resident interaction by augmenting locals' empowerment.

## 2.2. Community empowerment

Empowerment is acting as an individual or a collective (Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2015). Empowerment is a useful tool to improve community capacity and assets, but community empowerment requires community members' engagement and collective action rather than individual action (Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2015). In summary, empowerment could be seen as a precursor or enabler of capability. Once a community is empowered, it may use its capabilities to implement initiatives or manage activities effectively, but capability does not necessarily imply empowerment—it could be about the practical resources and know-how needed to take action. Empowered with knowledge and practical skills, the community can not only engage in tourism planning but also actively manage eco-tourism in a way that is both sustainable and beneficial to their local environment and economy (Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Irandu & Shah, 2014).

Community empowerment is essential for implementing SETD (Boley & McGehee, 2014). Historically, scholars (Byrd, 2007; Zhao & Jiao, 2019) have emphasized the critical role of community empowerment in fostering sustainable eco-tourism development. While many studies have concentrated on broader concepts such as community participation and local involvement in eco-tourism, few have delved into how empowerment specifically influences eco-tourism outcomes (Bello *et al.*, 2018; Boley *et al.*, 2015). Empowerment, particularly of marginalized groups, is seen as an essential driver for SETD (Shakeela & Weaver, 2018; Strzelecka *et al.*, 2017). It is not merely about granting power but involves a collective process where local communities, through joint action, gain the capacity to shape their environment and eco-tourism experiences (Sebastian & Rajagopalan, 2009). According to Byrd (2007), community empowerment in eco-tourism requires addressing the genuine needs and aspirations of the community, ensuring equitable access to resources, and fostering local leadership through strengthened organizational capacities. On the other hand, Bello *et al.* (2018) highlighted that the failure to incorporate community empowerment into tourism planning leads to top-down approaches, where external stakeholders dominate decision-making processes, ultimately creating tensions between local populations and tourism authorities. This hierarchical structure undermines community engagement, diminishing the potential for sustainable eco-tourism development (Shakeela & Weaver, 2018; Strzelecka *et al.*, 2017). Hence, fostering community support for eco-tourism initiatives, built on empowerment, is crucial to overcoming such challenges and achieving lasting, environmentally sustainable outcomes (Sood *et al.*, 2017; Sutawa, 2012).

Numerous researchers have highlighted the significance of empowering residents in the SETD context (Budeanu *et al.*, 2016; Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2017; Sofield, 2003). Additionally,

the influence of community empowerment on SETD can be understood through the lens of social exchange theory. A fundamental aspect of social exchange theory is the notion of social power, which influences the capacity of residents to leverage the benefits arising from ecotourism. Increased social power within a community fosters improved decision-making processes and enhances opportunities for developing local capabilities. In essence, empowered communities are more adept at reaping the potential advantages associated with sustainable tourism development. Consequently, we propose that:

H1: Community empowerment has a positive impact on SETD

## 2.3. Community support for ecotourism

Prior studies have demonstrated that the efficacy of sustainable eco-tourism development (SETD) efforts is significantly dependent on local inhabitants' collaboration, endorsement, goodwill, and active involvement. Several scholars in the field of tourism have studied the perceptions of citizens about eco-tourism in a variety of regions, including Asia, Australia, North America, Africa, and Europe (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Eusébio *et al.*, 2018; McCaughey *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, Gursoy and Jurowski studied Virginia residents, demonstrating that worry levels, resource utilization, and tourism's perceived benefits and costs significantly influence locals' support for tourist efforts (Gursoy *et al.*, 2002).

In community-based tourism research, power dynamics and trust are essential factors affecting local perceptions of ecotourism. An imbalanced power dynamic may lead to adverse impressions of eco-tourism among locals in host communities. The extent of control citizens has over tourist activities and the existing power dynamics are crucial in influencing their perceptions of tourism's effects. Moreover, when citizens engage in the planning and managing of tourism projects, they generally display a more positive disposition towards tourism, demonstrating greater support for eco-tourism initiatives. Therefore, we propose that:

H2: Community empowerment has a positive impact on community support for ecotourism.

