

DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AND SECTORAL TENSION: EXTENDING SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY IN SRI LANKAN AGRO-TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Abstract



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Purpose – This study aims to investigate the underutilised potential of agro-tourism for sustainable rural development in Sri Lanka, identifying key opportunities and systemic barriers hindering sectoral growth and examining structural misalignments between the agricultural and tourism industries.

Methodology/Design/Approach – A qualitative, grounded theory approach was adopted, conducting eight semi-structured interviews with diverse stakeholders (farmers, tour operators, government officials, community leaders) in Sri Lanka's Nuwara Eliya district. Data were analysed using three-stage coding (open, axial, selective) to develop emergent themes.

Findings – The analysis reveals tension between significant opportunities for sectoral synergy and profound structural barriers. Community empowerment is critically dependent on perceived distributive justice, while operational failures stem from institutional and knowledge-transfer asymmetries. The study proposes Asymmetric Development Readiness (ADR) as a context-specific conceptual refinement describing these misalignments, building on existing frameworks in community-based tourism and stakeholder governance.

Originality of the research – This paper provides the first empirical multi-stakeholder analysis of agro-tourism development in Sri Lanka. Its theoretical contribution is a modest extension of Social Exchange Theory, suggesting distributive justice may act as a potential mediator of community support in this context, acknowledging prior discussions of equity in SET-based research.

Keywords agro-tourism, rural development, sustainable tourism, Sri Lanka, community-based tourism

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is one of the most prominent and rapidly growing economic sectors in the world, providing major benefits to host countries by presenting a variety of income-generating opportunities (Sofronov, 2018; Subash, 2015). Therefore, tourism development in underdeveloped nations has been generally recognised as a potential engine of economic growth, foreign currency gains, and job creation (Fletcher et al., 2018). However, Community-based tourism (CBT) is viewed as a viable strategy for sustainable development and poverty reduction in rural areas, offering economic advantages and job opportunities to local populations (Okazaki, 2008; Agung Prakoso et al., 2020). CBT is broadly defined as a form of tourism that is owned, managed, and governed by the local community, where the primary aim is to ensure that a significant proportion of benefits remain within the community, thereby fostering local participation and empowerment in tourism planning and decision-making (Mtapuri et al., 2022; Okazaki, 2008). Unlike conventional tourism models, CBT emphasises community ownership, equitable benefit distribution, and the preservation of local cultural and environmental assets as core operational principles. In many developing countries, rural people often benefit little from tourism, owing to little investment and promotional efforts orientated towards these areas (Radović et al., 2020; Ribeiro & Marques, 2002).

Sri Lanka is now in the initial phase of introducing agro tourism as a new sector. Even if this concept is still fresh and insignificant in the country, it has ignited a lot of curiosity among the tourists who find it interesting. Agro-tourism is seen as a subset of rural tourism and is an essential tool for rural development, improving the sociocultural and economic well-being of rural people (Jayasinghe et al., 2024). Agro-tourism is a multipurpose rural activity that allows visitors to expand their awareness of agricultural methods, rural jobs, local production systems, traditional food habits, everyday lifestyles, and the cultural heritage, customs, and traditions of rural communities (Faganel, 2011; Jayasinghe et al., 2024; Shrutiba et al., 2025). According to Freeman's stakeholder theory, stakeholders are any group or individual who has the ability to influence or is affected by an organization's aims (Han et al., 2020). Stakeholder analysis is critical in agrotourism because it ensures that the different interests, roles, and influences of all parties, including farmers, local communities, government, the private sector, and tourists, are recognised and integrated into planning and management. This method is supported by its potential to promote sustainable, inclusive, and community-driven development (Liangco et al., 2024; Susila et al., 2024). Furthermore, Aryawan et al. (2019) claimed that Engaging stakeholders, particularly local communities and farmers, helps them to actively engage in decision-making, ensuring that agro-tourism initiatives represent local needs and values, and that benefits are delivered equitably. The theory is widely applied to ensure that the interests and rights of all these groups are integrated into planning and management, promoting sustainability and long-term success.

Additionally, in the same context, several developed countries have witnessed a significant change in their rural areas through the introduction of agro-tourism and thus they have simultaneously provided additional income for farmers. Likewise, a group of countries located in the Asia-Pacific region such as Thailand, Malaysia, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Indonesia have gone through the process of implementing agro-tourism which has led to both social and economic benefits (Hamzah, 2012; Khanal et al., 2024; Pandey & Pandey, 2013). As in the aforementioned countries, agro-tourism has been the result of a carefully prepared plan that directly connects agricultural and rural development, and the most recent policies aimed at improving farmers' conditions are being enacted. To grow and contribute effectively to sustainable development, rural tourism must first comprehend these issues (Bhat et al., 2024).

As noted by Ariyawardana (2021) the country is in the nascent stage of developing agro tourism, the implication is that Sri Lanka has all the fine elements to initiate and proliferate it. Being a nation with a long-standing agricultural economy where agriculture had been the mainstay, Sri Lanka has seen the industry of tourism as one of the main merchandises recently. After the termination of the three-decade long civil war, the country had become a more lucrative tourist destination which therefore had been enriched by nature's abundant gifts and distinct cultural influences. The nation has welcomed a substantial number of international tourists. In the year 2024, the visitor number in this lovely tourist destination crossed the 2 million marks for the first time with the highest number since 2019 (de Silva, 2025; TTJ, 2024). With an impressive 38.07% year-on-year rise, this achievement marks the best annual performance since 2019. It is a strong sign of the recovery of the tourism sector, which has gone through a number of challenges in the last five years (de Silva, 2025). The Tourism Development Strategy (2011–2016) underlines the promotion of community-based tourism and suggests tourist villages as one of the actions to improve the value chains related to the rural economy (Fernando, 2017; Kpundeh, 2017; Kumudhini & Vijesandiran, 2024). This includes aspects such as the harvest, wildlife, agriculture, art, and religion. In such a backdrop, Sri Lanka is well-positioned to push the use of agro-tourism as a possible way to improve the socio-economic conditions of rural farming families, thus making the whole rural community more developed.

The "Visit Sri Lanka" tourism brand focusses primarily on the country's beaches, cultural heritage, wildlife, hill country sceneries, adventure activities, wellness traditions, and culinary experiences. While these major attractions are well-known to international visitors, agro-tourism remains under-represented, despite Sri Lanka's abundant agricultural resources and rural cultural variety (Ariyawardana, 2021; Jayasinghe et al., 2024; Pattiyaedara & Fernando, 2020). Furthermore, while several studies have emphasised the benefits of agro - tourism, few have conducted a thorough study of the industry's problems. While the need of linking agriculture and tourism for long-term rural development is well acknowledged, there is a noticeable lack of study on the Sri Lankan setting. Most existing research, focus on other nations and emphasise the need for a more systematic and complete investigation of these links. Moreover, The literature review emphasises that the relationship between tourism and agriculture, particularly in terms of tourist satisfaction with local agricultural goods, has been neglected in hospitality and tourism studies (Han et al., 2020). This study aims to fill this critical research gap by providing a systematic, stakeholder-based analysis of the structural barriers and opportunities for agro-tourism in rural Sri Lanka, thereby offering context-specific insights that are currently absent from the literature.

