

CREATING A STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT MECHANISM FOR COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN: BOTTOM-UP APPROACH IN ACTION

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ABSTRACT

Community-based Tourism (CBT) is a powerful model for promoting sustainable tourism, local engagement, and cultural preservation. However, within the prevailing neoliberal framework, even alternative tourism models like CBT are often constrained by market-driven priorities that perpetuate inequalities and limit the equitable distribution of benefits. Azerbaijan is a historically multicultural country where diverse ethnic minorities have coexisted for centuries, contributing to the nation's rich cultural fabric. This study aims to explore the feasibility of establishing a strategic development framework for CBT using a bottom-up approach in Azerbaijan. Through qualitative research, specifically focus group interviews with tourism experts and stakeholders, the study identifies the primary challenges to the successful implementation of CBT in the region. The challenges identified include insufficient infrastructure, a lack of community awareness, limited support from governmental and institutional bodies, along with limited community participation, unequal distribution of benefits, and conflicts over resource management. The research reveals that adopting a CBT approach could significantly enhance rural tourism development, promote socio-economic equity, and contribute to the country's sustainable tourism goals. The findings highlight the importance of policy innovation, capacity building, and the active involvement of multiple stakeholders to ensure the long-term success of CBT initiatives. The proposed development mechanism aligns with international frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the guidelines of the UNWTO, to position Azerbaijan as a potential leader for community-led tourism in the region.

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Introduction

Tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing global industries, contributing significantly to economic growth, cultural exchange, and job creation (WTTC, 2021). In Azerbaijan, the government has prioritized tourism as a strategic sector to diversify its economy and reduce dependence on energy exports (ATB, 2023). While these initiatives have led to the development of large-scale, urban-centric tourism projects, the potential of rural areas remains largely overshadowed. This overemphasis on conventional tourism models often prioritizes profitability over community well-being, leading to environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and inequitable economic benefits (Richards & Hall, 2000). CBT represents a promising alternative to traditional tourism by placing communities at the center of tourism planning and development. CBT is a participatory approach where local communities manage and benefit from tourism, aiming to reduce inequalities, empower people, and preserve cultural heritage (Goodwin, 2007). On the other hand, Mearns (2003) emphasizes that CBT must not only involve communities but also address their capacity limitations through training and capacity-building initiatives. Critically, CBT is not limited to rural settings, although it is predominantly associated with them. In urban contexts, community-driven tourism initiatives often take the form of neighborhood revitalization projects, cultural festivals, or guided tours showcasing local lifestyles (Salazar, 2011). Rural CBT initiatives, however, frequently focus on integrating traditional livelihoods such as farming, handicrafts, and ecological stewardship into the tourism experience. Thus, CBT can thrive in both urban and rural environments, adapting to the socio-cultural and economic context of the area.

In Azerbaijan, with its rich cultural heritage and diverse landscapes, CBT has the potential to address rural poverty, reduce urban migration, and promote cultural sustainability. Regions such as Sheki and Guba, known for their UNESCO-listed cultural assets, exemplify the opportunities for CBT development in the country (UNESCO, 2024). While some rural destinations, such as Sheki with its rich cultural heritage, have successfully embraced CBT principles, many initiatives remain controlled by a small group of individuals or external businesses, limiting broader community engagement and diminishing local control over tourism resources. This imbalance often restrains equitable distribution of benefits and reduces the authenticity of CBT practices. Moreover, there is a lack of standardized terminology and clear

frameworks for CBT in Azerbaijan, creating confusion in its application and development. In Azerbaijan, where rural regions face economic stagnation and outward migration, CBT offers a viable solution to these socio-economic challenges. Through integrating rural communities into the tourism economy, CBT can create opportunities for income generation, skill development, and cultural exchange. However, this requires a strategic and well-structured framework that not only empowers communities but also addresses structural barriers such as limited infrastructure, lack of access to markets, and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

The primary objective of this study is twofold: first, to examine how a bottom-up approach can empower local communities to actively engage in and benefit from tourism development; and second, to assess the feasibility of establishing a strategic framework for CBT in Azerbaijan through a practical and actionable bottom-up approach.

