



Vol. 31 | Post COVID-19 Recovery and Sustainable development

Vol. 31 Article 11 | June, 14 2026

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## Sustainable Tourism Policy in Western Kenya Tourism Circuit: Wildlife and Cultural Tourism Development, Opportunities, Challenges and Strategies

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**Cite as:** Wawire, C. R. (2026). Sustainable Tourism Policy in Western Kenya Tourism Circuit: Wildlife and Cultural Tourism Development, Opportunities, Challenges and Strategies. *International Journal of Social and Development Concerns*, 31(11), 160–168. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20685627>

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**Abstract:** Sustainable tourism policy and planning is the systematic process of creating guidelines, strategies and frameworks to promote tourism that is economically viable, environmentally sound and socially equitable over long term. This is by minimizing negative impacts, enhancing wellbeing of local communities, supporting the preservation of natural and cultural heritage and ensuring high-quality visitor experience. A tourism circuit is a planned route that links a group of tourism attractions or destinations, allowing tourists to travel from one to another in a logical, accessible sequence, often returning to the starting point. Circuits aim to enhance visitor experience, increase average stay and spending of tourists and distribute tourism benefits across multiple areas. Kenya through the National Tourism Policy 2020 addressed sustainable tourism development amicably by defining and developing indicators of sustainable development for the country and the county governments' role in enhancing the same. The policy also addressed the various tourism circuits that are known and the county's role in developing and managing tourism in their respective localities. From the reviewed literature it is evident that destinations that have embraced sustainable tourism policies, have been able to conserve their pristine environment, developed economically, has active stakeholder participation and the local culture remains preserved for future utilization by the anticipated generations. The main purpose for this study is to find out the opportunities, challenges and strategies of implementing sustainable tourism policy in the Western tourism circuit which is rich in both wildlife attractions such as Ruma national park, Kisumu impala sanctuary, Saiwa Swamp National Park, Mt Elgon National park and Kakamega forest reserve. Cultural attractions within the circuit include Nabongo cultural center, Kisumu museum, Kitale museum and bullfighting in Kakamega. The study is a desktop review which uses secondary data to address the issue of policy in the western Kenya tourism circuit. The study is also guided by three theories namely, sustainable development theory, triple bottom line theory and stakeholder theory which focuses on integration, balance and long-term planning. The main opportunity for the western tourism circuit is its strategic location with the neighboring east African countries hence can easily attract tourists beyond the Kenyan borders. The main challenge is however poor policy framework which has left the region with poor infrastructure and low promotion campaign. Excellent strategies for this circuit include proper representation of the wildlife and cultural attractions in the National tourism policy and involvement of all stakeholders in the initial planning stages for better promotion and marketing of the destination. These focus and be broadened to the other circuits within and beyond the Kenyan boundaries.

**Key Words:** Sustainability; Tourism policy; Circuit; Strategic Positioning, Stakeholder Involvement

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

The National Tourism Policy 2020 states that tourism circuits in Kenya are fully integrated systems of transport infrastructure and alternative nodes, supported by a range of infrastructure, technologies and building sources. Most of the circuits however, are not well developed and lack basic auxiliary services to support tourism. The government has purposed to develop effective integrated tourism circuits, encourage cooperation among counties on development of shared resources and circuits and establish signage and display boards showing tourism maps and documentation on places of interests and tourism attractions.

County tourism development plans involve tourism attractions and facilities are located in certain localities throughout the country. Tourists visit and enjoy the wonderful tourism experience. The county governments are the custodians of tourism products and services hence play a vital role in tourism development in the country. In this regard the tourism policy stipulates that the national government in collaboration with county governments endeavor to develop frameworks and mechanisms for collaboration with county governments, support county governments in the development of local tourism products through issuance of guidelines and technical assistance, support county governments to provide necessary tourism infrastructure, encourage counties to provide necessary tourism infrastructure, encourage counties to provide incentives for potential investors in the tourism industry and encourage and support counties to establish and maintain tourism information centers and tourism signage.