The aim of this study is to critically examine the structural challenges and opportunities associated with agro-tourism development in Sri Lanka's rural communities. Specifically, the research seeks to illuminate the economic, social, cultural, and infrastructural factors that influence the expansion of agro-tourism as an alternative source of rural income, providing insights for policymakers and stakeholders to guide sustainable development strategies.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What are the main structural barriers and opportunities affecting the growth of agro-tourism in rural Sri Lanka?
- How do economic, social, cultural, and infrastructural factors impede or facilitate the development of agro-tourism in these communities?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Evaluation of Social Exchange Theory in the context of Agro Tourism

To systematically examine how residents evaluate the diverse effects of tourism, researchers in the discipline have extensively employed Social Exchange Theory (SET). Originally introduced by Emerson (1976) as a sociological theory, SET was adapted to tourism research to elucidate the development of perceptions within host communities by modelling the exchange dynamics between residents and the tourism sector (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Vidal Rua, 2020).

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is a conceptual model used to analyze the outcomes of interpersonal relationships, with a central focus on evaluating the rewards and costs perceived by each participant (Albert et al., 2024). Social Exchange Theory (SET) is commonly used in agrotourism to examine how stakeholders weigh the advantages and costs of participation. The concept explains why locals and tourists support or oppose it by assessing their perceived benefits and downsides. This theory argues that individuals embrace agrotourism when they perceive the benefits (economic, social, environmental, or psychological) outweigh the costs (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015). Tourism can benefit local communities by increasing earnings, creating jobs, and boosting the overall level of living. It also contributes to improved public infrastructure, greater recreational opportunities, and the promotion and preservation of local culture (Deery et al., 2012; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015). Despite its benefits, tourism can have a negative impact on local communities by raising living and property costs, causing overcrowding and traffic, and increasing crime and drug usage (Látková & Vogt, 2012).

Moreover, Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a useful lens for understanding how Sri Lankan rural inhabitants perceive and respond to agro-tourism programs. In Sri Lanka, communities frequently assess the economic benefits of greater tourism such as enhanced income opportunities, job development, and improved infrastructure against possible costs, including cultural commercialisation and disruptions to traditional livelihoods. Numerous studies affirm that economic interests are of significant importance, with (Soldić Frleta & Smolčić Jurdana, 2020), demonstrating that employment status has a direct influence on support for tourism, especially among individuals employed within the tourism sector. Community attachment arises as a significant factor, with Kim et al., (2021) illustrating that residents' sense of connection to their community considerably influences their attitudes towards tourism development. Environmental considerations and levels of engagement are also of considerable importance. Orgaz-Agüera et al., (2022), demonstrated that environmental attitudes are crucial for sustainable tourism, whereas Ryu et al., (2020), showed that resident involvement in planning stages directly impacts their perceived benefits.

The dependency of many Sri Lankan rural families on agricultural operations emphasises the necessity of positive exchanges, since agro-tourism can diversify household income and strengthen community resilience to economic and environmental shocks. As a result, SET is especially useful for examining how host communities, local governments, and businesses in Sri Lanka assess the impacts of agro-tourism, as well as identifying sources of community support or opposition to such ventures.

Stakeholders Theory in the context of Agro tourism

According to stakeholder theory, stakeholders are any group or people who can influence or is affected by an organization's attainment of its goals (Wondirad et al., 2020). Agro-tourism stakeholders include farmers, local communities, government agencies, private sector actors, visitors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and academic institutions. The approach emphasises the significance of understanding stakeholders' interests, power, legitimacy, and urgency, as well as relationship management to create collaboration and resolve problems (Aryawan et al., 2019).

Effective stakeholder collaboration is important to the success and sustainability of agrotourism. A plethora of researches demonstrate that simply attempting collaboration is insufficient; trust-building, transparent communication, and participatory decision-making are required for long-term success (McComb et al., 2016). Empowering stakeholders-particularly local communities and farmers via skills development, policy assistance, and collaborative decision-making results in more inclusive and resilient agro-tourism systems. Balancing economic growth with sociocultural and environmental stewardship requires multifaceted approaches that incorporate public-private partnerships, community-led models, and technological innovation (Liangco et al., 2024). Stakeholder theory in agrotourism offers a framework for inclusive, collaborative, and long-term development. By recognising and combining the interests and capacities of all important players, agrotourism programs can achieve increased resilience, community empowerment, and balanced growth.

Contextualizing Agro tourism Within Broader Frameworks

Agro-tourism acts as a multifaceted sustainability catalyst, promoting economic viability, socio-cultural preservation, and environmental conservation through integrated approaches. This unique type of rural enterprise retains fundamental ties to both agricultural communities and their surrounding ecosystems, enabling mutually beneficial interactions between human activity and natural systems. The agro-tourism sector demonstrates inherent synergies with both sociocultural preservation imperatives and ecological sustainability requirements, reflecting its dual orientation toward community well-being and environmental stewardship (Ariyawardana, 2021). Therefore, research on the conservation and preservation of natural and cultural heritage is crucial for the development of a sustainable agro-tourism sector. Public authorities ought to endorse targeted initiatives that enhance sustainability in this sector, specifically to elevate the knowledge and awareness of managers and users of agro-tourism facilities. The growth of sustainable agrotourism in Europe brings both advantages and disadvantages as it delivers economic benefits by diversifying farm income and promoting rural economies (Faganel, 2011; Streifeneder & Dax, 2020). It emphasises cultural preservation and educational possibilities for visitors (Ana, 2017; Zoto et al., 2013). However, challenges include potential negative consequences on conventional farming operations, diminished family leisure time, and strain on local communities (Grillini et al., 2023). Therefore, to maximise advantages and address challenges, tailored support, enhanced infrastructure, and better cooperation among sectors are required (Shrutiba et al., 2025). A fundamental strength is its agricultural foundation, which serves as a catalyst for rural revitalisation while protecting natural landscapes and cultural traditions, strengthening local communities, and supporting regional economic growth.

Agro-tourism is a specific segment within the broader category of rural tourism, characterised by its unique focus (Tripathi & Tiwari, 2024). Rural tourism encompasses tourism activities situated in countryside environments, involving diverse experiences associated with rural life and landscapes. Agro-tourism represents a distinct category of rural tourism occurring on farms, where visitors engage directly with agricultural practices and experience farm life firsthand (Utama, 2023). He further claimed that agro-tourism contributes to rural economic diversification by creating employment opportunities in hospitality, food services (farm- to- table), and transportation sectors. In this context, tourists participate directly in rural activities organised by accommodation providers, encompassing agricultural practices, animal husbandry, and various farm-related operations.

Agro-tourism involves the organisation and control of agricultural operations to provide tourism experiences. This strategy entails creating immersive services that reflect the cultural and agricultural wealth of rural communities. Such activities could include guided agricultural tours that demonstrate farming processes, Eno gastronomic encounters using local wine and products and agritourism hospitality services provide farmstay lodgings. Utama (2023) stated that Agro-tourism provides various economic, social, and environmental advantages. From an economic standpoint, it can produce supplementary income for farmers and rural communities, generate employment opportunities, and promote the development of local businesses. It helps in the preservation of cultural traditions, enhances community engagement, and offers significant educational experiences for visitors. These programs aggressively promote environmentally responsible agricultural practices, particularly organic farming and biodiversity conservation activities. They also promote increased public awareness of ecosystem preservation and wildlife habitat protection. As previously noted, agro-tourism enterprises provide a sustainable alternative to conventional mass tourist models, delivering multiple advantages that include economic prosperity, social empowerment, and environmental stewardship for host communities.