Literature Review

This section explores the fundamental principles of CBT and its significance in modern tourism development. Sub-chapter 1: Conceptual Understanding, Scope, and Importance of Community-based Tourism provides an in-depth explanation of what CBT is, its goals, and why it is crucial for sustainable tourism growth. Sub-chapter 2: The Role of Local Participation and the Bottom-Up Approach focuses on how involving local communities in tourism planning and decision-making ensures that the benefits are distributed fairly and in line with local needs. Sub-chapter 3: Challenges and Limitations of Community-based Tourism examines the obstacles and constraints that may hinder the successful implementation of CBT, such as lack of infrastructure, external pressures, and the need for capacity building.

Conceptual Understanding, Scope and Importance of Community-based Tourism

The idea that CBT could serve as a strategy for broader community development became more evident in the early 21st century. Mukherjee & Banerjee (2019) stressed that the key to successful CBT was not just involving local communities in tourism but ensuring that the economic benefits from tourism stayed within the community. This

concept of local empowerment emphasized the need for communities to control and manage their resources, enabling them to make decisions that are aligned with their interests and priorities. According to Goodwin (2016), CBT is a tourism model where communities play a central role in planning, managing, and benefiting from tourism activities, creating opportunities for both economic growth and cultural preservation.

CBT has emerged as a vital approach to sustainable tourism, offering a model that empowers local communities to actively participate in and benefit from tourism development (Timothy & Tosun, 2003). Its benefits vary depending on community conditions and include economic gains, environmental protection, and improved quality of life (Tamir, 2015). At its core, CBT is centered on principles of local ownership, community participation, and sustainable management of resources. Defined broadly, CBT seeks to provide authentic cultural and natural experiences for tourists while ensuring that the economic and social benefits remain within the host community. CBT is defined as responsible visitation to local or indigenous communities that allows for the enjoyment of their cultural and natural heritage, with resources developed and managed through community participation, ensuring that benefits are shared collectively (Boonratana, 2010). Hiwasaki (2006) outlines four main goals of CBT: conserving natural and cultural resources, supporting fair local economic development, empowering communities through active participation, and offering visitors authentic and responsible experiences.

The scope of CBT is vast and adaptable, extending to both rural and urban settings. In rural areas, CBT initiatives often integrate traditional livelihoods such as agriculture, handicrafts, and ecological conservation into the tourism experience. This approach not only provides a source of supplementary income for rural communities but also helps preserve local traditions and biodiversity (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). In urban contexts, CBT takes a different shape, focusing on initiatives such as cultural festivals, guided neighborhood tours, and local entrepreneurship. These projects celebrate the unique identity of urban communities and expand stronger connections between residents and visitors, contributing to urban regeneration and community pride (Salazar, 2011).

A core principle of CBT is active community participation, which empowers communities to manage resources and tourism activities, ultimately securing greater benefits (Tosun, 2000). CBT's flexibility lies in its ability to adapt to the specific socio-cultural and economic contexts of the areas where it is implemented. Unlike traditional top-down tourism models, which are often driven by external stakeholders and prioritize profitability, CBT emphasizes inclusivity and equity (Goodwin, 2007).

While the definitions of CBT vary among scholars and practitioners, they share common elements including local ownership, community control, and the prioritization of community well-being over commercial interests. For example, the *Community-based Tourism Handbook* defines CBT as “tourism that is owned and managed by the community, providing opportunities for local people to gain benefits while preserving their cultural and environmental assets” (*Handbook on CBT*, 2009). At the heart of CBT is a bottom-up approach that emphasizes community participation. This model contrasts with traditional top-down tourism, which often prioritizes external stakeholders’ interests over those of local populations. Local residents play a crucial role in decision-making, and their active participation in tourism planning helps create opportunities to access markets, grow businesses, reduce poverty, and generate jobs (Lo & Janta, 2020). As Harrison (2008) notes, CBT’s success depends on aligning tourism initiatives with the values, traditions, and needs of the host community. CBT is a small-scale, sustainable tourism model that develops interaction between visitors and host communities. It supports natural resource management, builds local infrastructure, and promotes a bottom-up development approach, enabling communities to manage tourism resources while conserving traditions (Boboli, 2023).

