

Sustainable rural tourism development in Ethiopia: Leveraging economic growth, infrastructure improvements, and cultural heritage

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Abstract: Rural tourism, which offers authentic cultural and nature-based experiences, is increasingly recognized as a vital tool for sustainable development. Ethiopia, with its rich rural landscapes and cultural heritage, holds immense potential for rural tourism, but the sector remains underdeveloped. This study assesses the facilitating conditions and challenges of rural tourism in Ethiopia using a mixed-methods approach. Results indicate that Ethiopia's economic growth, improved rural infrastructure, large rural population, higher ethnic and religious diversity index, and 11 UNESCO World Heritage Sites provide strong foundations for rural tourism. However, significant challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited marketing, restricted access to financing, ethnic conflicts, environmental degradation, and insufficient stakeholder cooperation hinder its growth. To address these barriers, the study proposes a model encompassing strategic investments in infrastructure, enhancing marketing and promotion, access to finance initiatives, conflict resolution strategies, sustainable tourism practices, enhancing stakeholder coordination, and supportive policy frameworks. By employing these strategies, Ethiopia can harness the full potential of its rural tourism sector, contributing to economic development and community well-being while promoting cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. Also, the proposed model is highly applicable to other developing economies that share similar contexts. Besides, given the importance of the seven fundamental pillars of the model, it remains relevant across tourism types like coastal destinations.

Keywords: rural tourism; facilitating conditions; barriers; mixed-methods approach; sustainable development; Ethiopia

1. Introduction

According to the UNWTO (2024a), rural tourism is a “type of travel where visitors experience activities connected to nature, agriculture, the local way of life and culture, fishing, and scenic attractions”. It encompasses a wide range of forms/types including agri-tourism, ecotourism, culinary tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, heritage tourism, gastronomic tourism and community-based tourism (UNWTO, 2024b). In particular, rural tourism involves various activities including hiking, biking, camping, fishing, hunting, wildlife observation, swimming, helping with chores, learning about agricultural practices, picking fruits and vegetables (Rosalina et al., 2021). Moreover, rural tourism comprises of cooking classes, farm-to-table meals, visits to food and beverage producers, visits to museums, historical sites, and traditional festivals, wildlife watching, conservation projects, volunteering,

rock climbing, white-water rafting, and spelunking (Rosalina et al., 2021). Key opportunities from rural tourism are job creation, livelihood enhancement, depopulation mitigation, cultural heritage conservation and environmental protection (UNWTO, 2024b). Also, it is widely believed that rural tourism offers a win-win scenario for both tourists and local communities (Garau, 2015). Travelers get a unique and enriching experience, while rural areas get a much-needed economic, social, and environmental benefits (Liu et al., 2023). Besides, rural tourism can be implemented as alternative to mainstream development (Sidali et al., 2015). Cognizant of this, rural tourism has emerged as a significant global trend with a lot of states prioritizing it and expecting its future improvement (UNWTO, 2024b). However, rural tourism faces various challenges that hinder its growth and development including infrastructure gap, rural depopulation, lack of education, training, and skills development (Nair et al., 2015). Similarly, capacity to attract and retain talent in the workforce, limited access to financial systems, restrictions on developing innovative tourism products, managing natural resource degradation impacts, and limitations in data management, digitalization, and knowledge management prevent rural tourism from booming (UNWTO, 2024b).

Ethiopia is endowed with diverse rural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and unique traditions which offer an exclusive experience for tourists seeking authentic and immersive experiences (Bayih and Singh, 2020). Despite this potential, Ethiopia's rural tourism sector re-mains relatively unexplored. Even though there are various studies which assessed Ethiopia's potential for tourism in general and particularly for specific tourism types, however, Ethiopia's potential for rural tourism is absent from the current body of knowledge. Thus, this study aims to address this critical gap in existing literature by providing a brief summary of the potentials and challenges of rural tourism in Ethiopia, and proposing recommendations for the way forward. Specifically, the study aims to: i) Assess the facilitating conditions of rural tourism in Ethiopia, looking at Ethiopia's economy and rural infrastructure, rural population percentage, population diversity, and World Heritage sites; and ii) Evaluate the main challenges that hinder rural tourism development in Ethiopia. The structure of the paper is the following: Section 2 summarizes the materials and methods applied. Section 3 presents the results of the study, Section 4 discusses the findings, and Section 5 draws conclusions and provides recommendations for the future.