Seena and Sheela (2023) argue that economic modernity has fuelled the growth of agro-tourism, which is now a major topic in current discussions about rural development strategies, techniques, and programs. It mixes agriculture and tourism to produce additional income for farmers, conserve traditional practices, and give unique experiences for urban visitors (Shrutiba et al., 2025). Despite constraints such as inadequate infrastructure and limited promotional knowledge, agro-tourism has demonstrated potential in numerous nations, including Korea, India, and Cambodia (Tawade & Dhar, 2024).

This transformation has allowed for a new assessment of the worth of rural resources. They further stated that this approach can provide important insights for farmers and policymakers to embrace wider perspectives on rural development. In several developing nations, policies actively promote agro-tourism as a means of increasing farmers' earnings and raising their knowledge of agriculture's importance and value (Karampela et al., 2021). The primary aim of agro-tourism is to increase farm revenue by providing visitors with organised recreational and educational opportunities. Agro-tourism offers mutual benefits to both the agricultural community and the visitors (for example see : Tripathi & Tiwari, 2024), agro-tourism generates profitable opportunities by combining agriculture with tourism, creating unique markets, services, and travel options that appeal to a wide range of regional audiences. Agro-tourism has been acknowledged as a successful entrepreneurial enterprise, allowing farmers to continue their traditional farming activities while increasing their household income (Chase et al., 2019). This presents an opportunity to promote the agricultural venue's "experience" through the efficient optimisation of resources. Wright and Annes (2014) posit that it offers a chance to market the "experience" of agricultural venues by effectively utilising resources productively and enhancing value through diverse activities associated with agriculture and the rural environment. Furthermore, value is enhanced through product diversification, the potential for increased profits via specialised production, packaging, and marketing, as well as by providing a range of services or experiences linked to a specific product or production method, including direct sales (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2020, pp. 56–63). According to conference findings, direct-to-consumer sales tactics enable agricultural producers to bypass traditional distribution channels, allowing for improved profit margins by eliminating middleman expenditures.

The tourism sector's potential to alleviate poverty in developing countries is constrained by substantial revenue leakages, wherein a considerable portion of generated income fails to benefit the impoverished, as higher-income groups secure a significant share (Blake, 2017; Croes & Rivera, 2017; Sandbrook, 2010). Anderson (2013) claims that conventional mass tourism provides negligible benefits to host towns because to extensive external procurement of materials and services, resulting in major income drain from local economies. As a result, specialised tourist models have arisen as viable alternatives aimed at mitigating negative socio-environmental impacts while maximising economic benefits for local residents.

Agro-tourism has become a significant alternative to mass tourism, providing economic, social, and environmental advantages to local communities and serving a vital function in rural development strategies and initiatives. It facilitates the re-evaluation of rural resource values amidst economic modernisation, fosters wider perspectives among farmers and policymakers (Karampela et al., 2021), and is increasingly advocated in developing nations to increase farmer incomes and raise awareness of agriculture's (Ariyawardana, 2021).

Agro-tourism seeks to enhance agricultural income by providing tourists with structured leisure and educational experiences through intentional development strategies. This model generates reciprocal benefits for both farmers and tourists through the development of innovative commercial opportunities, hospitality services, and destination experiences. It simultaneously promotes crop diversification, enhances the economic status of rural communities, generates revenue streams, and broadens distribution channels for local agricultural products (Barbieri & Streifeneder, 2019). Additionally, it enables farmers to remain engaged in agriculture and improve their families' quality of life through supplementary earnings (Tripathi & Tiwari, 2024).

Agro-tourism has been recognised as a form of entrepreneurial activity offering economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefit (Phelan & Sharpley 2011). The approach facilitates the marketing of the agricultural venue's "experience" through the effective utilisation of resources. Value can be created by providing diverse agricultural and rural experiences, as well as expanding product lines and improving revenue prospects through targeted production methods, customised packaging, and effective marketing approaches. Value creation entails providing complementary services or immersive experiences related to core products or manufacturing processes, with direct-to-consumer sales channels serving as a crucial component. Curtis et al (2018), Aguglia et al (2009), and (Park et al., 2018) scholars argue that direct marketing techniques allow agricultural producers

to bypass traditional distribution networks by selling directly to end consumers, potentially increasing profit margins. Factors influencing the adoption of direct marketing include farm location, management skills, and marketing expertise (Aguglia et al., 2009; Park et al., 2014). Furthermore, scholars have emphasised agro-tourism's dual significance as both a conservation strategy for farming assets and a means of maximising resource efficiency (Shrutiba et al., 2025; Songkhla & Somboonsuke, 2013). This method promotes an interdependent dynamic between traditional agriculture and tourism sectors by sharing productive inputs such as land, labour, and financial resources.

Agro-tourism contributes to rural development by leveraging underutilised farm resources such as accommodation, meals, water, labour, and space for diverse agro-tourism activities (Khanal et al., 2024; Pandey & Pandey, 2013). This approach generates supplementary income for farmers and supports the implementation of agro-tourism promotion policies, especially in developing nations. Moreover, Enhancing the local tourism sector can serve as a strategic response to the adverse impacts of economic transition in small communities. It provides income-generating opportunities for economically disadvantaged populations through employment, entrepreneurship, and participation in supply chains (Hampton et al., 2018). As noted by Ashley and Goodwin (2007), tourism directly contributes to increased wages and business prospects. Furthermore, infrastructure improvements associated with tourism often facilitate broader economic linkages and stimulate the emergence of new enterprises as shown in Figure 3.

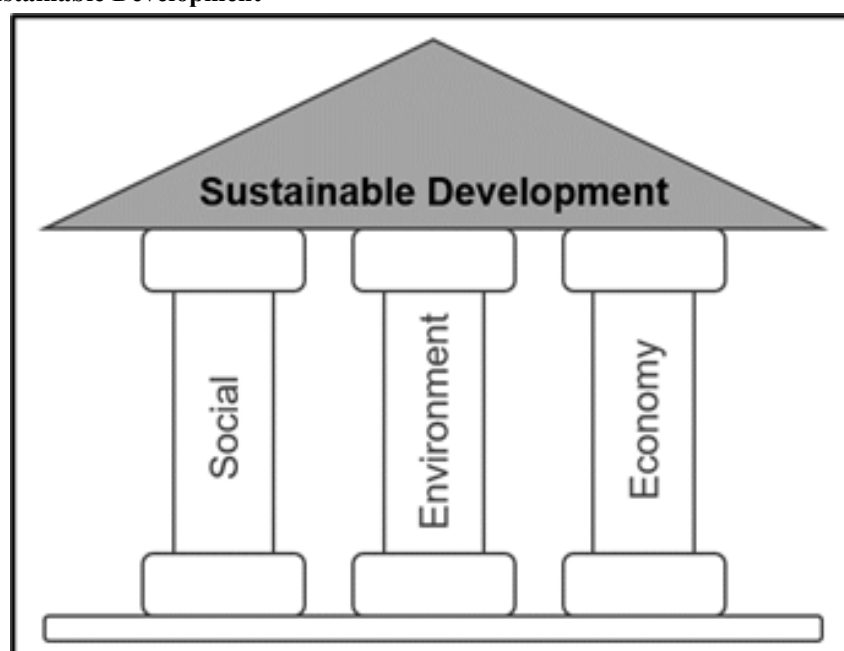
Key considerations in sustainable development

Community-based tourism (CBT) frameworks aim to empower local communities, promote sustainable development, and ensure that tourism benefits are distributed equitably. These frameworks bring together social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors while emphasising local participation, ownership, and governance. Furthermore, CBT initiatives are usually owned, managed, and maintained by local community individuals, ensuring that decision-making power and economic advantages remain within the community (Mtapuri et al., 2022). According to Quang et al. (2023) by engaging locals in tourism, CBT helps maintain and promote indigenous cultures, practices, and heritage. Community-based tourism promotes sustainable development by including local communities in tourism planning and benefit sharing. While it provides enormous economic, social, and environmental benefits, its success is dependent on overcoming resource constraints, participation, and long-term sustainability.