A study conducted in Botswana by Sebele (2010) highlights the critical importance of local community involvement in eco-tourism planning and management to promote community empowerment and natural resource conservation. Involving the community in eco-tourism development helps them understand the costs and benefits. When communities can participate in decisions that affect their lives, they are more likely to build on their strengths and take pride in their cultural heritage and customs. Developing sustainable eco-tourism is difficult without local buy-in, making their support an essential element of SETD. Scholars have underscored the importance of local support for SETD, emphasizing that their participation and positive perceptions of tourism are vital for sustainable eco-tourism. The Global Standards for Sustainable Development (GSTC-D, 2013) recognizes that sustainability has a profound impact on the lives of local people. Local communities perceive eco-tourism growth as more appropriate when they are actively involved in the planning process. Therefore, we propose that:

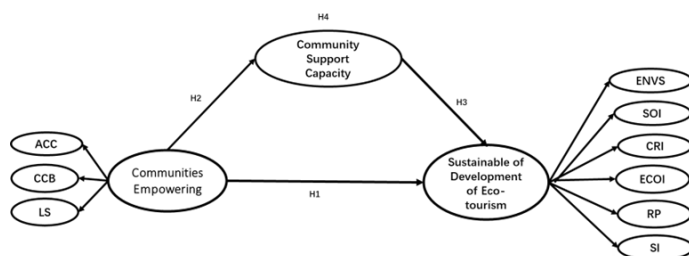
H3: Supporting Tourism in the Community positively impacts SETD



Empowered communities can benefit more from tourism development opportunities and use them effectively for development (Bittar Rodrigues & Prideaux, 2018; Chen *et al.*, 2017). The realization of sustainable eco-tourism hinges on the active support of community members for eco-tourism initiatives (Cheng *et al.*, 2019; Moghavvemi *et al.*, 2017). For governments and market entities to successfully implement strategies for SETD, the community's involvement and support is vital (Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2017; Selin, 2017). The existing literature has primarily utilized qualitative approaches to highlight the importance of community empowerment within the framework of SETD. Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) have emphasized the investigation of community support as a possible mediating variable in sustainable tourism. They underscored the importance of investigating the mechanisms by which community empowerment affects STDs, especially through mediating effects. Previous research has demonstrated that community support mediates the connection between the perceived impact of eco-tourism and people's endorsement of tourist planning Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) and Nunkoo and So (2016) posited that community support for ecotourism is a dependent variable affected by trust in government, advocating for empirical testing to clarify this relationship. Furthermore, Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) recognizes power dynamics as a pivotal factor influencing community support capacity for tourism endeavors. Therefore, we propose that:

H4: Community support for tourism mediates the effect of community empowerment on SETDs

The conceptual model of the study is shown in Figure 1.



Note: ACC—accountability; CCB—Community capacity building; LS—leader support; ENVS—environmental sustainability; SOI—social impact; CRI—community resource identification; ECOI—economic impact; RP—resource preservation; SI—stakeholder inclusion.

Figure 1. Research Framework.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Measures

The methodology for assessing community support capacity encompasses three dimensions: accountability (ACC), community capacity building (CCB), and leadership support (LS) derived from Satarat (2010), assessed on a 5-point Likert scale. Community capacity involves the active participation of residents in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability for community projects (Scott &

Marzano, 2015). ACC features equal voices and opportunities for all community members in the local development process (Park *et al.*, 2015). According to Ellis and Sheridan (2015) LS is characterized by leadership that emerges through consensus and addresses the interests of many community groups.