2. Materials and methods

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis, to assess the potentials and challenges of rural tourism development in Ethiopia. Quantitative data was collected from a range of secondary sources, including the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI, 2024), Central Statistics Agency of Ethiopia (CSA, 2024), and the UNESCO World Heritage Site database (UNESCO, 2024). Descriptive analysis (mean, std. dev., min and max) of key indicators, such as GDP (current USD), GDP per capita (current USD), annual CPI change to previous year, GDP (constant 2015 price level, USD), GDP per capita (constant 2015 price level, USD), access to electricity, rural (% of rural population), and access to clean fuels and technologies for cooking, rural (% of rural population),

over the period 1960–2023 was employed. Also, Ethiopia’s ethnic and religious diversity indices were computed using the Greenberg formula (Bacsi, 2017). These facilitated the identification of the facilitating conditions for rural tourism development in the country.

Additionally, a systematic literature review was conducted to identify the challenges hindering rural tourism development in Ethiopia. The review followed a structured protocol, beginning with a keyword search using terms such as “rural tourism,” “challenges,” and “Ethiopia” on the Google Scholar database. The inclusion criteria were limited to studies published in English in the last 10 years, focusing on Ethiopia’s rural areas. The first search yielded about 120 results. After screening the titles and abstracts, 100 studies that did not meet the established inclusion criterias were eliminated. Finally, full-text review of 20 studies was performed to ensure relevance and adherence to the research focus. These selected studies were subjected to thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2016) which allowed the identification of key themes related to the challenges of rural tourism development such as limited infrastructure, marketing and promotion, financing, ethnic conflicts, environmental degradation, and stakeholder cooperation. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, triangulation (Johnson and Sylvia, 2018) was undertaken by comparing the study’s findings with previous works. By employing this comprehensive mixed-methods approach, the study was able to provide a thorough analysis of both the potentials and challenges of rural tourism in Ethiopia, offering evidence-based recommendations for fostering sustainable rural tourism development in the country.

3. Results

3.1. Potentials of rural tourism development in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has a wealth of resources that can be leveraged to create a thriving rural tourism industry. They are discussed as follows:

3.1.1. Economic growth and improved rural infrastructure

Ethiopia has experienced significant economic growth, as evidenced by rising GDP and GDP per capita (1960–2023). Ethiopia’s GDP has shown substantial growth over time, with a marked increase from the early 1960s to 2023, despite variability due to economic fluctuations and structural changes in the economy. The steep increase in GDP, particularly in recent decades, reflects Ethiopia’s economic expansion driven by investment in infrastructure, agriculture, and services. The country’s GDP crossed the \$100 billion mark around 2020, which is a notable milestone (see **Table 1**). Similarly, Ethiopia’s GDP per capita rose from \$74.08 in 1960 to \$1293.78 in 2023, despite slower growth and wider variation (see **Table 1**). During the same period, Ethiopia experienced an annual inflation rate of 9.93% on average. Real GDP measured in USD at 2015 price levels showed a more than 21-fold increase, from \$5.26 billion in 1960 to \$112.65 billion in 2023, reflecting a 33% annual growth rate. Per capita real GDP also grew by 377%, reaching \$890.35 in 2023, albeit with more fluctuations due to population growth (see **Table 1**). In terms of rural infrastructure, access to electricity has greatly improved, with 43% of rural areas electrified in 2022 compared to virtually no access in the 1980s. Although historically low (18.26% mean access), progress has

accelerated due to government initiatives in expanding rural electrification through grid and off-grid solutions. Similarly, access to clean cooking technologies in rural areas saw a slight increase from 0.30% to 0.60% in 2022, despite modest gains (see **Table 1**). These improvements in economic growth and infrastructure create an enabling environment for rural tourism development by enhancing accessibility, service quality, and the overall tourist experience (Gica et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2018; Streimikiene et al., 2020).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of Ethiopia’s major economic and rural infrastructure indicators from 1960–2023 (Author’s own computation based on WDI, 2024).