Economically, CBT diversifies activities, generates revenue, and creates employment, while socially, it fosters interaction between locals and visitors, empowers communities, and preserves cultural heritage. Environmentally, CBT promotes biodiversity conservation, prevents land degradation, and enhances ecotourism (Ishihara, 2020). It also minimizes environmental impact and educates visitors while strengthening community organizations, empowering women, and alleviating poverty (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Bagus et al., 2019; Lee & Jan, 2019).

Ashley and Garland (1994) identify four models of community participation in tourism development, from passive involvement to active community ownership of tourism enterprises. The first approach involves a private investor operating a tourism facility on communal land, creating employment opportunities, but not directly benefiting the community financially. In the second approach, the investor shares a portion of the revenue with the community, though this remains voluntary and depends on the investor’s initiative. The third model is a profit-sharing joint venture, where the community and the investor share profits, providing more direct financial benefits to the community, although the community’s role in management may vary. Lastly, in a community-owned tourism enterprise, the local population develops and manages tourism activities, ensuring both control and profits remain within the

community.

Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of various tourism types, each with distinct approaches to community engagement, economic impact, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Tourism Types: Key Metrics, Community Impact, Challenges and Primary Focus

Tourism Types	Community Engagement	Economic Impact	Environmental Sustainability	Cultural Preservation	Challenges	Primary Focus
Community-based Tourism	<i>High:</i> Local people actively participate in tourism planning, management, and decision-making (Simpson, 2008).	<i>Moderate to High:</i> Direct benefits include increased local employment and revenue from tourism services (Liu et al., 2019).	<i>High:</i> Focus on sustainable practices, natural resource management, and conservation (Hall, 1996).	<i>High:</i> Local culture, traditions, and heritage are preserved and shared with visitors (Murphy, 1985).	Requires strong community involvement; conflicts between locals and external stakeholders may arise (Ife, 1995).	Empowering local communities through tourism development while ensuring environmental and cultural sustainability.
Responsible Tourism	<i>Moderate:</i> Communities are typically involved in decision-making, but with an emphasis on partnerships rather than control (Holden, 2008).	<i>Moderate:</i> Benefits are often shared through partnerships, with a focus on community-based businesses, providing jobs and promoting fair trade (Goodwin, 2016).	<i>High:</i> Strong focus on reducing the negative environmental impacts of tourism (McCool & Moisey, 2008).	<i>Low to Moderate:</i> Cultural protection is encouraged, but the main focus is on sustainable practices (Scheyvens, 2002).	Issues with over-reliance on tourism, the need for education on sustainable practices (Wearing & Neil, 2009).	Promoting tourism that is ethically responsible and striving to minimize its environmental impact, support local communities.
Pro-Poor Tourism	<i>Moderate to High:</i> Focus on improving the livelihoods of the poorest segments of the population (Ashley et al., 2001).	<i>High:</i> Tourism-related income directly targets poverty alleviation and enhances access to basic services (Torres & Monsen, 2004).	<i>Moderate:</i> Often involves low-impact tourism but may not always focus on environmental sustainability (Ashley et al., 2001).	<i>Moderate:</i> Cultural aspects may be preserved but may not be the primary focus (Goodwin, 2007).	Difficulties in balancing tourism growth with poverty alleviation goals; dependency on tourism (Ashley et al., 2001).	Alleviating poverty and improving living conditions through tourism-generated income.
Sustainable Tourism	<i>Moderate to High:</i> Local communities are key partners in managing sustainable tourism initiatives (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006).	<i>High:</i> Revenue from tourism can be reinvested into local infrastructure and sustainable development projects (Swarbrooke, 1999).	<i>Very High:</i> Emphasizes reducing carbon footprints, sustainable transport, and green building practices (Fennell, 2008).	<i>Moderate:</i> Cultural elements are integrated but may not be the primary focus (UNWTO, 2004).	Managing the tension between economic growth and environmental limits; balancing scale and sustainability (Swarbrooke, 1999).	Balancing tourism development with the long-term health of the environment and society.
Rural Tourism	<i>Low to Moderate:</i> Local involvement is more peripheral, with tourism often focused on rural experiences (Sharples, 2002).	<i>Low to Moderate:</i> Economic benefits mainly benefit those directly involved in tourism, such as farmers or small-scale operators (Ilieva & Ilieva, 2012).	<i>Low to Moderate:</i> Environmental sustainability is often not a primary concern, but focuses on rural landscapes (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).	<i>High:</i> Showcases traditional lifestyles and crafts, fostering pride in local heritage (Warinda & Van der Merwe, 2023).	May lead to over-commercialization of rural areas, leading to loss of authenticity (Muller, 2006).	Promoting rural areas by providing economic opportunities while preserving traditional ways of life.