Community-based tourism (CBT) and rural tourist development in Sri Lanka have been identified as promising techniques for poverty alleviation and socioeconomic development (Pattiyagedara & Fernando, 2020; Ratnayake & Kasim, 2015). It is crucial to analyse the definitions and features of rural tourism and agro-tourism, as well as to investigate their interrelations. A comprehensive understanding of these linkages can greatly enhance the socio-economic impact of tourism initiatives across the country.

The Brundtland Report (UNCED) identifies three basic pillars for sustainable development: economic success, environmental protection, and social justice (Purvis et al., 2019), emphasising their balanced integration. Figure 1 shows how this concept pertains to the current study's situation.

Figure 1: Pillars of Sustainable Development



Source: Purvis et al., 2019

Sustainable development is a core idea that shapes modern global governance frameworks. In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which established 17 interconnected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a comprehensive framework for global progress. The worldwide framework went into effect in January 2016 (United Nations, 2015; United Nations, 2016). Over a fifteen-year period (2016-2030), worldwide efforts prioritised the widespread adoption of the SDGs by all member nations. These projects, in particular, emphasised three key objectives: (1) poverty and inequality reduction, (2) climate change mitigation, and (3) promoting inclusive society for all populations. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an evolutionary step beyond the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), broadening their framework with the ambitious goal of eradicating poverty in all of its forms worldwide (Wahyuningsih, 2018).

The supplementary objectives are intended to be applicable across all nations, regardless of their economic status, with the purpose of fostering prosperity and ensuring environmental protection. Effective poverty alleviation requires a multifaceted approach that balances economic development initiatives with critical social provisions such as education access, job creation, social welfare systems, and public safety measures, while also prioritising ecological preservation. The aforementioned aims are designed for universal adoption across all nations, regardless of economic status, necessitating the engagement of essential stakeholders including governments, civil society, and the business sector. Furthermore, The United Nations Division for Sustainable Development (UN-DSD) has identified sustainable consumption and production as a top priority, with a focus on: (1) resource efficiency optimisation, (2) pollution prevention, and (3) the implementation of comprehensive life cycle assessment methodologies across all production systems (See; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2020).

Considerations on Sustainable Development in Tourism

The rapid rise of mass tourism in the 1960s and 1970s raised global concerns about its triple-bottom-line implications (de Kadt, 1981). Tourism helped to economic prosperity and cultural interaction, but it also caused economic distortions, cultural upheavals, and environmental damage (Amin & Budilestari, 2025; Thullah & Abdulai Jalloh, 2021). These concerns prompted greater academic and policy focus to establishing alternative tourist models that prioritise environmental principles.

Sustainable tourism is fundamentally linked to the increasing global focus on sustainable development and the foundational research conducted by the Brundtland Commission 1983 (Saarinen, 2021). Sustainable tourism can be approached through multiple methodologies. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2025) define it as follows:

- Sustainable tourism development necessitates making the best use of environmental resources while maintaining vital ecosystem functions and promoting the preservation of biological diversity and natural heritage.
- This viewpoint emphasises the crucial necessity to maintain host communities' socio-cultural integrity, protect their tangible and intangible legacy, and promote intercultural discussion and acceptance.
- This approach ensures the sustainability of economic activities by enhancing the socio-economic welfare of all stakeholders. It includes the creation of secure employment opportunities, income generation, provision of social services for local communities, and efforts to alleviate poverty.

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) describes sustainable tourism as a method that considers current and anticipated implications in three dimensions: economic viability, social equality, and environmental conservation. This paradigm meets the demands of a variety of stakeholders, including tourists, industry operators, natural ecosystems, and destination communities (Grandcourt, 2020). UNESCO describes sustainable tourism as a method that prioritises respect for both host populations and visitors while actively protecting cultural treasures and ecological systems (Rasdi et al., 2019; Sihombing et al., 2024).

Bramwell et al. (2017) and Bramwell and Lane (1993) present a basic sustainable tourism framework designed as an intentional intervention mechanism. This strategy addresses friction points and communication gaps caused by the dynamic interaction of tourist operators, guests, ecosystems, and local inhabitants. Their concept sees tourism development as an essential component of global sustainability goals, acknowledging the sector's reliance on three important pillars: ecological assets, cultural capital, and community resources. To obtain and retain high-value resource inputs across all operational domains, the tourist sector must actively engage with sustainable development imperatives via cross-sectoral collaborations (Choudhary, 2019; Jones & Comfort, 2020).

Sustainable tourism aims to reduce environmental effect while maintaining a balance between ecological conservation, socio-cultural protection, and economic sustainability. Inadequate regulatory frameworks expose rural tourism destinations to negative consequences from unregulated visitor expansion. The continued deterioration of rural ecosystems jeopardises their long-term sustainability and availability for future generations. These considerations highlight the importance of implementing circular economy ideas in the tourism sector.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative, exploratory technique based on grounded theory to analyse the expansion of agro-tourism in a specific region of Sri Lanka. Grounded theory was chosen due to its strengths in facilitating the construction of theory inductively from contextually rich evidence, especially ideal for complex social phenomena dependent on local circumstances and stakeholder views.

The grounded theory technique promotes model creation by systematic data collecting and iterative analysis, where theoretical structures emerge from the constant interaction between empirical data gathering and interpretive interpretation (Balasubramanian & Mathias, 2020). It entails simultaneous data collection and processing, coding, constant comparison, memo draughting, and theoretical sampling (Minas et al., 2018). The technique has evolved into various variations, including classical, Straussian, constructivist, and feminist grounded theories (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023). Grounded theory methodology (GTM) is a qualitative research strategy that begins with an open study of empirical data to produce theory (Charmaz, 2017; Wang et al., 2012). It uses inductive reasoning, which begins with data collection and analysis rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses (Mathison, 2005). Researchers collect extensive data on people, situations, behaviours, and events in a systematic manner, remaining impartial and refraining from imposing predefined frameworks or evaluative judgements throughout the early stages. Primary observations are supplemented with data collected from interviews, focus groups. The analytic procedure incorporates progressive coding stages: first splitting material into conceptual units (open coding), then building linkages between categories (axial coding), before synthesising a central narrative (selected coding) using known grounded theory techniques. These phases are not precisely consecutive, but they frequently interact and inform one another during the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Sampling Design and Rationale