Indicators	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
GDP (current USD)	\$23.8 bn	\$3.51 bn	\$1.61 bn (1960)	\$164 bn (2023)
GDP per Capita (Current USD)	\$285.26	\$268.71	\$74.08 (1960)	\$1293.78 (2023)
Annual CPI change to previous year	9.93	11.25	−9.81 (1986)	44.36 (2008)
GDP (constant 2015 price level, USD)	26.81	28.57	5.26 (1960)	112.65 (2023)
GDP per Capita (constant 2015 price level, USD)	367.95	183.70	215.64 (1992)	890.35 (2023)
Access to electricity, rural (% of rural population)	18.26%	14.42%	0.60% (1984)	43% (2022)
Access to clean fuels and technologies for cooking, rural (% of rural population)	0.40%	0.09%	0.30% (several years)	0.60% (2022)

3.1.2. Higher rural population percentage

As shown in **Figure 1**, Ethiopia’s total population increased steadily, from approximately 21.7 million in 1960 to around 126.5 million in 2023. Although the percentage of the rural population decreased over time, from 93.57% in 1960 to 76.84% in 2023, this still represents a significant portion of the total population. Rural tourism can capitalize on this large rural population by offering authentic and immersive experiences that align with sustainable development goals (Rainero and Modarelli, 2020). Rural tourism could also provide alternative income sources for local communities, thereby reducing reliance on agriculture and mitigating rural-urban migration.

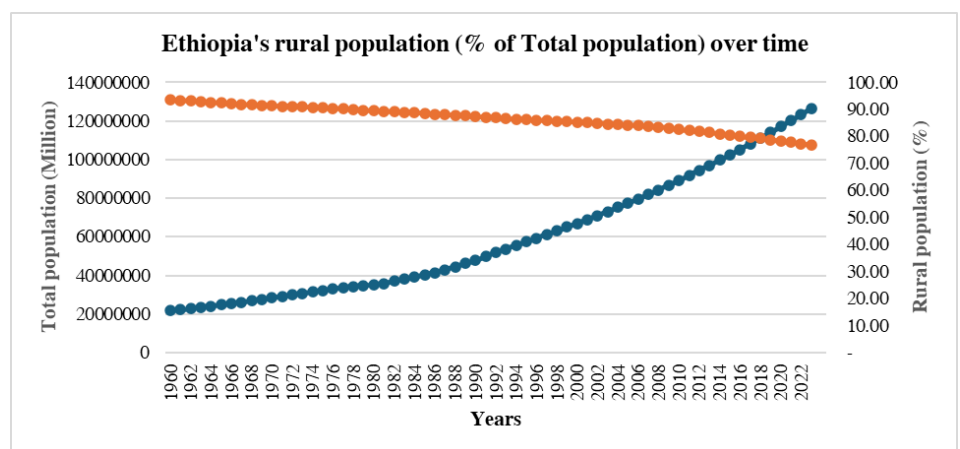


Figure 1. Rural population (% of total population) of Ethiopia from 1960–2023 (Source. Author’s computation based on WDI, 2024).

Note: The orange color shows the share of rural population, according to the right axis, while the blue color indicates the total number of rural inhabitants in million, according to the left axis.

3.1.3. Diverse population

Table 2 presents the ethnic and religious diversity indicators for Ethiopian population, based on the Greenberg-formula (Bacsi, 2017). The index measures the probability of the event, that randomly selecting two individuals from the total population, they belong to different groups of the population. If there is only one group in the population, i.e., all the people belong to the same group, the index has the value of 0 indicating absolute homogeneity. If, however each individual belongs to a different group, then the index is equal to 1. The formula is often used for measuring ethnic, linguistic and religious fractionalization, too. As **Table 2** indicates, the diversity index values are rather high for Ethiopia, indicating that the probability of two random members of the population to belong to different ethnic groups is around 79%–80%, and it is around 66% regarding religious groups. However, this high diversity is not unique for Ethiopia, East African countries are similarly diverse, as is reflected by the diversity values for Kenya and Uganda. South Africa, on the contrary, seems far more homogeneous, and world averages generally show diversity indicators around 0.45 (Bacsi, 2017). With diversity being a valuable resource for tourism growth when well-managed (Bacsi, 2017), Ethiopia’s diversity offers significant potential for rural tourism and could be utilized to provide unique experiences such as cultural immersion, homestays, festivals, and handicraft workshops.

Table 2. Diversity index values for Ethiopia, 2007, 2012, 2016 (Authors’ own computation).