Kenya's tourism circuits are increasingly focusing on sustainable tourism practices to ensure long-term benefits for both the environment and local communities. This includes promoting responsible tourism, protecting natural resources and ensuring fair economic and social benefits for all stakeholders. The government, through organizations like Kenya Tourism Board (KTB) is actively implementing policies and initiatives to encourage sustainable tourism. Kenya's sustainable tourism policy in various circuits encourages environmental conservation by encouraging tourists to plant trees, championing for green practices such as waste reduction; community involvement through community-based tourism, fair distribution of benefits and; respecting the local culture. Policy and regulations by formulating National Tourism Policy and codes and practices, and formation of tourism circuits such as North Rift, coastal, western, central, Nairobi, south rift, northern Kenya tourism circuits.

This study focuses on sustainable tourism policy and planning of Western Kenya circuit which is endowed with attractions such as Kakamega tropical rainforest, Lake Victoria, Kit Mikayi, Ruma and Mt Elgon National Parks. The region has rich culture from the Luhya and Luo citizens of Kenya including circumcision ceremonies, bullfighting and death rituals.

### **1.2 Justification of the Study**

Tourism policies guide tourism development and practices in every tourism destination. Streamlined policies act as opportunities for potential wildlife and cultural tourism development especially in western Kenya which has lagged behind for a long time despite its great tourism potential. This study aims to provide insights and guidelines on how the region can achieve sustainable development goal number one on poverty reduction as they venture in tourism activities other than over relying on small scale agriculture which for a long time has been the economic backbone of the region. The county governments are likely to benefit as they collaborate with other developed destinations such as Nairobi and the coast

circuits hence increasing tourist arrivals in the destination. This in turn increases the revenues for the county governments, (Gatwiri & Kimaiyo, 2023). This collaboration will promote resource sharing such as accommodation transfers leading to comfort ability of travellers. An inclusive policy in the region will make it possible from local communities to substantiate the benefits gained from both wildlife and cultural tourism, making it a great motivation for their economic diversification.

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to critique the western Kenya Tourism circuit and its sustainability in wildlife and cultural tourism development with a focus on opportunities, challenges and strategies.

### 1.4 Theoretical review

*Sustainable Development Theory*: This is a foundational theory which posits that development should meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It integrates the economic, social and environmental dimensions of progress, focusing on balancing them equitably.

*Triple Bottom Line (TBL)*: This concept is also known as “people, planet and profit”, provides a framework for evaluating a project’s impact across the three dimensions namely; environmental which deals with protecting ecosystems, biodiversity and natural resources; social which ensures social equity, fair benefits, community wellbeing and cultural preservation; and lastly economic aspect which promote economic growth, job creation and stable, long-term financial viability.

*Stakeholder theory*: This theory was developed by Edward Freeman and it argues that the successful long-term management of a business or project requires engaging and balancing needs of all stakeholders. All the three theories emphasize on integration, balance and long-term planning of the tourism policy for it to be implementable.

### 1.5 Empirical Review

Khan et al. (2021) studied the sustainable Tourism Policy, Destination Management and Sustainable Tourism Development. A Moderated-Mediation Model. Sustainable tourism promises protection of the complex relationship between sustainable policy, management, and tourist behavior. Authors examined the relationships between sustainable tourism policy and destination management, destination social responsibility, and tourist value orientation with sustainable tourism development participants were recruited at managerial level coming from 163 Malaysian companies using cross-sectional quantitative study, using partial least square structural equation modeling. They proposed that sustainable tourism policy and destination management and destination social responsibility significantly impact sustainable tourism development. Moreover, destination social responsibility partially mediates the relationship between sustainable tourism policy and destination management and sustainable development.

Khan et al 2020 argued that tourism contributes to economic growth and well-being has been widely acknowledged; however, its impacts on the environment demand an integrated approach to policy improvement across institutions in the emerging economies for the development of sustainable tourism practices. The study investigates the causal relationship between tourism, economic growth (GDP, Capital investment) energy consumption and environmental pollutants in developing economies, explicitly focusing on the case of Pakistan. Various econometric procedures and techniques were applied to test the proposed hypotheses. The findings suggest that economic growth support tourism development. Tourists’ arrivals have a significant positive impact on energy consumption, capital

investment and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; besides environmental pollutant (CO<sub>2</sub>) causes negative effects on tourism. Results suggest that I unit increase in capital investment increases CO<sub>2</sub> emissions metric tons per capita by 0.26 units in the long-run. A one unit increase in capital investment increases CO<sub>2</sub> emissions metric tons per capita by 0.21 units, and a one unit increase in energy consumption increases CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, metric tons per capita by 0.51 units in the long run. Sustainable tourism remains a sole option in developing economies to enhance the competitiveness of tourism as a tool for friendly development. Thus, tourism policies are needed to be integrated with overall economic, environmental, and energy policies to encourage the shift towards sustainable tourism development to minimize environmental pollution.