The snowball sampling technique was used to discover and recruit volunteers with appropriate skills and experience. Snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral sampling, is a well-established methodological tool commonly used in qualitative social science research (Gierczyk et al., 2023). The sample process began with a purposeful selection of key informants from the primary stakeholder groups in the rural tourism industry, such as local government officials, hospitality professionals, agricultural experts, community members, and farm organisation leaders (Table 1). Each respondent was asked to suggest more participants who fulfilled the study's inclusion criteria, allowing for access to information-rich instances via a chain-referral approach. Recruitment proceeded until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was assessed through ongoing comparison of newly collected data with existing codes and categories during the iterative coding process. Specifically, saturation was determined to have been reached when the final two interviews (P07 and P08) produced no new open codes and instead reinforced existing categories without introducing additional conceptual dimensions. This assessment was documented through reflexive memos that tracked the emergence and stabilisation of categories across successive interviews, consistent with established grounded theory saturation assessment practices (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Guest et al., 2006). As a result of this approach, eight participants were interviewed, each chosen to ensure that all major stakeholder perspectives were represented and that there was gender balance among resident and visitor responses. The decision to limit the sample to eight was based on both reaching saturation and ensuring that each stakeholder category of rural agro-tourism was represented, which is consistent with recognised qualitative research practice. This is consistent with established qualitative research practice, where sample size is determined by theoretical saturation and the principle of information power, rather than by statistical representativeness (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). However, it should be acknowledged that each stakeholder group is represented by only one or two participants, which means that findings attributed to specific stakeholder perspectives should be interpreted as individual viewpoints situated within their respective sectors, rather than as representative positions of entire stakeholder categories. This design choice prioritises breadth of perspectives across the agro-tourism ecosystem over depth within any single group.

Data Collection Procedure

Between April 15th and June 30th, 2025, all participants were interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured format. The interview guide (see Appendix 1) included open-ended questions designed to explore participants' perceptions of opportunities, barriers, community impacts, and necessary support for agro-tourism development. Everyone provided verbal agreement for recording. The interview duration ranged from 30-40 minutes for ordinary responders to up to 60 minutes for managerial or specialist informants. Furthermore, focus group talks with the local farming community were held to gain collective insights into their existing capacities, available resources, willingness to participate in agro-tourism, perceived barriers, and proposals for new activities. Multiple data sources improved triangulation and the depth and dependability of findings.

Secondary qualitative data were gathered through an extensive assessment of relevant published and unpublished literature, reports from local and international institutions, and grey literature. Key sources were records from the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Industrial Development, the Ministry of Tourism, and the United Nations World Tourism Organisation. This supplementary resource provided contextual background and policy viewpoints that supplemented and enhanced the core data.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted following established ethical guidelines for social science research. Recognizing international standards for research ethics, all fundamental ethical principles were rigorously maintained:

1. **Informed Consent:** Written information sheets were provided to all participants explaining the research purpose, voluntary participation, data usage, and right to withdraw. Verbal consent was audio-recorded before each interview, with participants explicitly agreeing to: (a) participation, (b) audio recording, (c) use of anonymized quotes, and (d) data storage procedures.
2. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Participants were assigned codes, with all identifying information removed from transcripts. Given the small community context, extra care was taken to remove contextual identifiers that might indirectly reveal identity.
3. **Data Protection:** Audio files were encrypted and stored on password-protected devices. Transcripts were de-identified immediately after transcription. Data will be retained for five years per academic standards, then securely destroyed.
4. **Participant Welfare:** Interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience, conducted in their preferred language, and sensitive economic topics were approached with cultural awareness.

Analytical Process

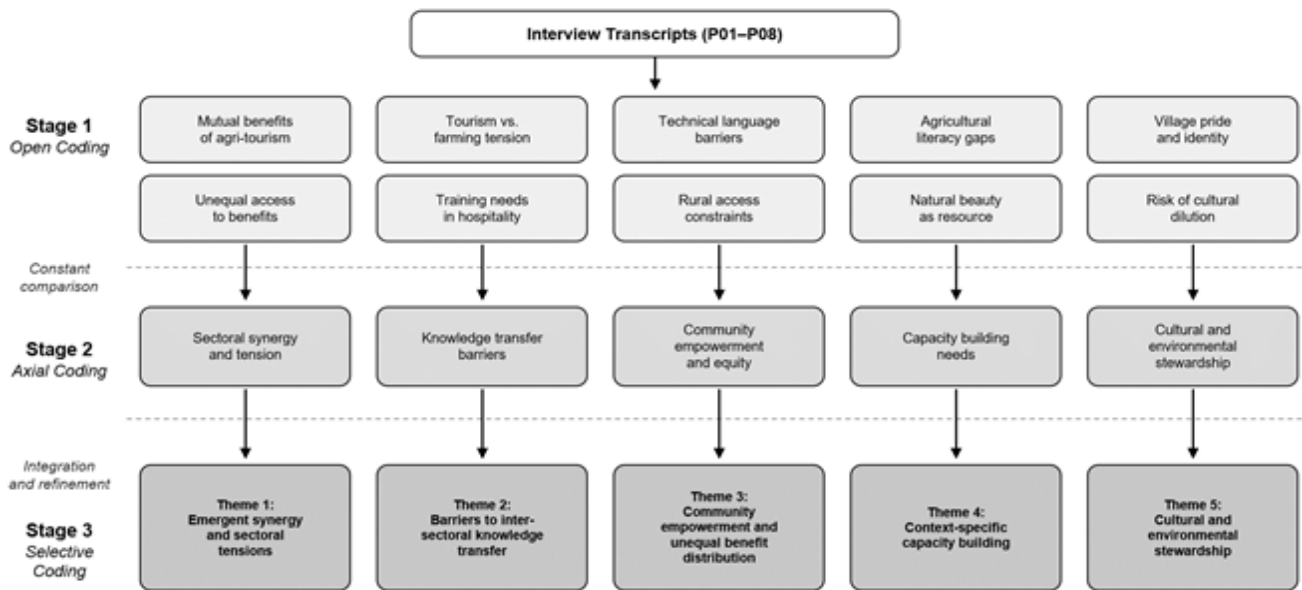
The data analysis followed the grounded theory methodologies given by Corbin and Strauss (2008), with the NVivo software used to aid systematic coding and administration of the qualitative data.

To emphasize the inductive nature of the process, analysis began with open coding of raw data to identify emergent concepts, without initial reliance on pre-existing frameworks. The researchers maintained reflexive memos throughout the open coding phase to document how categories emerged organically from the data, recording analytical decisions and tracing the progression from raw observations to conceptual labels. This memo trail provides an auditable record of the inductive process prior to any engagement with existing theoretical literature. Axial and selective coding then iteratively built categories and relationships, with theoretical memos documenting how initial findings informed refinement of codes. For example, the theme of 'Barriers to Inter-Sectoral Knowledge Transfer' emerged directly from participants' repeated references to communication difficulties between farming and tourism professionals during open coding, and was only subsequently contextualised through the lens of Stakeholder Theory's relationship management principles. Pre-existing theories (e.g., SET and Stakeholder Theory) were introduced only during the later stages of selective coding to contextualise and situate the emergent themes within the broader scholarly discourse; they did not predetermine the coding structure or category formation. This sequential approach, data-first, theory-second, ensured methodological transparency and fidelity to grounded theory principles (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

- **Transcripts were analysed** to identify and categorise noteworthy acts, comments, and thoughts related to agro-tourism development.
- **Axial Coding:** The relationships between categories were investigated and grouped around major themes.
- **Selective Coding:** Thematic categories were combined to form a cohesive explanatory framework for local agrotourism dynamics.