Diversity Index	Ethiopia, 2007	Ethiopia, 2012	Ethiopia, 2016	Kenya, 2016	Uganda, 2016	South Africa, 2016
Ethnic	0.795656	0.792126	0.799798	0.898382	0.926175	0.331066
Religion	0.660484	0.659916	0.658054	0.785346	0.711498	0.256306
Source of data	(CSA, 2024)	(Britannica, 2024)	(The World Factbook, 2024)	(The World Factbook, 2024)	(The World Factbook, 2024)	(The World Factbook, 2024)

3.1.4. Most UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Africa

Ethiopia boasts around 11 UNESCO World Heritage Sites (**Figure 2**) of which 9 are cultural (Aksum, Fasil Ghebbi, Harar Jugol, Konso Cultural Landscape, Lower Valley of the Awash, Lower Valley of the Omo, Rock-Hewn Churches, The Gedeo Cultural Landscape, and Tiya) and 2 are natural (Bale Mountains National Park and Simien National Park). This makes it the country with the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Africa. Additionally, there are 7 sites on the Tentative List to be considered for nomination (UNESCO, 2024). Given the fact that heritage sites are popular tourist spots worldwide, attracting many visitors and helping increase tourism income (Bacsi et al., 2023) Ethiopia’s heritage sites, which are often located in or near rural areas, can be leveraged for rural tourism development offering tourists the opportunity to explore the country’s rich cultural and natural heritage while experiencing the unique lifestyle of rural communities.

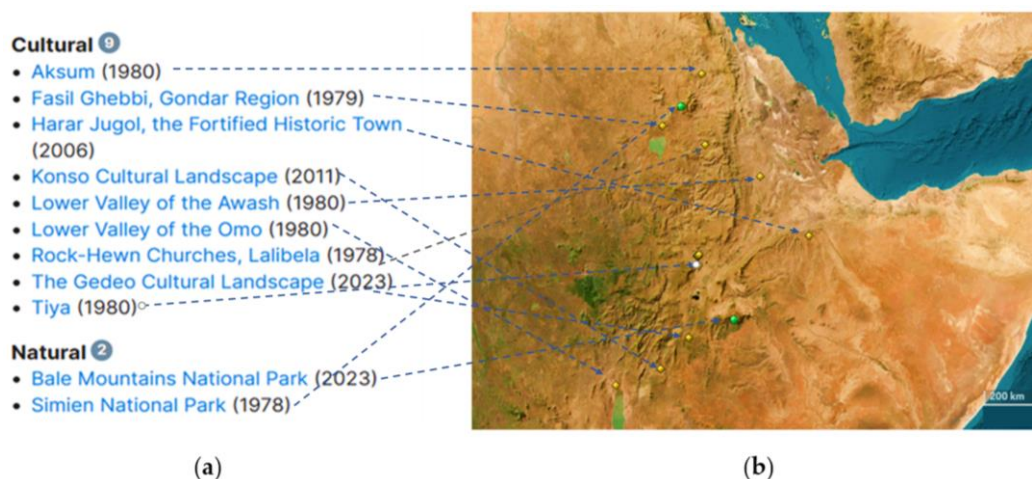


Figure 2. (a) Ethiopia’s properties inscribed on the World Heritage List (Source: UNESCO, 2024); (b) Location of the World Heritage Sites (Source: UNESCO, 2024).

3.2. Challenges of rural tourism development in Ethiopia

3.2.1. Limited/lacking infrastructure

Numerous studies have identified limited or inadequate infrastructure in rural Ethiopia as a significant impediment to tourism development. Transportation infrastructure, in particular, is highlighted as a major obstacle due to poor road conditions, a lack of public transportation options, and limited access to remote areas, all of which create substantial challenges for tourists (Fakana and Mengist, 2019; Mekonnen and Mekonen, 2023; Soressa, 2018). Furthermore, the scarcity of tourist-standard accommodations, including hotels and guesthouses, is a major issue in many rural areas, making it difficult for tourists to find comfortable lodging (Desalegn, 2023; Mekonnen and Mekonen, 2023). The lack of essential utilities, such as reliable electricity, clean water, and sanitation facilities, also discourages tourists from visiting rural regions (Teshome et al., 2022; Wondirad, 2020). Additionally, poor internet connectivity and limited mobile phone coverage further hinder tourists from staying connected and sharing their experiences (Kebede, 2020; Teshome et al., 2020). These deficiencies in infrastructure significantly reduce Ethiopia’s competitiveness in rural tourism compared to destinations with better amenities and services.