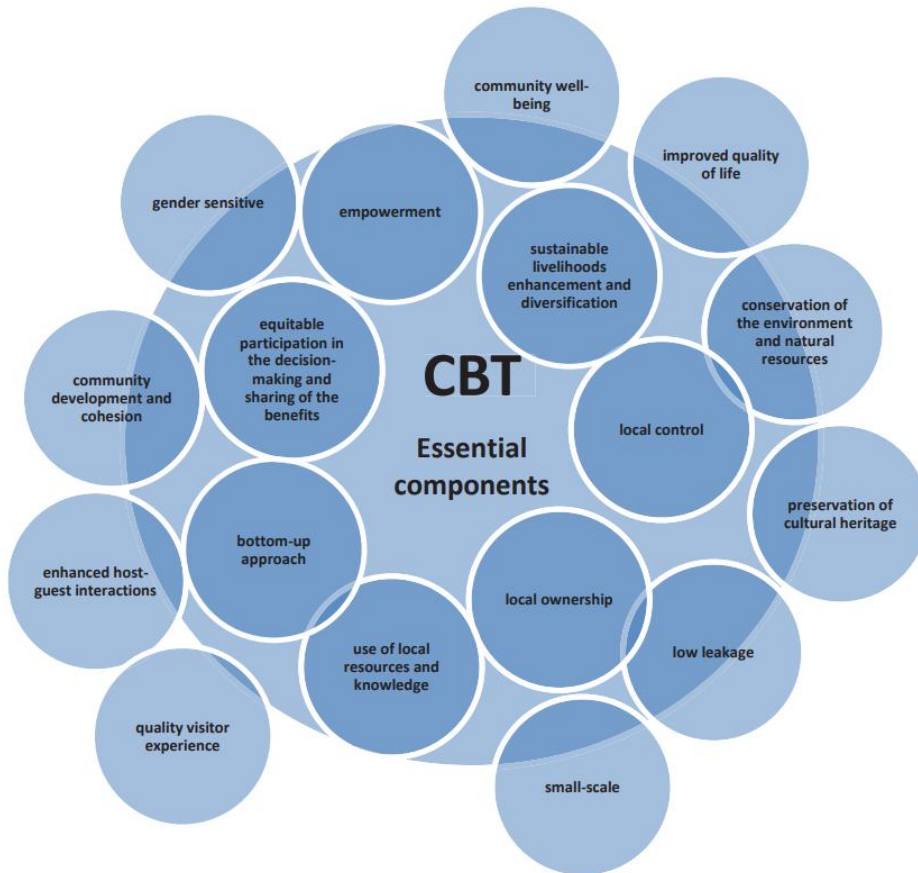
Source: Author's own compilation

Globally, CBT has gained traction as a tool for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, CBT aligns with Goal 8 (promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth), Goal 11 (making cities and communities sustainable), and Goal 12 (ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns) (UNWTO, 2021). CBT helps local communities directly benefit from tourism, which can lead to more equal opportunities and less reliance on traditional industries. It also encourages the protection of the environment and local cultures. This shows how CBT can help achieve sustainability, and it is also relevant in Azerbaijan's tourism plans.

In Azerbaijan, the strategic importance of CBT lies in its potential to bridge the rural-urban economic divide and to promote regional development. The country's rural areas, which encompass rich cultural traditions, historical landmarks, and unique natural landscapes, remain underutilized within its broader tourism strategy. The "Strategic Roadmap on the Development of Tourism in Azerbaijan" (2017) acknowledges the unexplored potential of rural tourism and calls for innovative frameworks to integrate local communities into the tourism value chain. However, there are still not enough practical ways to empower these communities and make CBT work effectively.