The community support for eco-tourism scales, comprising six components, was developed based on research by (Nunkoo & So, 2016). Similarly, the components associated with the SETD construct were derived from a different study. This framework comprises six dimensions: Social Impact (SOI; two items), Community Resource Identification (CRI; three items), Environmental Sustainability (ENVS; six items), Economic Impact (ECOI; six items), Resource Preservation (RP; eight items), and Stakeholder Inclusion (SI; six items), amounting to a total of 31 items evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale.

Social Impact (SOI) emphasizes the need for responsible authorities to consider the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as residents, the community, industry representatives, tourists and special interest groups, in developing tourism policies and strategies (Go & Moutinho, 2000). Community resource identification (CRI) pertains to community members' awareness and understanding regarding resources that can positively influence tourism development in their area (Ven, 2015). Environmental Sustainability (ENVS) involves providing tourism-related education and training initiatives designed to improve the community's understanding of the effects of tourism and promote consensus on SETD (Cárdenas *et al.*, 2015). Sustainable tourism economic planning necessitates the amalgamation of tourism with other economic sectors to optimize advantages while mitigating the long-term social, cultural, and environmental detriments linked to tourism (Simpson, 2008). Resource preservation (RP) pertains to efforts to sustain the existing condition of natural and cultural resources (Tosun, 2000). Stakeholder Inclusion (SI) involves recognizing the diverse stakeholders within the community and improving their awareness and education about tourism, which is critical to facilitating substantive stakeholder engagement (Cárdenas *et al.*, 2015).

#### 3.2. The study area

Figure 2 shows a map of northern Tanzania, showing the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA), which is rich in eco-tourist sites. It highlights the following major eco-tourism destinations: NCA is rich in wildlife, including the "Big Five" (lion, leopard, elephant, rhino, buffalo); Serengeti National Park (Known for the Great Wildebeest Migration and vast savannah landscapes) offers one of the most iconic safari experiences in Africa; Mount Kilimanjaro (Africa's tallest mountain and a major attraction for climbers and trekkers); Lake Manyara National Park (Renowned for its tree-climbing lions and diverse bird species, including flamingos) offering stunning views of the Great Rift Valley escarpment; Tarangire National Park (Known for its large herds of elephants and iconic baobab trees) offering excellent wildlife viewing, especially during the dry season); Lake Eyasi (A cultural tourism hotspot, home to the Hadzabe and Datoga tribes); Lake Natron; Arusha National Park.







**Figure 2.** Map of Tanzania, which represents the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA)

### 3.3. Data gathering

To empirically evaluate the proposed research framework on the linkages between community empowerment, community support for ecotourism, and SETD, a trained research team collected data from local community members, leaders, and ecotourism operators. The research team conducted two visits to local community members to complete the study and enlisted locals' participation with the assistance of local leaders and eco-tourism businesses. Furthermore, in-person data collection

was performed in notable eco-tourism regions of Tanzania, particularly within the NCA.

The criteria for participant selection included: (a) residents whose primary source of income is linked to eco-tourism activities; (b) local leaders such as village chairpersons or ward council representatives; and (c) eco-tourism operators such as guides, tour companies, and accommodation providers. In total, 450 residents, leaders, and eco-tourism operators were invited to participate in the survey; however, 58 responses

**Table 1.** Profile of respondents

Features	Groups	Occurrence (O)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	230	58.67
	Female	162	42.33
Age	19–30	96	24.49
	31–39	102	27.02
	40–49	78	19.90
	50–59	59	15.05
	Older than 60	57	14.54
Resident Type	Community members	210	53.57
	Local leaders	92	23.47
	Tour operators	90	22.96
Level of Education	Secondary	50	12.76
	Bachelor	110	28.06
	Diploma	94	23.98
	Tourism professional certificate	75	19.13
	Masters–Doctoral	63	16.07



were excluded due to incomplete information or missing data. Consequently, 392 responses were deemed usable for further data analysis. The demographic and occupational profiles of the respondents are summarized in Table 1.