3.2.2. Limited marketing and promotion

Limited marketing and promotion of rural tourism in Ethiopia present another major challenge. Several studies have reported a lack of awareness about Ethiopia’s rural attractions, both domestically and internationally (Bayih and Singh, 2020). The absence of promotional materials, such as brochures, websites, and social media campaigns, exacerbates this problem, leaving potential tourists unaware of the unique experiences rural Ethiopia can offer (Fakana and Mengist, 2019; Soressa, 2018). When marketing does exist, it is often poorly targeted or not effectively distributed to the appropriate audiences (Dadi et al., 2022). As a result, Ethiopia’s rural tourism sector struggles to compete with destinations that heavily invest in promotion and maintain a strong online presence (Gabayo, 2020).

3.2.3. Limited access to financing

Limited access to financing is a major barrier to rural tourism development in Ethiopia. Entrepreneurs in rural areas face difficulties obtaining loans due to factors such as lack of collateral, poor credit histories, high-interest rates, and limited access to microfinance institutions (Fakana and Mengist, 2019; Soressa, 2018). Even when loans are available, the high-interest rates make repayment difficult, which discourages investment in tourism ventures such as lodges, homestays, or tour services (Mekonnen and Mekonen, 2023). Microfinance institutions offer smaller loans, but their reach is often limited in remote areas (Wondirad, 2020). Additionally, many rural entrepreneurs are unaware of available financing options, further restricting their ability to access capital for tourism-related enterprises (Soressa, 2018). These financial constraints impede the establishment and growth of rural tourism businesses, stifling the potential of the sector.

3.2.4. Conflict between ethnic groups

Ethnic tension and conflict in Ethiopia pose another significant challenge to rural tourism development. Ethnic violence and political unrest often deter tourists from visiting regions perceived as unsafe (Karimi et al., 2021). These conflicts can damage critical infrastructure such as roads and bridges, further limiting access to rural areas (Dadi et al., 2022). Additionally, ethnic conflicts displace local communities, disrupt traditional lifestyles, and degrade cultural experiences that are central to rural tourism (Desalegn, 2023). Negative media coverage of these conflicts can overshadow Ethiopia's tourism potential, further diminishing its appeal (Gabayo, 2020).

3.2.5. Environmental degradation

Environmental degradation is another pressing issue affecting rural Ethiopia. Deforestation, soil erosion, and desertification reduce the aesthetic value of rural landscapes, which are key attractions for tourists (Teshome et al., 2022). The destruction of habitats and the decline in wildlife populations also negatively impact wildlife tourism, an important segment of Ethiopia's rural tourism sector (Soressa, 2018). Deforestation and climate change further diminish water availability, limiting tourism activities such as sightseeing near lakes and rivers or engaging in recreational activities like boating or fishing (Yilma et al., 2016). The degradation of natural resources strains the livelihoods of local communities, making it more difficult for them to support tourism (Woyesa and Kumar, 2021). These environmental challenges complicate efforts to develop sustainable rural tourism in Ethiopia.

3.2.6. Weak cooperation among stakeholders and insufficient government support

Lack of cooperation among tourism stakeholders in Ethiopia's rural areas is a recurring challenge (Bekana, 2023). The fragmentation of service provision among tour operators, accommodation providers, and local communities often results in a disjointed tourist experience, where visitors struggle to find coordinated services or comprehensive information (Bayih, 2019). The unequal distribution of tourism benefits, particularly when local communities do not share in the gains, leads to resentment and undermines the long-term sustainability of the tourism sector (Teshome et al., 2020). Insufficient government support also hampers rural tourism

development. The absence of clear, comprehensive policies on rural tourism creates uncertainty for investors and slows sector growth (Ali, 2016). Furthermore, local governments often lack the expertise and resources necessary to effectively plan and manage tourism in rural areas (Gabayo, 2020). These limitations prevent Ethiopia from fully realizing the potential of its rural tourism sector.

4. Discussion

The findings in this study highlight Ethiopia's significant potential for rural tourism development, underpinned by a range of economic, infrastructural, demographic, cultural, and environmental resources. In particular, the robust economic growth, improvements in rural infrastructure, high rural population percentage, ethnic and religious diversity, and 11 UNESCO World Heritage Sites form a unique basis for sustainable rural tourism. The country's large rural population creates a foundation for authentic cultural experiences and community-based tourism. This is also evident in Uganda and Kenya, where rural tourism successfully leverages local communities for activities like traditional homestays and cultural festivals (Strydom et al., 2020). Ethiopia's higher religious and ethnic diversity also offers opportunities, comparable to Kenya (Kelliher, 2018) and Tanzania (Mkiramweni, 2014) where diversity drives tourism through experiences with diverse communities groups like the Maasai. The country's UNESCO World Heritage Sites further support rural tourism providing a dual advantage if effectively utilized—the preservation of cultural heritage while fostering local economic benefits. This finding echoes with the results of Mbowe et al. (2021) and Nzama (2008) who revealed that heritage sites are integrated with local community initiatives and conservation efforts in Tanzania and South Africa respectively.