The benefits of CBT are seen in many areas, including economic, social, and environmental aspects. Economically, CBT diversifies local livelihoods, generates income, and reduces dependency on single industries such as agriculture or mining (Scheyvens, 2002; Effective CBT: A Best Practice Manual, 2010). Socially, it strengthens community cohesion, preserves intangible cultural heritage, and enhances the self-esteem of community members (Singh et al., 2003). Environmentally, CBT promotes sustainable practices by incentivizing the conservation of natural resources and ecosystems (Weaver, 1998). These benefits show how important CBT can be in creating a positive impact on rural areas.

CBT works best when certain key components are in place. These include community well-being, improved quality of life, respect for local culture, conservation of the environment and natural resources, quality visitor experience, equitable involvement of communities and so on. CBT aims to create a balance between economic benefits, environmental preservation, and cultural sustainability, ensuring that local communities directly benefit from tourism activities (Martokumsumo, 2015). Figure 1 shows the essential components of CBT in a comprehensive way.

Figure 1: Essential components of community-based tourism

Source: Martokumsumo, K. S. (2015). Thesis, Massey University, New Zealand.

The Role of Local Participation and the Bottom-Up Approach

In a tourism context, the “bottom-up” policy approach indicates challenges and opportunities for destination communities to work with the public and private sectors. However, the key question is whether or not all tourism stakeholders are involved at the beginning of development plans, not at the end. This concept of participatory tourism planning is initially developed from the grassroots and extends to the global level by incorporating local wisdom, knowledge, culture and needs through alternative future scenarios of possible global tourism transformation. Continuity of pride amongst people living in destination communities might encourage local participation and maintain a sense of community and social equity for local residents

(Theerapappisit, 2012).

The relationship between CBT and the bottom-up approach is foundational. Unlike top-down tourism models, which often impose externally designed solutions on local communities, the bottom-up approach emphasizes grassroots participation and empowerment (Tosun, 2000). As outlined by Scheyvens (2002), a bottom-up approach enables communities to define their own development goals, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are distributed equitably within the community. In a CBT context, this means that community members are not only participants but also decision-makers in tourism development. Such an approach fosters a sense of ownership, ensures that tourism initiatives align with local values and needs, and minimizes the risks of exploitation or cultural erosion. This approach signifies that local communities are not passive recipients of tourism activities, but rather active stakeholders in shaping the direction of tourism development. It entails a shift in power dynamics, wherein communities are entrusted with the responsibility of planning, managing, and benefiting from tourism in ways that are culturally sensitive and environmentally sustainable. Furthermore, the bottom-up approach facilitates the integration of indigenous knowledge into tourism practices, thereby enhancing the authenticity of the visitor experience (Saarinen, 2006). However, achieving true community empowerment requires addressing power imbalances, providing capacity-building opportunities, and fostering collaborative networks between communities, government agencies, and private sector stakeholders.

Community-based tourism, when implemented with a bottom-up approach, allows local populations to leverage their cultural heritage, natural resources, and skills in ways that enhance both the tourism experience and the community's welfare (Bunten, 2010). The success of CBT lies in the empowerment of these communities, which allows them to control and benefit from the development of tourism in their area (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). A key feature of the bottom-up approach is the recognition of the diverse needs and characteristics of the community. Each community is unique, with its own cultural traditions, environmental context, and social structure. Therefore, the development of CBT mechanisms must take into account these specific factors, ensuring that tourism activities respect local customs and contribute to the well-being of the community. This participatory process helps build a sense of ownership among community members, which is crucial for the long-term success of CBT initiatives (Martokumsumo, 2015).