These steps were iterative and overlapped, illustrating grounded theory's adaptable methodology. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the three-level coding process, illustrating how raw data progressed from initial open codes through axial categories to the five final selective themes. Throughout the process, codes and themes were regularly compared and improved as new data were added, and the researchers maintained methodological transparency by writing memos and developing codebooks in NVivo. Two researchers independently conducted the initial open coding of all eight transcripts. Inter-coder reliability was established through a phased approach: both researchers first independently coded a subset of two transcripts, then convened to compare their coding outputs and resolve discrepancies through consensus-based dialogue until agreement was reached on the initial codebook. The remaining transcripts were then coded independently, with periodic comparison meetings held after every two transcripts to ensure consistency and alignment. Any disagreements in code assignment or category boundaries were resolved through discussion, with the third author consulted where consensus could not be reached between the two primary coders. Data-driven insights guided analytical conclusions, allowing for reflexivity and impartiality, until all core categories were saturated.

Figure 2: Three-level coding process from raw data to final themes



Source: Authors' elaboration

Study Area in Sri Lanka

Research has been carried out in the Nuwara Eliya District, which is located in the Central Province of Sri Lanka, as shown in Figure 3. chosen as the place for study due to its significance in tourism and agriculture. This district was specified based on two main reasons, as a center for eco- and cultural tourism which are closely connected to agro-tourism, and its high percentage of agricultural production in Sri Lanka, which includes a variety of farming activities. The site of research was chosen according to three main factors: the tourists' accessibility to the primary attractions, the conservation of natural and artistic culture, and the wide variety of agricultural production. Data collection and analysis were centralised in the Ambewela area, located in the district, since it was considered the most suitable area according to the predetermined selection criteria.

Figure 3: Ambewela map



Source: Google map, 2025

3. ANALYSIS

Table 1: **Participant Profile**

Participant ID	Sector	Role	Gender	Years of Experience	Notes
P01	Agriculture	Agricultural Trainer	Male	12	Concentrate on the teaching of farmers and the agricultural policy.
P02	Tourism	Tour Operator	Female	8	Partners with rural communities in the promotion of agritourism.
P03	Community	Village Farmer	Male	25	Offered some ideas on cultural values and intergenerational knowledge.
P04	Grassroots Organisation	Community Liaison Officer	Female	7	A firm supporter of women's active participation in the agritourism sector in a sustainable manner.
P05	Hospitality	Hotel- Manager	Male	15	That is showing views on tourist satisfactions and local sourcing.
P06	R&D	Agricultural Researcher	Female	9	Integrates tourism with sustainable farming as a main specialisation.
P07	Community	Youth Entrepreneur	Male	5	Different visions for the modernisation of the country and the youth role in it have been suggested.
P08	Tourism	Travel Itinerary Planner	Female	6	Emphasises experiential and educational rural tours.

Source: Authors' elaboration

The Participant Profile included in Table 1 lists the demographic and contextual information of each individual involved in the study. This table is included to clarify the transparency and give a better view to the readers on the diversity, background, and relevance of the participants, thus, supporting the interpretation of the findings in the methodology and analysis sections. The data's key themes are being discussed in Table 2, together with the participant cohort's characteristics. The enumeration of the themes in this form complies with the currently accepted methodological rules and gives a detailed picture of the degree of representation of themes in different groups of participants. In this way, the research is provided with additional analytical depth and the interpretive validity of the study is thus enriched.

Table 2: **Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data**

Theme	Description	Illustrative quotes	Participant Group(s)	Negative feedback
The Joint Efforts of Agriculture and Tourism.	The participants pointed out the symmetrical advantages of the phenomenon where farming techniques are attached to the tourism experience.	"People who are visiting in our place are very inquisitive about our food production; in fact, they can themselves have the practical exercise."	Local farmers, Tour operators, Community members	A few agricultural producers expressed worries regarding their participation in tourism-related ventures, which they believe distracts them from their main agricultural activities.
Barriers to the Transfer of Knowledge	The problems connected with communicating agricultural practices to both tourism stakeholders and tourists were pointed out.	"Leisure travelers often find it challenging to follow the explanations of technical agronomy terminologies."	Specialists in agriculture, Staff of hospitality	In some cases, tour operators are not as knowledgeable about agriculture as they should be; thus, there is a possibility of them showing the wrong side of agriculture practices.
The empowerment of community through agri-tourism.	Agri-tourism was seen as a way to empower locals and revitalise the countryside.	"Our village has developed a sense of pride thanks to this project—we are now a tourist destination and we get an income."	Individuals from the community, Grassroots organisations.	Imagine if some people alone derive economic advantages from a certain situation while everyone else is left to deal with stress and exclusion in their community.
The requirement for capacity building is accentuated.	It was pointed out by a number of stakeholders that farmers are again again faced with the inadequate training in hospitality and tourism sector, and vice versa.	"There is an essential aspect for a farmer to learn it is in customer service which is also vital for a tour guide to know, about agricultural especially the process of crop and livestock production as well as the technology used."	Pros in training, Hotel specialists, Community-based entities	Limited financial support, inaccessibility to rural training, and language difficulties are major obstacles to skill development.
Preservation of the Environment and Culture	The spotlight is on the preservation of local knowledge, ecosystems, and customary practices as a tourism resource.	"Tourists visit to see the natural beauty of things that we must take care of it and not only market it."	Local residents, Scientists in the field of Agriculture, Professionals in the Tourism sector.	Cultural dilution and environmental degradation are the potential risks resulting from the tourism activities which are poorly managed.

Source: Authors' elaboration

The study of key informant interviews and focus group discussions, guided by Grounded Theory methods, identified five primary theme categories that capture the prospects and structural barriers to agrotourism growth in the Nuwara Eliya District. The themes are outlined below, with a focus on emerging tensions and inter-sectoral relations.

Theme 1: Emergent Synergy and Sectoral Tensions in Agro-Tourism

The core focus emphasises the apparent synergy between agriculture and tourism, with participants from all sectors recognising the mutual benefits of incorporating farming methods into the visitor experience. The data strongly implies that tourists are actively seeking authentic, hands-on agricultural experiences, which give farmers with an additional source of income.

“People who are visiting in our place are very inquisitive about our food production; in fact, they can themselves have the practical exercise. This is a new market for our knowledge, not just our produce.” (P03, Village Farmer)

However, this synergy is offset by a large sectoral conflict. A minority of agricultural farmers expressed fear that tourism demands might detract from their core farming activity, especially during peak seasons. This conflict is significant because it has a direct impact on primary farmers’ willingness to engage, which is essential for the success of any agro-tourism venture.

Theme 2: Barriers to Inter-Sectoral Knowledge Transfer

A persistent structural barrier highlighted across the tourism and R&D cohorts was the challenge of translating specialised agricultural information into accessible, engaging content for tourists and non-agricultural tourism personnel. This information gap is a barrier to providing high-quality, authentic experiences.

“Leisure travelers often find it challenging to follow the explanations of technical agronomy terminologies. We need a bridge someone who understands both the science of farming and the art of hospitality.” (P06, Agricultural Researcher)

Furthermore, the data revealed a reciprocal issue: a lack of agricultural literacy among certain tour operators, which risks distorting local farming techniques and reducing the educational value of the trip. This demonstrates a basic problem in cross-sectoral professional development.