However, despite its potential, Ethiopia faces several challenges in developing rural tourism including limited infrastructure, weak marketing, restricted access to financing, ethnic conflicts, environmental degradation, weak cooperation among tourism stakeholders and insufficient government support. Most of these issues are also observed in other East African countries in general (Okello and Novelli, 2014). In particular, limited infrastructure, including poor road networks, inadequate accommodations, and unreliable utilities, is a notable constraint observed in Uganda (Ayikoru, 2015), Rwanda (Kabanda, 2014) and Kenya (Chege, 2015). Similarly, Ethiopia's lack of adequate marketing efforts also mirrors challenges in Uganda, where limited promotion of rural tourism hampers visibility and competitiveness in the global tourism market (Jones and Lechiguero, 2024). Likewise, the challenge of limited access to financing including high-interest rates, lack of collateral, and limited financial literacy are reported in Rwanda (Njenji, 2020) and Kenya (Nzomo et al., 2021). Likewise, ethnic conflicts are seen in Kenya's Rift Valley (Kieti et al., 2020) and Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (Busey, 2014). Furthermore, environmental degradation, particularly deforestation, trail erosion, and water contamination, are also prevalent in Tanzania (Mafuru et al., 2009). Lastly, weak cooperation among tourism stakeholders and insufficient government support is common in Zimbabwe and Zambia, where poor collaboration has resulted in

mismangement of tourism resources (Gohori and Van der Merwe, 2022; Mwango, 2022).

5. Conclusion

To foster a vibrant and sustainable rural tourism sector in Ethiopia, a multifaceted approach involving strategic interventions, policy reforms, and stakeholder collaboration is necessary. In particular, the recommendations are proposed:

- **Infrastructure development:** Improving infrastructure is foundational for successful tourism development as it directly impacts accessibility, safety, and visitor satisfaction (Dumitraşcu et al., 2023). The Ethiopian government, in collaboration with the private sector and other stakeholders should prioritize the development of roads, utilities (such as water and electricity), and tourist accommodations in rural areas. Drawing lessons from Rwanda's comprehensive road network upgrading, which improved tourist accessibility (Kabanda, 2014), and Kenya's effective public-private partnerships (Chege, 2015), Ethiopia could enhance both domestic and international tourist flow to rural destinations. Also, mapping out critical routes (Lourens, 2007), establishing rural rest stops and visitor centers (Beazley, 2024) and creating incentives for private-sector investment in accommodations and eco-friendly facilities (Nekmahmud and Fekete-Farkas, 2021) could make rural Ethiopian destinations more attractive.
- **Enhancing marketing and promotion:** A comprehensive rural tourism marketing strategy should be developed to showcase Ethiopia's diverse rural tourism products and services. This include the creation of an Ethiopia-centric campaign that highlights the unique cultural diversity, heritage sites, and authentic rural experiences in the country. Given social media's indispensable role for shaping visitor motivation and perceptions (Tham et al., 2020), the country can attract more visitors and enhance overall brand reputation by providing a wealth of information, visual content, user-generated reviews and even collaborative campaigns. Successful marketing campaigns like "Magical Kenya" (see <https://magicalkenya.com/>) and Uganda's niche tourism strategies (Jones and Lechiguero, 2024) serve as models for using digital platforms to reach wider audiences.
- **Facilitating access to finance:** To address financial barriers, tailored financial support mechanisms (Lebambo and Shambare, 2020) should be implemented, focusing on rural tourism entrepreneurs who often lack the capital needed to start or expand their businesses. In particular, building on Rwanda's Community-Based Tourism Initiative (Njenji, 2020) and Kenya's conservancy financing model (Nzomo et al., 2021), Ethiopia could develop microloan programs and targeted grant opportunities for rural tourism operators. These initiatives would enable local communities to develop attractions, accommodations, and guiding services, further strengthening the rural tourism sector. Additionally, government and non-governmental organizations should offer capacity-building initiatives (mainly financial literacy workshops) to support sustainable business growth and financial management in rural tourism enterprises (Maldonado-Erazo et al., 2022).