Farmaki (2020), conducted research on regional network governance and sustainable tourism. It is evident that effective governance sustainable tourism. It is evident that effective governance has been identified as one of the most important factors in sustainable tourism implementation. As governance structures are increasingly becoming network-based, attention needs to be diverted to the effectiveness of partnerships in achieving sustainability in tourism. The study conducted in Cyprus considered regional tourism organizations (RTO's), public private network involving exploratory research using semi-structured interviews with key tourism stakeholders. Findings reveal that network governance-related challenges interact with region-specific characteristics, inhibiting the effectiveness of regional tourism governance in implementing sustainable tourism. RTO's represent a weak form of governance and their effectiveness in implementing sustainable tourism is limited by the continuing dependence on foreign tour operators, a system of mutual favors which complexities the nature of tourism planning and a growing emphasis on economic interests further fueled by recent austerity measures imposed by Cyprus. The study concluded that network governance cannot be considered separately from the socio-cultural, economic and environmental factors of the context in which it is studied and proposes that further research reflects the horizontal relations across regional, national and global networks.

Hall (2021) researched on construction of sustainable tourism development: The 2030 agenda and the managerial ecology of sustainable tourism. The UN 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development sets a series of sustainable development goals (SDGs) to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all by 2030. The agenda influences tourism policy even though the agenda resolution only mentions tourism three times. A 'heterogeneous constructionism' approach was adopted to examine the managerial ecology tourism and the SDGs. Managerial ecology involves the instrumental application of science and economic utilitarian approaches and in the service of resource utilization and economic development. A managerial ecological approach is integral to UNWTO work on the SDGs, as well as other actors, and is reflected in policy recommendations for achievement of the SDGs even though tourism is less sustainable than ever with respect to resource use. This situation substantially affects capacities to do 'other' and create alternative development and policy trajectories. It concluded that a more flexible understanding of knowledge and management is required to better understand the implications of knowledge circulation and legitimization and action for sustainable tourism. More importantly, the study recommended the need to rethink human-environment relations given the mistaken belief that the exertion of more effort and greater efficiency will alone solve problems of sustainable tourism.

Matiku et al 2020, conducted a study on sustainable tourism planning and management of sustainable livelihoods. They found out that communities play an important role in the process of tourism

development, planning and successful operation of tourism development and their support is essential for the development, planning and a successful operation of tourism development, and their support is essential for the development, planning and successful operation of tourism development, and attainment of sustainable livelihoods. Community-driven tourism projects are supposed to benefit the community and contribute to their livelihoods. However, majority, ultimately do not benefit communities because of poorly or mismanaged institutional structures. The study recommended an all-stakeholder oriented model where the community is at the center with an element of co-management with other sectors, considering the sustainability of communities' livelihoods.

Ivars et al 2021 carried out a study on sustainable tourism indicators; to find out what's new within the smart city/destination approach. They noted that indicators are fundamental tool for destinations in their progress towards a more sustainable tourism development. However, a lack of real progress and accelerated technological change are obliging policy makers to rethink the existing indicator systems. The study examined the relationship between smart cities and destinations and sustainable tourism indicators by analyzing proposals at different scales. It provides a critical review of international smart city standards and the role that sustainability indicators play within them. Content analysis of planning instruments applied in smart strategies in Spain, focusing on how sustainability indicators are considered under the smart paradigm. At the regional local scale, this research compares two sets of indicators and tests the scientific validity of one of them for addressing the imbalance suffered by many indicators between their usefulness for policy makers and their academic rigor. The results show that little progress has been achieved despite the appropriation of the sustainability discourse by smart city destination promoters. These findings reveal that the (limited) real contribution made by smart cities/destinations to sustainable tourism development and contribute to identifying weaknesses and opportunities so as to redirect smart policies and projects. A final discussion contextualized the findings within the novel framework of smart sustainability and highlights the need to reinforce public governance of urban and tourist spaces.