Challenges and Limitations of Community-based Tourism

CBT has gained recognition as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism, emphasizing local community involvement and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage. However, several constraints hamper the successful implementation and sustainability of CBT initiatives. A key limitation is the lack of community capacity, resources, and institutional support, particularly in rural or underdeveloped regions. In such cases, the success of CBT often depends on external facilitation, such as capacity-building programs and policy frameworks that support local empowerment (Mearns, 2003). The reliance on external support can create dependency, jeopardizing the sustainability of CBT projects over time (Community-based Tourism Toolkit, 2020). Another significant challenge is the uneven distribution of benefits within the community, which can lead to conflicts and resentment. Infrastructure limitations in rural areas, such as inadequate transportation, accommodations, and essential utilities, also pose a significant barrier. Similarly, the lack of skills and training within local communities is a critical barrier. Afenyo-Agbe and Mensah (2022) highlight that these constraints prevent destinations from fully benefiting from tourism, restricting both tourist access and the overall visitor experience. Effective tourism management requires expertise in hospitality, marketing, and sustainable practices, yet many rural areas struggle with capacity-building. As Richards (2002) points out, local communities must possess the necessary skills to manage tourism effectively and deliver quality services. Without proper training, CBT initiatives may fail to meet the expectations of tourists, undermining their success. Marketing and promotion are essential to attracting visitors, yet financial limitations and a lack of expertise in rural areas hinder the development of effective marketing strategies. Tosun (2000) emphasizes that marketing is crucial for new and emerging destinations to reach potential tourists. Without proper promotion, these areas are unable to capitalize on tourism opportunities. Furthermore, sustainability concerns, such as the risk of over-tourism and environmental degradation, also pose challenges to CBT. While CBT aims to promote environmental conservation, Scheyvens (1999) warns that unmanaged tourism growth can lead to overcrowding and resource depletion, undermining the goals of CBT.

Economic constraints, including the lack of financial resources for infrastructure development and marketing, further limit the potential of CBT initiatives. Honey (2008) underscores that financial investment is often a significant obstacle for community-based tourism ventures. Without adequate funding, these initiatives struggle to

compete with more established destinations. Communities often lack the funds to maintain control of resources, which may result in reliance on external enterprises. As Goodwin and Santilli (2009) note, limited financial resources, lack of expertise in tourism management, and inadequate infrastructure can hinder the scalability of CBT initiatives. Additionally, externally imposed CBT projects, even if well-intentioned, risk failing due to a misalignment with community priorities or unrealistic expectations. The risk of commercialization and loss of authenticity as tourism demand grows further complicates the sustainability of CBT (Salazar, 2011). This can lead to the commodification of culture and a loss of the original cultural values that attract visitors in the first place.

Finally, issues related to diverse community dynamics, such as class, gender, and ethical factors, can hinder full participation and inclusivity in CBT initiatives. Insufficient resources, information, and stakeholder consultation further exacerbate these challenges, creating vulnerabilities that may undermine the effectiveness of CBT projects (Scheyvens, 2002).

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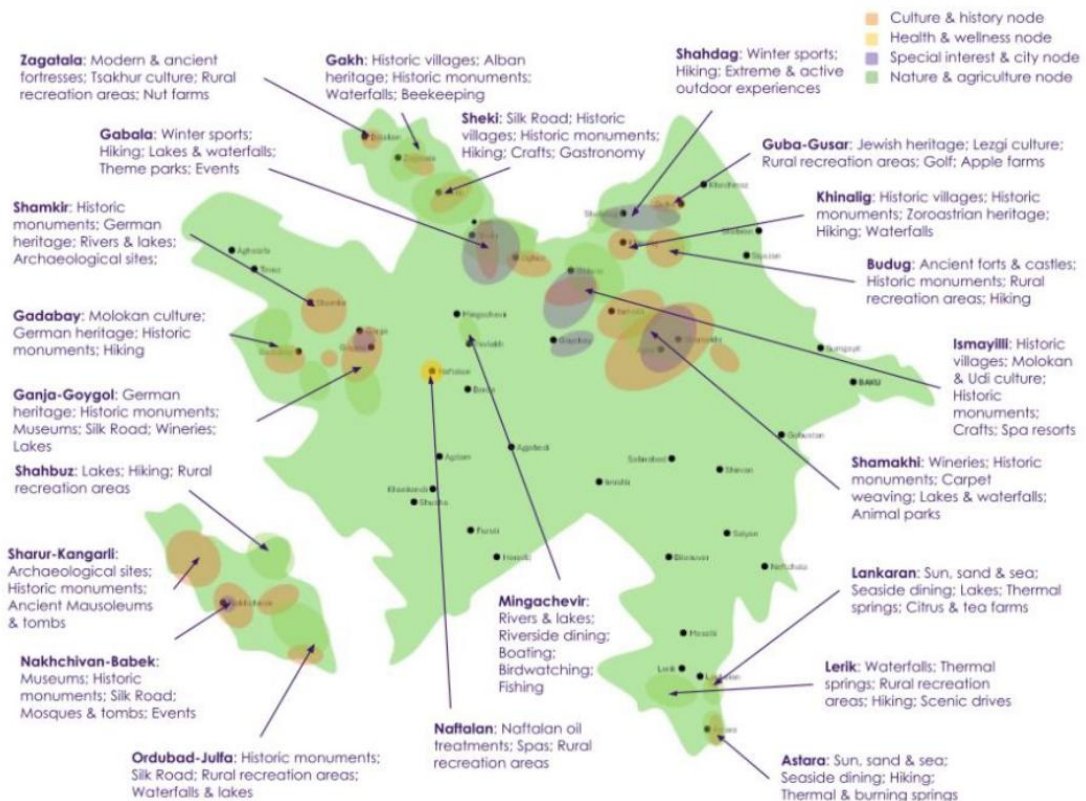
This section examines Azerbaijan's potential for developing CBT, highlighting the country's cultural and natural resources as key assets. The research focuses on identified priority tourism clusters, international experiences in CBT, and strategic initiatives for Azerbaijan's tourism landscape. The goal is to encourage community involvement, protect cultural heritage, and use sustainable practices to promote CBT successfully.