Theme 3: Community Empowerment and the Risk of Unequal Benefit Distribution

Agro-tourism was widely seen as a significant tool for community empowerment and reviving rural pride. Participants reported a greater appreciation for local traditions and a shared identity based on the district’s agricultural background.

“Our village has developed a sense of pride thanks to this project we are now a tourist destination and we get an income. It’s not just about money; it’s about respect for our way of life.” (P04, Community Liaison Officer)

Despite this good feeling, a serious question arose about the equity of benefit distribution. Informants cautioned that if economic benefits are concentrated among a few individuals or external investors, it may result in internal community tensions, exclusion, and a breakdown of the social support required for sustained development.

Theme 4: The Accentuated Need for Context-Specific Capacity Building

All stakeholder groups emphasised the urgent need for targeted capacity building. Farmers need training in hospitality, customer service, and fundamental company management, whereas tourist professionals need basic knowledge of agricultural and livestock production. The existing training landscape is insufficient, as evidenced by three major constraints:

- Limited Financial Support- Insufficient capital to invest in training programs.
- Inaccessibility- Training centres are frequently located in urban areas, which presents logistical issues for rural farmers.
- Language Barriers- Training resources are frequently unavailable in local languages or adapted to the specific context of the Nuwara Eliya region.

“There is an essential aspect for a farmer to learn it is in customer service which is also vital for a tour guide to know, about agricultural especially the process of crop and livestock production as well as the technology used.” (P01, Agricultural Trainer)

Theme 5: Cultural and Environmental Stewardship as a Double-Edged Sword

The third topic emphasises the importance of preserving local knowledge, ecosystems, and cultural practices as both a fundamental resource for agro-tourism and a major responsibility. Participants acknowledged that natural beauty and cultural authenticity are the primary draws for travellers.

“Tourists visit to see the natural beauty of things that we must take care of it and not only market it.” (P08, Travel Itinerary Planner)

Conversely, the data revealed a strong awareness of the potential for cultural dilution and environmental degradation resulting from poorly managed tourism. This negative outcome is a key perceived cost that must be mitigated to ensure the long-term viability of the sector.

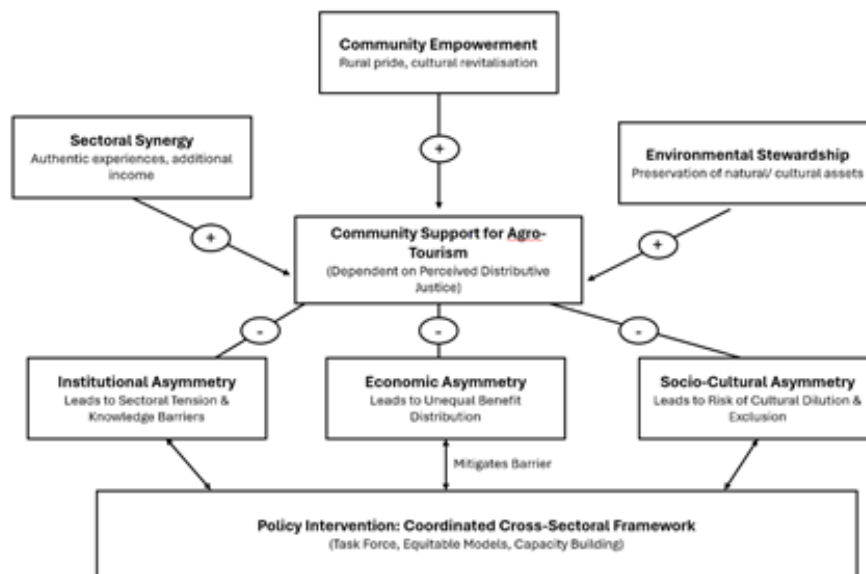
4. DISCUSSION

This study examined the structural barriers and prospects for agro-tourism development in rural Sri Lanka, with a focus on the Nuwara Eliya District. The findings, based on a multi-stakeholder approach, not only confirm several established themes in the global agro-tourism literature, but also provide a unique, context-specific lens through which to examine the applicability of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Stakeholder Theory in a developing economy setting.

Theoretical Implications: Integrating Findings with SET and Stakeholder Theory

The empirical results offer a robust platform for engaging with the theoretical frameworks established in the literature review.

Figure 4: A Conceptual Model of Asymmetric Dynamics in Agro-Tourism Development



Source: Authors' elaboration

Introducing a Framework of Asymmetric Development Readiness (ADR)

The findings of this study reveal that the primary barriers to agro-tourism development are not merely a lack of resources, but fundamental asymmetries between the agricultural and tourism sectors, and within the community itself. We conceptualize this condition as Asymmetric Development Readiness (ADR), a context-specific refinement that synthesizes well-established issues in community-based tourism (e.g., Mtapuri et al., 2022), stakeholder governance (e.g., Freeman, 1984), and rural development literature (e.g., Radović et al., 2020). ADR builds on these frameworks by highlighting multi-dimensional misalignments in capacity, incentives, power, and institutional support within the Sri Lankan rural context, offering a localized lens for understanding why balanced integration often fails. While not claiming distinct explanatory power beyond this setting, ADR provides a modest tool for analyzing similar asymmetries in other developing economies, subject to further empirical testing for transferability. The data point to three core dimensions of this asymmetry: institutional, economic, and socio-cultural, as visualized in Figure 4. This ADR framework offers a nuanced, exploratory explanation for the challenges in agro-tourism initiatives, complementing rather than replacing generic sustainability models that may assume pre-existing balance absent in contexts like rural Sri Lanka.

ADR and Social Exchange Theory: The Potential Role of Distributive Justice

The findings on Community Empowerment and Unequal Benefit Distribution (Theme 3) are clearly consistent with the key principles of SET, which state that support for tourism is determined by the perceived ratio of benefits (rewards) to costs. The local community's stated pride and economic gains are the incentives that motivate support for agrotourism. However, the specific worry about the asymmetry of these benefits (i.e., some people benefiting solely from economic advantages) adds an important nuance. This suggests, in this exploratory context, that community support may be influenced not only by net benefit, but also by distributive justice a concept already discussed in prior SET-based tourism research (e.g., Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Orgaz-Agüera et al., 2020). Given the small sample and qualitative design, this insight builds modestly on existing work, highlighting equity as a potential mediator in rural Sri Lanka without claiming strong generalizability. If the perceived costs (e.g., increased social friction, marginalisation) outweigh the advantages for a large percentage of the community, collective support for agro-tourism will dwindle, regardless of overall economic growth. This finding critically engages with the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which champions equitable benefit-sharing as a core tenet. The study suggests a contextual refinement to SET, where equity appears to mediate the cost-benefit analysis in this setting, though this requires validation through larger-scale studies. The risk of unequal distribution we identified represents a direct challenge to achieving the participatory and empowering ideals of CBT frameworks.