Sustainable tourism development and competitiveness: the systematic literature review by Streimikieru et al 2020 noted that it is of great significance to plan and develop tourism purposefully and sustainably through the search and compromises between environmental, economic and social aims of society. The sustainable development management has to retain high satisfaction degree of tourist's needs, assure significant experience and consumers. Higgins- Desbiolles (2023) studied the subsidiary in tourism and travel circuits in the face of climate change crisis. The study applied the notion of proximity tourism as a springboard. Proximity travel describes touring nearer to home and subsidiary describes a prioritization of narrower travel circuits in the interests of reducing tourism's contribution to climate change, as well as underpinning local thriving through more localized tourism.

Guilarducci & Fratucci (2020) conducted an analysis of the social network of the Instance of Governance of the Caminho Novo Tourist Circuit; a complex and systematic perspective. The objective of the study was to analyze the composition, organization and operation of the Caminho Novo-MG Tourist Circuit (CTCN) within the context of public tourism policies, supported the complex systems theory and using as theoretical support the complexity paradigm proposed by Edgar Movin, Beni's SISTUR model (1998) and its reconstruction proposed by Moesch and Beni (2015, 2017). They used the snowball method and content analysis and the elaboration of sociograms of the relationships between social agents. Results indicated lack of a regional network capable of producing useful results, the low understanding of the

municipalities on public tourism policies, a substantial municipal and regional interference linked to a context of discontinuity of public management and a competitive position with reduced participation of social agents to work in a network.

Constantino et al (2022) conducted a study on digital and territorial Trails System for developing sustainable tourism and enhancing cultural heritage in rural areas in San Giovanni Lipioni, Italy. The case study area has 150 inhabitants and no significant economic activities; hence the research aimed at describing the crucial role of nature-oriented tourism in economic, social and revitalization strategy and how digital tools can be used to map and create a territorial trail system between municipalities; and finally outline the operations necessary for reactivation. The proposed methodology consisted of a first digital survey phase using GPS receivers and outdoor navigation apps. The second phase created a web platform with a system of virtual itineraries between villages, named the 'Golden Leaves Paths'. The last phase concerned the creation of analysis factsheets to guide the maintenance of paths and the design of iconic signage with artistic illustrations based on the oak leaves leitmotif to be installed along the paths. Local social promotions then employed the outcomes, technical drawings and strategic reactive paths as an attractive element for nature-oriented tourism and create a digital platform to foster the village's territorial and cultural heritage.

Badar & Bahadure (2020) assessed tourism sustainability in hill town; case study of Shimla, India. Hill towns form a popular niche in tourism destinations. They are renowned for their natural beauty and distinctive cultural traditions. The tool used specified seven dimensions of sustainable tourism; tourism assets, tourism activity, tourism related linkages, tourism related leakages, environmental and social sustainability, infrastructure and attractiveness. Primary data were collected through questionnaire surveys of local households and arriving tourist. Visual surveys conducted to map-built environment and land use. Secondary data were gathered from government reports and scholarly articles. A framework of indicators and sub-indicators was developed to analyze the data at two levels-city and ward. While the appraisal of the city provides an overall view of the performance of the tourism industry, at the ward level a comparative analysis was carried out to reveal sector related potentials and issues. The study reveals the imbalanced tourism concentration in the core of the city as compared to other wards and the gap between tourist potentials and infrastructure development.