The Potential of Azerbaijan for Community-based Tourism Development

Azerbaijan's multiculturalism is a living reality, where mosques, churches, and synagogues stand side by side, and diverse communities celebrate their traditions in harmony. Communities such as Lezgins, Talysh, Avars, Mountain Jews, Molokans, Udis, and Kurds have preserved their unique traditions, languages, and customs while integrating into the broader Azerbaijani society. This cultural diversity presents significant opportunities for CBT, offering visitors authentic experiences rooted in traditional craftsmanship, music, cuisine, and heritage (Ismayilova, 2016).

To target development of Azerbaijan's CBT tourism offers priority tourism clusters have been identified. These clusters are located where hotspots, or "nodes", of the country's core tourism resources, tourism products (culture, nature & active, and health & wellness) and accommodation intersect in significant concentrations. With each cluster possessing a different mix of products, the main aim for each cluster is to be developed, positioned, and promoted in a way that maintains their uniqueness, and avoids the development of destinations that have a generic tourism offer. According to the map below, current priority tourism clusters include Sheki, Gakh, and Zagatala in the North-West, Gabala, Ismayilli, and Shamakhi in North-Central, Shahdag, Khinalig, Guba-Gusar, Khachmaz, and Budug in the North, Lankaran, Lerik, and Astara in the South, Ordubad-Julfa, Nakhchivan-Babek, Sharur-Kangarli, and Shahbuz in the South, and Mingachevir, Naftalan, and Ordubad-Julfa in the South. Additionally, the map below shows tourism products unique to each cluster, providing a detailed representation of their distinctive offerings.

Map 1: Tourism offerings of Azerbaijan (Cluster by Cluster)



Source: Author's own compilation

Azerbaijan's regions offer diverse resources that enrich CBT, making each area unique in its offerings. The country's cultural heritage plays a central role, with historic villages, monuments, and traditions that provide an authentic experience for visitors. These cultural sites allow tourists to connect with local communities and learn about their history. Azerbaijan's natural landscapes, from mountains to coastlines, offer excellent opportunities for outdoor activities like hiking and winter sports. Additionally, many rural areas engage visitors in agricultural tourism, where they can experience local farming practices and sample fresh produce, supporting sustainable agriculture. Each region's resources contribute to a diverse and sustainable CBT experience, benefiting both locals and visitors while preserving Azerbaijan's heritage and promoting economic growth.

International Experiences in CBT: Lessons Learned

International experiences provide valuable lessons from successful CBT countries. These international examples highlight the importance of a strategic approach to CBT that incorporates local knowledge, respects cultural heritage, and provides long-term benefits to the community for the development of CBT in Azerbaijan. Countries such as Thailand, Nepal, and Vietnam have successfully implemented CBT models that prioritize community involvement and have seen positive outcomes in terms of local economic development, environmental sustainability, and social empowerment. In Vietnam, for instance, community-managed conservation areas have allowed local groups to generate income from ecotourism while simultaneously protecting their biodiversity (Gossling, 2010). In Nepal, the development of CBT in rural communities has been instrumental in enhancing local livelihoods, especially in remote areas where tourism offers one of the few viable economic opportunities (Lama, 2019).