### 3.4. Data analysis process

To evaluate the proposed model, partial least squares (PLS) analysis was conducted using SmartPLS version 4.0 software (SmartPLS GmbH, Hamburg, Germany). Following the two-stage analytical framework proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the study initially evaluated the measurement model and then assessed the structural model. The structural model analysis utilized a bootstrapping technique with a resampling

size of 5,000 (Hair Jr *et al.*, 2023).

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Measurement model

The measurement model test was an assessment of both convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity for the reflective measures was determined by examining factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability, following the guidelines of (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). As shown in Table 2, all factor loadings exceeded the threshold of 0.5. Composite reliabilities were greater than 0.7, and AVE values were greater than 0.5, confirming adequate convergent validity.

**Table 2.** Measures of convergent validity - reflection

Construct	Mean	Mean Std.	Cronbach	CR	AVR
<b>Community empowerment</b>					
Accountability (ACC)	3.814	0.678	0.824	0.873	0.532
Capacity Building (CB)	3.745	0.692	0.843	0.881	0.521
Leader Support (LS)	2.849	0.562	0.854	0.892	0.529
Community Support	3.301	0.569	0.772	0.847	0.518
<b>Sustainable eco-tourism development</b>					
Social impact (SOI)	4.102	0.754	0.785	0.902	0.822
Community Resources Identification (CRI)	4.245	0.729	0.798	0.879	0.712
Environmental Sustainability (ENVS)	3.992	0.632	0.807	0.861	0.507
Economic Impact (ECOI)	4.032	0.652	0.829	0.872	0.531
Resource Preservation (RP)	4.041	0.671	0.873	0.901	0.529
Stakeholder Inclusion (SI)	3.961	0.674	0.851	0.891	0.571

Note: Std. Dev.—standard deviation.

Six dimensions follow the standards as a type II (reflective-formative) measurement paradigm (Ziggers & Henseler, 2016). We evaluated the weights, t-values, and variance inflation factor (VIF) to assess the formative measures. Table 3 indicates

that all weights were significant, with VIF values continuously below 5 (Hair Jr *et al.*, 2023), demonstrating compliance with accepted thresholds.

**Table 3.** Formative measures convergent validity

Construct	Weights	t-Values	VIF
Community Empowerment ACC → Community Empowerment	0.367	14.368 **	1.425
CB → Community Empowerment	0.436	20.024 **	1.632
LS → Community Empowerment	0.395	17.436 **	1.559
Sustainable Eco-Tourism Development SOI → Sustainable Eco-Tourism Development	0.092	16.485 **	1.942
CRI → Sustainable Eco-Tourism Development	0.119	18.798 **	1.901
ENVS → Sustainable Eco-Tourism Development	0.208	27.575 **	3.892
ECOI → Sustainable Eco-Tourism Development	0.213	28.596 **	3.016
RP → Sustainable Eco-Tourism Development	0.291	26.637 **	3.453
SI → Sustainable Eco-Tourism Development	0.229	23.639 **	3.707

Note: ACC—accountability; CCB—Community capacity building; LS—leader support; ENVS—environmental sustainability; SOI—social impact; CRI—community resource identification; ECOI—economic impact; RP—resource preservation; SI—stakeholder inclusion; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .



The validity of the discriminant of the constructs (the extent to which items distinguish between different constructs or assess unique concepts) was evaluated by adhering to the criterion established by Fornell and Larcker (1981), which involves comparing the correlations between constructs with the square root of the AVE for each construct (refer to Table 4). All diagonal values exceeded the corresponding values in their respective rows and columns, demonstrating that the adequately distinct constructs were confirmed to be discriminant. Recent critiques have emerged regarding the (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) criterion, suggesting that it may not consistently identify the absence of discriminant validity in typical research contexts (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, an alternative method that uses the multitrait-multimethod matrix for discriminant validity assessment, specifically through the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, has been proposed. We adopted the HTMT criterion with a cut-off value 0.85 (Kline, 2023). All calculated HTMT ratios were significantly below the 0.85 threshold (community empowerment–community support (CE–CS): 0.325, CE–STD: 0.542, and CS–STD: 0.456), confirming that discriminant validity was established.