Buzinde & Caterina (2023), carried out a study on tourism policies and inclusive development in Rwanda and Kenya. The study utilized textual analysis to interrogate the development policies for the two nations. It comprised of three tenets; social inclusiveness, ecological inclusiveness and relational inclusiveness. This framework is rooted in theories of social justice and sustainable development. Social inclusiveness was accounted for in the findings vis-à-vis the participation of all in development as well as protection and capacity building for the most vulnerable. However participatory public processes aimed at pluralizing knowledge that inform development were not supported. Evidence for ecological inclusiveness included accounts on ecological limits, just sharing of the responsibility and risks of climate change and participation of all stakeholders. Accounts on steps taken to protect the most vulnerable to climate change and engage all stakeholders in mitigation were absent. Relational inclusiveness included discussions on rule of law; however, wealth redistribution, critical assessment of taxation policies and protection of public resources from privatization were notably absent. The omissions for locally defined and equitable approaches do development have become more profound

globally, particularly in Africa, thus it is imperative for the tourism industry to align with these decolonial ideals.

Owiyo (2018) conducted a study on strategic determinants of destination competitiveness: a case study of Western Tourism Circuit, Kenya. The researcher noted that although western Kenya is the best kept secret of the country, the circuit is the least competitive as most tourists prefer coastal and selected protected areas. The study was grounded on and guided by Richie and Crouch (2003) model of destination competitiveness. The variables studied were destination attractors, support resources, destination management and safety and security. Objectives of the study were to examine the effect of safety and security on the relationship between destination competitiveness determinants and destination competitiveness. Explanatory research design was used to gather information while convenience sampling technique was applied to derive a sample of 102 tourists. Closed ended questionnaires were used to collect data. Multiple regression analysis was applied to test the hypothesis and deduced models that explained the strategic determinants of tourism destination competitiveness. Findings revealed that destination attractors were found to positively and significantly affect destination management and support resources had a negative though insignificant effect on destination competitiveness. The study recommended that further research in the other seven circuits is necessary to identify strengths and weaknesses in the destination so as to formulate implementable policies.

### **1.6 Methodology**

This study explored secondary literature review, journals and articles that are well streamlined with tourism policy with main reference being the Tourism Act 2020, the county development plans and the local community regulations that guide the way they perceive the tourism resources around them. Successful destinations helped recommend opportunities, while unsuccessful ones helped come up with challenges and proposed strategies for the case study in question.

### **1.7 Findings**

A sustainable tourism policy for western Kenya tourism circuit should prioritize environmental protection, community involvement and economic benefits while promoting local culture and traditions. The policy should integrate tourism into national development planning, strengthen legal and institutional frameworks, and encourage partnerships among all stakeholders. The key aspects of the policy address environmental sustainability thorough conservation and protection, green practices and habitat preservation, community engagement and empowerment through local benefit sharing, cultural preservation and community tourism, economic viability and growth through investment and incentives and diversification of products, policy and institutional framework through integration with national plans, legal and institutional strengthening and stakeholder collaboration.

In Bangladesh similar study which used qualitative research and secondary data of policies, literature, domestic and international case study addressed a policy gap in Bangladesh's tourism sustainability by identifying a whole system policy strategy. Findings revealed that sustainable tourism development model suggests cooperation between government agencies, local community members, the commercial sector and non-governmental organization. Environmental Impact Assessment conservation and climate change mitigation should be included in tourism management. The approach emphasizes community empowerment, non-uniform tourist benefits, and cultural conservation. The study concluded that Bangladesh's sustainable tourism development should be dynamic, flexible and contingent on sustainability principles to its fullest.

## 1.8 Conclusion

Western Kenya tourism circuit is the country's "best-kept-secret" because of the presence of natural and cultural attractions that have not been exploited for the development of various forms of sustainable tourism. The circuit is home to historical and archeological sites, hills and mountains, waterfalls, national parks and reserves yet despite these treasures; the destination is one of the least competitive in tourism as most tourists to Kenya prefer coastal beaches and selected protected areas. By implementing a comprehensive and sustainable tourism policy, the western Kenya tourism circuit can ensure that tourism contributes to economic, unique, natural and cultural heritage.

## 1.9 Recommendation

The study suggests development of a sustainable tourism model in the circuit which can be incorporated in the tourism policy. This is because the model is a holistic approach to sustainable, inclusive and equitable tourism policies, focusing on ensuring economic growth, environmental conservation and social equity integration for all forms of tourism in the circuit. By involving stakeholders and promoting community participation, the model addresses concerns and power, strategy and interests, and promotes principles of eco-tourism, cultural tourism and climate resilience. This study contributes to a significant policy formulation for the tourism industry.

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