ADR and Stakeholder Theory: Managing Sectoral Asymmetries

The examination of Sectoral Tension (Theme 1) and Knowledge Transfer Barriers (Theme 2) demonstrates the practical applicability of Stakeholder Theory. The success of agro-tourism is dependent on the successful management of multiple and frequently competing stakeholder interests specifically, farmers (primary producers) and tourism operators (service providers). The friction observed in Theme 1 demonstrates a failure in stakeholder salience, in which the tourism industry fails to prioritise farmers' urgent need to preserve agricultural productivity. Furthermore, the information transfer barrier (Theme 2) is the direct result of inadequate relationship management between these two essential groups. According to the report, a successful agro-tourism framework must go beyond simple partnership to build official, institutionalized processes that recognize the agricultural sector's legitimacy and influence in the design and implementation of tourism operations—aligning with prior stakeholder applications in tourism (e.g., McComb et al., 2016; Wondirad et al., 2020). Due to limited representation per group, these interpretations offer preliminary insights rather than robust comparative analysis.

Policy and Practical Implications

The study's findings provide precise, actionable suggestions for policymakers and practitioners in Sri Lanka.

Form a Joint Sectoral Task Force- To alleviate sectoral friction (Theme 1) and knowledge obstacles (Theme 2), a formal task force comprised of Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Tourism, and local farmer cooperatives is required. This group should be tasked with developing a standardised curriculum for cross-sectoral capacity building (Theme 4), ensuring that training is context-specific, financially accessible, and available in local languages.

Implement Equitable Benefit-Sharing mechanisms- To mitigate the danger of unequal distribution (Theme 3), local governments should require and oversee transparent, community-led benefit-sharing mechanisms. This may include imposing a small community development charge on all agro-tourism revenue, which would be controlled by a democratically elected village council, ensuring that the social benefits outweigh the individual costs forecast by SET.

Prioritise Stewardship in Regulation- Because cultural and environmental resources are inextricably linked (Theme 5), a regulatory system that prioritises stewardship above marketing is necessary. Policy should prioritise reducing visitor numbers in sensitive areas, implementing stringent waste management regulations).

Furthermore, learning from successful agro-tourism models in countries like Thailand and Malaysia, which have established robust institutional linkages and public-private partnerships (Srisomyong & Meyer, 2015; Jaunis et al., 2022), is crucial. In contrast, the Sri Lankan context reveals a significant institutional void that such a task force would need to address.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provides a deep, contextualized understanding of agro-tourism dynamics in the Nuwara Eliya District. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. As a qualitative, exploratory study based on grounded theory, its primary aim was theoretical insight and depth rather than statistical generalizability. The findings are therefore context-specific to a distinct agro-ecological and cultural zone in Sri Lanka's central highlands. The sample size (n=8), while sufficient to reach theoretical saturation and provide a diverse range of key stakeholder perspectives, necessarily limits the breadth of views captured.

These limitations, inherent to the chosen methodological approach, include restricted depth per stakeholder group with each category represented by only one or two participants which constrains the robustness of comparative stakeholder analysis. Consequently, claims regarding differences between stakeholder groups (e.g., farmers versus tour operators) should be treated as exploratory observations warranting further investigation with larger, group-specific samples, rather than as definitive stakeholder-level conclusions. Furthermore, the ADR framework was developed from this single case study; its analytical utility in other developing economy contexts remains untested and represents a priority for future comparative research.

Building upon these findings and limitations, we propose three critical avenues for future inquiry:

1. **Comparative Qualitative Analysis:** A multi-sited qualitative study across Sri Lanka's diverse agro-ecological zones (e.g., the dry zone, the coastal belt, and the wet zone) is essential. This would test the transferability of the Asymmetric Development Readiness (ADR) framework and uncover region-specific manifestations of institutional, economic, and socio-cultural asymmetries.
2. **Quantitative Validation and Modeling:** The exploratory insight from this study, which suggests distributive justice as a potential mediator of community support within SET, requires quantitative validation. A large-scale survey statistically testing the relationship between perceived benefit equity, overall community costs/benefits, and support for agro-tourism would powerfully generalize this study's core theoretical proposition.
3. **Action Research and Policy Pilots:** Future research should adopt participatory action research methodologies to design, implement, and evaluate the concrete policy interventions suggested in this study. This includes longitudinal studies on the efficacy of cross-ministry task forces, hybrid governance models, and pilot agro-tourism innovation zones in actively mitigating the ADR barriers identified herein.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study, based on a qualitative analysis of key stakeholder views in the Nuwara Eliya District, offers a critical assessment of the potential and structural barriers to agrotourism growth in rural Sri Lanka. The study successfully identified five core themes: emergent synergy and sectoral tension, inter-sectoral knowledge transfer barriers, community empowerment versus unequal benefit distribution, the need for context-specific capacity building, and the double-edged sword of cultural and environmental stewardship, which collectively define the operational landscape of this emerging sector.

The main contribution of this research is a modest, context-specific refinement of established frameworks to the environment of a developing economy. Using the Social Exchange Theory (SET), the study suggests that distributive justice may play a mediating role in determining community support for agro-tourism in this setting, building on prior equity discussions in SET literature. The findings indicate that the long-term survival of these projects may be influenced not just by the size of financial incentives, but also by the equity with which they are distributed, as perceived disparities could undermine community support though these insights are preliminary and require further validation given the small sample. Furthermore, the analysis used Stakeholder Theory to identify the root cause of operational challenges, revealing that knowledge transfer barriers and sectoral tension are symptoms of a failure in relationship management and a lack of institutionalised mechanisms to recognise the legitimate power and urgency of the agricultural sector's interests.

From a practical aspect, the study emphasises the critical necessity for a coordinated, multi-ministerial policy formulation methodology. The current ad hoc growth of agro-tourism must be replaced by a strategic framework that includes: (1) the establishment of a formal, cross-sectoral task force to manage the inherent tension between farming and tourism; (2) the implementation of transparent, community-led benefit-sharing models to ensure equitable distribution of rewards; and (3) the development of context-specific, accessible capacity-building programmes tailored to the unique needs of rural farmers in the While the findings are specific to Nuwara Eliya and exploratory in nature, they provide useful preliminary insights for other developing countries looking to use agrotourism for rural development. Future research should focus on quantitative validation of the suggested SET refinement for distributive justice, as well as comparative studies across Sri Lanka's varied agro-ecological zones to test the generalisability of these structural impediments. Finally, this study suggests that agro-tourism has potential for improving rural livelihoods in Sri Lanka, provided that its development is guided by a strong, equitable, and theoretically informed strategy that prioritises the interests of primary agricultural producers as well as long-term stewardship of the local environment and culture subject to further empirical testing.

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APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What would need to change, taking into account all the benefits and expenses, in order for you to provide more robust support for the future growth of agrotourism?
2. Which major infrastructure obstacles such as those related to roads, water, energy, and communication are now impeding the development and quality of agrotourism in this region?
3. How have traditional farming methods and the day-to-day lives of farmers in this area been impacted by the rise of tourism, especially agro-tourism?
4. Do you think that all parties involved farmers, locals, and outside investors, for example—are receiving a fair share of the advantages produced by agrotourism? Would you kindly explain why or why not?
5. What information or abilities do you think are essential for bridging the agriculture and tourism industries, and what are the primary barriers to effective knowledge sharing?
6. What are the primary social or cultural issues that the community is facing as a result of agro-tourism, aside from financial costs? Examples include traffic, cultural shifts, and rising living expenses.
7. How well do the various stakeholders in agro-tourism (e.g., government, farmers, commercial operators) communicate and collaborate on planning and decision-making?

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