**Table 4.** Discriminant validity.

Construct	1	2	3
1. Community Empowerment	Formative		
2. Community Support	0.325	0.718	
3. Sustainable Eco-Tourism Development	0.542	0.455	Formative

**Table 5.** Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	STD. Estimate	STD. Error	t	Decision	95% BootCL	
					LL	UL
H1: CE direct effect SETD	0.482	0.056	7.654	Endorsed	0.368	0.592
H2) CE directly affects CS	0.326	0.044	5.249	Endorsed	0.189	0.424
H3: CS direct effect SETD	0.289	0.062	5.876	Endorsed	0.209	0.387
H4: CE → CS → SETD	0.087	0.022	4.213	Endorsed	0.045	0.129

Note: CE—community empowerment; SETD—sustainable eco-tourism development; CS—community support; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

#### 4.3. Discussion

This research adds to the body of tourism literature by proposing a framework that connects key elements of community-based tourism with the sustainability of ecotourism development. The results of this study demonstrate that community empowerment is essential for advancing SETD. Historically, the empowerment of residents has been acknowledged as a crucial element in promoting sustainable ecotourism practices, thereby enhancing the long-term economic, social, and cultural well-being of community residents (Bello *et al.*, 2018; Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Hughes & Scheyvens, 2020; Nunkoo & So, 2016; Panyik, 2015; Park *et al.*, 2015). Community empowerment allows residents to assume control over decision-making processes concerning the execution of plans and policies for SETD, hence improving the general welfare of the community

#### 4.2. Structural model

Hair Jr *et al.* (2023) recommended examining the R<sup>2</sup>, the beta coefficients, and the associated t-values through a bootstrapping procedure with a resampling size of 5000 to evaluate the structural model. Furthermore, they advised that researchers disclose effect sizes ( $f^2$ ) alongside these fundamental metrics to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the model's performance.

We then go on to analyze how the independent variables influence the dependent. Community empowerment ( $\beta = 0.482$ ,  $t = 7.654$ ,  $f^2 = 0.552$ ) and community support ( $\beta = 0.289$ ,  $t = 5.876$ ,  $f^2 = 0.398$ ) had positive effects on SETD, together explaining 41.2% of the variance in SETD.) Furthermore, community empowerment ( $\beta = 0.326$ ,  $t = 5.249$ ,  $f^2 = 0.198$ ) significantly influenced SETD, accounting for 12.3% of SETD variance. The results support hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 of our study.

We then examined the mediating role of community support in the relationship between community empowerment and SETD. The indirect effect of community empowerment on SETD via community support ( $\beta = 0.087$ ,  $t = 4.213$ , BC0.95 LL = 0.045 and BC0.95 UL = 0.129) was significant. Furthermore, according to the guidelines of (Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008), the indirect effects did not include zero within their confidence intervals, indicating a mediating effect. Consequently, we can state that the mediating effect was statistically significant, thus supporting hypothesis H4. The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Table 5.

(Sutawa, 2012). This study enhances and extends the current literature by empirically evaluating theory through data collected from community-based tourism residents in a least-developed country.

The results of the data analysis indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between community empowerment and community support for ecotourism. Community empowerment is essential for obtaining community support for ecotourism, as it fosters improved information, capacity, and engagement in decision-making regarding local tourism initiatives, leading to increased resident backing for tourism (Nunkoo & So, 2016). These findings correspond with social exchange theory, arguing that power dynamics are fundamental to social exchange, affecting a community's ability to benefit and endorse tourist growth (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). Communities are



granted the opportunity to participate in the planning and administration of tourism. These findings are in line with social exchange theory, which argues that power dynamics are fundamental to social exchange and affect a community's ability to benefit from and facilitate ecotourism development (Canalejo *et al.*, 2015; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011; Panyik, 2015). Communities are granted the opportunity to participate in the planning and administration of eco-tourism.