- **Conflict resolution and community engagement:** To address ethnic tensions and social conflicts, inclusive community engagement and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms should be implemented. Kenya's Maasai Mara Conservancies, which have successfully reduced ethnic tensions through co-management agreements and equitable benefit-sharing (Kieti et al., 2020), provide a valuable model for Ethiopia to adopt similar strategies that promote cooperation and trust among diverse ethnic groups. Specifically, the country could benefit from organizing community dialogues to foster understanding among different ethnic groups, establishing community-managed funds to ensure that tourism revenues benefit all members equitably, and implementing training programs that equip local leaders with conflict-resolution skills (Khater and Faik, 2024). This inclusive approach not only builds trust and strengthens community ties but also creates a stable tourism environment and improves the overall tourist experience.
- **Implementing sustainable tourism practices:** In light of environmental challenges such as deforestation and water contamination associated with rural tourism, Ethiopia should adopt rigorous sustainable tourism frameworks. Learning from South Africa's isimangaliso Wetland Park (Nzama, 2008) and Tanzania's Kilimanjaro Environmental Conservation Program (Kilungu et al., 2019), the country could establish regulations for eco-friendly infrastructure, promote conservation education, and encourage responsible tourism practices among visitors and local operators. In particular, enforcing strict waste management protocols, promoting eco-certification for rural accommodations, and investing in conservation projects in collaboration with local communities could protect Ethiopia's natural and cultural heritage (Nzama, 2008; Kilungu et al., 2019).
- **Strengthening stakeholder coordination:** An integrated approach to rural tourism requires active collaboration among key stakeholders, including government bodies, private enterprises, local communities, and NGOs (Wondirad et al., 2020). Establishing a national framework for rural tourism, similar to Namibia's Community-Based Tourism Association (NACOBTA), could streamline resource management, policy implementation, and tourism development (Lapeyre, 2010). This framework could focus on regular stakeholder meetings, joint decision-making processes, and the creation of a shared database for tracking rural tourism performance and resources (Roxas et al., 2020). In addition, stakeholder training programs and workshops should be conducted to align the goals and roles of each stakeholder group in fostering sustainable tourism growth (Graci, 2020).
- **Policy and institutional support:** For rural tourism to flourish, the government of Ethiopia should revise and strengthen policies that prioritize rural tourism within the national tourism agenda. Such policies should aim to create enabling conditions for private-sector investment, provide fiscal incentives (such as tax breaks) for rural tourism development, and ensure sufficient budget allocations for capacity-building initiatives and infrastructure projects (Trusova et al., 2023). In particular, updating national tourism legislation to reflect sustainable tourism priorities, simplifying bureaucratic processes for tourism entrepreneurs, and expanding rural tourism research to guide evidence-based policymaking are vital

(Dias et al., 2024). Also, drawing on international best practices (Liu et al., 2020; Trusova et al., 2023), Ethiopia could establish dedicated tourism development zones in rural areas, supported by tourism-friendly policies that promote innovation and investment in sustainable rural tourism projects.

The graphical representation of the proposed model is presented in **Figure 3**.

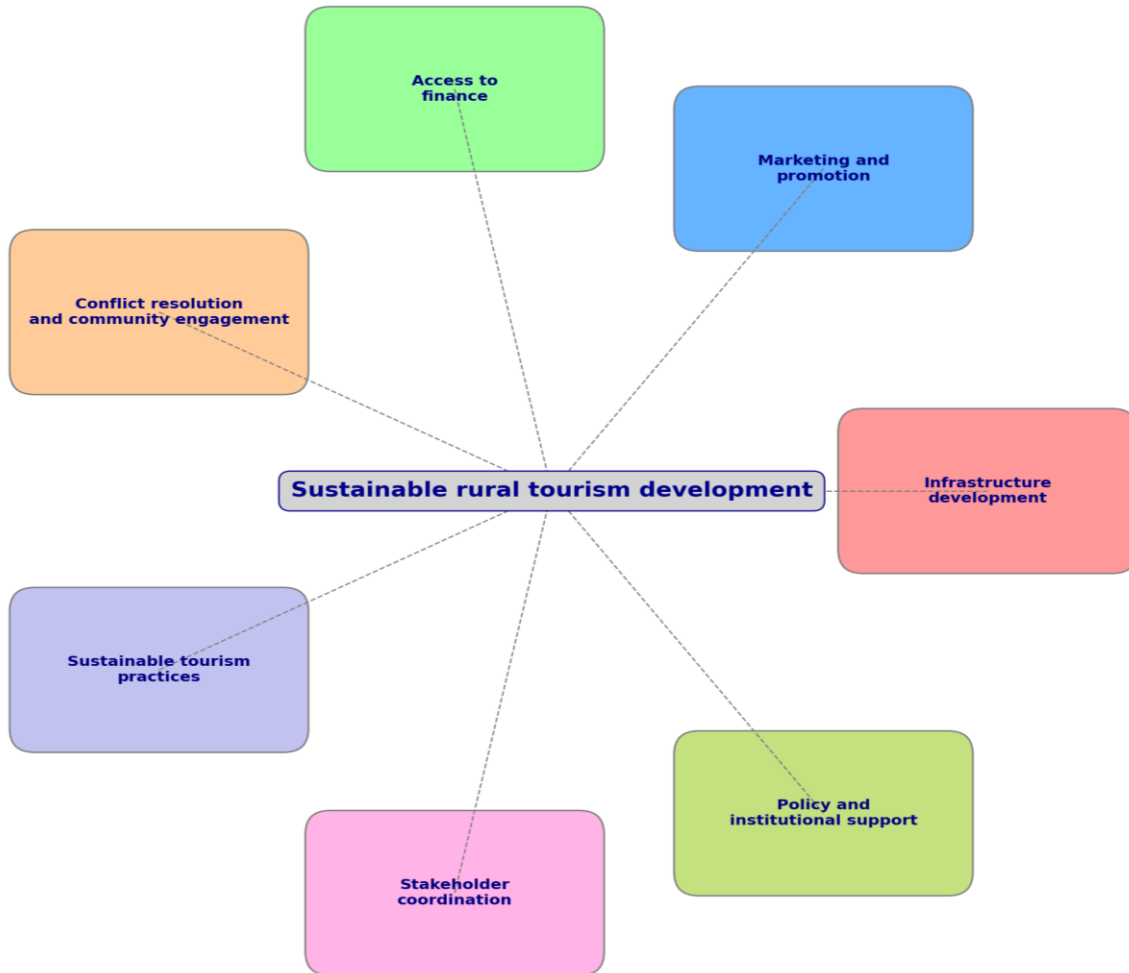


Figure 3. Proposed model for sustainable rural tourism development.

By employing these strategies, Ethiopia can unlock the full potential of its rural tourism sector, contributing to economic growth, community development, and cultural preservation while promoting sustainable tourism practices. Also, the proposed model is highly applicable to other developing economies that share similar contexts. For example, countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and/or Latin America, with similar assets and/or challenges to that of Ethiopia, can apply these strategies to leverage their own economy, rural infrastructure, diverse populations and heritage sites as tourism assets for sustainable rural tourism development. Besides, given the importance of the seven fundamental pillars of the model, it remains relevant across tourism types like coastal destinations. Visitors to rural tourism destinations tend to be different from those visiting coastal destinations regarding their age, motivations, their willingness and ability to spend (Andriotis, 2011), and therefore their approach to the issues of sustainability, and openness to local cultures and authentic experiences may differ. However, from the tourism development viewpoint

the issues of economic growth, infrastructural development and preservation of cultural heritage are important issues in coastal destinations, too (Meo et al., 2021) although the actual challenges, and the possibilities of handling them may be different by destination type.

While the study provides valuable insights into the potential and challenges of rural tourism development in Ethiopia, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. First, the study primarily relied on secondary data, which may not capture the most recent developments or localized nuances of rural tourism in specific regions of Ethiopia. Second, the use of a systematic literature review, though rigorous, may have omitted relevant studies due to exclusion criterias, especially studies published in languages other than English. Lastly, the study's national-level scope may limit its applicability to specific local contexts where unique factors may influence rural tourism differently. Future research should consider primary data collection methods, such as key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations, to provide a more in-depth understanding of rural tourism from the perspectives of local communities, tourists, and policymakers. Moreover, future studies could focus on specific regions within Ethiopia to explore localized potentials and challenges in rural tourism development, providing a more tailored set of recommendations.

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