Moreover, community support for ecotourism is a significant partial mediator between community empowerment and SETD. Previous research has established a moderating role of community support in the relationship between perceived eco-tourism impacts and endorsement of tourism planning (McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2017). The findings of this study further illuminate the bridging role of community support, indicating that residents' backing for eco-tourism is bolstered by strong leadership support, accountability among residents, and capacity-building efforts, ultimately guiding the community toward successful SETD.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This research investigated the impact of community empowerment on SETD in community-based tourism, employing data collected from 392 participants in a Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) located in Arusha region, Tanzania. This study sought to examine community empowerment as a vital element that bolsters the sustainability of tourist development through the active engagement of residents. The emphasis was on comprehending how empowering the local community facilitates the attainment of sustainable ecotourism results. The results reveal a distinct correlation between community empowerment and SETD, indicating that empowerment is a crucial predictor of community support for ecotourism and the SETD. This study serves as both a practical and theoretical addition to the subject. The practical implications emphasize the application of findings to guide policy and management strategies in tourist development, whilst the theoretical implications focus on the knowledge gaps this research aims to solve through its results.

### 5.1. Practical implications

Local communities can obtain advantages from SETD by actively endorsing SETD activities. Community empowerment is the philosophical cornerstone of SETD (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). Empowered residents are essential in mitigating tourism's negative impacts and enhancing eco-tourism development's sustainability. Therefore, tourism planners must include local communities by incorporating them into the decision-making processes for SETD initiatives. Local communities must acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, and competencies to participate effectively in SETD projects. Consequently, it is advised that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local authorities offer continuous education to communities to improve their understanding of SETD concepts. Residents and community leaders can form ecotourism advisory committees, implement training programs, organize workshops, supervise focus groups, and conduct public hearings. These activities will promote

cultivating and disseminating skills and competencies among community members, ultimately enhancing their engagement in sustainable eco-tourism initiatives.

Community leaders and local officials should be vital intermediaries between external stakeholders and internal community members. They must establish trust among citizens by evidencing that eco-tourism growth provides advantages for local communities instead of imposing burdens. When community people see that their interests are recognized and prioritized, they are more inclined to actively participate in and support tourism development activities (Özel & Kozak, 2017; Wu *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, governments must uphold ecotourism planning and management transparency to ensure community support. Because eco-tourism is inherently service-oriented, community support is essential to the overall success of the sector (Kafashpor *et al.*, 2018). Planners could use the findings from the current study to strengthen local community support for eco-tourism development initiatives.

### 5.2. Theoretical contribution

Traditionally, authorization has been conceptualized as a unidimensional construct primarily focused on political power. In contrast, the present study adopts a multidimensional perspective on empowerment, as suggested by earlier research. Furthermore, the findings of this study contribute to the theoretical framework by clearly establishing an empirical link between community empowerment and sustainable SETD, thereby addressing the existing gap in the literature regarding the necessity for quantitative research to assess empowerment and its influence on SETD (Boley *et al.*, 2015). Community members cannot participate in eco-tourism development activities without the necessary skills and support from local authorities. This research found the support of leaders as a crucial aspect of community empowerment, which is frequently neglected in eco-tourism studies. Consequently, this study addresses the gap highlighted by prior research (Armstrong, 2012; Martín *et al.*, 2018).

### 5.3. Limitations and future research

While the current study examined the direct impact of community empowerment on eco-tourism support, future research can consider people's attitudes towards eco-tourism as possible mediators in the relationship between community empowerment and tourism support. This can be accomplished by applying the perception-attitude-behavior paradigm introduced by (Martín *et al.*, 2018). The present study focused on residents as participants; however, subsequent research could include different groups, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and tourism officials, to provide a multi-group analysis.

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