Figure 2 below highlights the CBT activities offered by Vietnam, Nepal, and Thailand, showcasing how each country uses its unique strengths to create memorable experiences. These countries are known for their vibrant cultures, stunning landscapes, and strong local involvement in tourism. From cultural exchanges and traditional crafts to nature-based adventures, the graph reveals how CBT activities reflect the diversity and charm of each destination, making them popular choices for travelers seeking authentic and sustainable tourism experiences.

Figure 2: CBT activities in Vietnam, Thailand, and Nepal

Source: Author's own compilation

Key Initiatives for Community-based Tourism Development in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan, with its diverse landscapes, historical sites, and rich cultural heritage, has significant potential to implement CBT as a sustainable tourism model. However, there is a pressing need to create effective mechanisms that enable communities to participate actively in tourism development. As noted by Yurtseven and Toker (2021), the success of CBT in any region depends on the development of a comprehensive strategy that includes community involvement, capacity-building, and the creation of institutional frameworks that support sustainable tourism. According to the World Bank (2014), a successful CBT model requires a multi-faceted approach, including training programs, financial support, and a robust governance framework that improves cooperation among local communities, government agencies, and private stakeholders. First and foremost, it is essential to conduct an in-depth community assessment to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to tourism. This will allow for the development of suitable strategies that address local needs and aspirations (Sharpley, 2009). Capacity-building initiatives are critical in this process, as they provide local communities with the skills required to manage tourism operations, from marketing to hospitality and environmental conservation. Second, local governments must play a facilitating role in providing the necessary infrastructure and institutional support for CBT initiatives. Collaborative efforts

between public and private sectors, as seen in countries like Thailand will ensure that local communities can participate in the broader tourism market while still maintaining control over their cultural and environmental resources (Smith, 2006).

In Azerbaijan, many rural areas and smaller communities have unused potential for tourism development, but they often lack the necessary resources and skills to participate fully. Moreover, while tourism has begun to take root in urban areas such as Baku, rural regions remain disconnected from the benefits of this sector (Maharramov, 2021). Lezgin villages in the north are famous for their unique dances and carpets, while Udi communities keep old Christian traditions connected to the Caucasian Albanian heritage. In the south, Talysh villages show their ancient farming methods and special cooking traditions. Supporting CBT in these areas not only adds variety to Azerbaijan's tourism but also helps local people earn money, allowing them to keep their culture alive. Moreover, these efforts improve Azerbaijan's image as a tolerant and inclusive country, encouraging visitors to appreciate different cultures.

Developing a strategic mechanism for CBT can provide a framework for these communities to benefit from tourism while protecting their heritage and natural resources. To develop CBT effectively in Azerbaijan, a strategic development mechanism must be created, ensuring that local communities are not only involved in the decision-making process but also equipped with the tools and knowledge to manage and sustain tourism activities.

The "Azerbaijan Tourism Strategy 2023-2026" outlines a comprehensive framework for tourism development, emphasizing sustainable practices and community involvement. This strategy aims to enhance tourism experience by focusing on the country's cultural, natural, and historical assets, thereby fostering economic growth and improving the quality of life for local populations (ATB, 2023). In line with this strategy, the "Strategic Roadmap for the Development of the Tourism Industry in Azerbaijan" (2017) highlights the promotion of sustainable tourism in rural areas as a key instrument for development. This approach seeks to protect heritage, promote cultural identity, and generate income, thereby improving living standards and preventing excessive migration from rural to urban areas. A core element of the Azerbaijan Tourism Strategy is the development of community-based tourism projects that not only support local populations but also encourage social and cultural sustainability (ATB, 2023).

A major initiative under this strategy is the promotion of rural tourism, which empowers local communities by showcasing their cultural heritage and natural landscapes. Projects such as the “Cultural Heritage Route Development” help turn rural areas into tourism destinations, allowing locals to display their traditional crafts, architecture, and customs. These projects offer a dual benefit: preserving cultural practices while providing sustainable income sources for rural communities.

Agritourism is another vital focus of Azerbaijan’s tourism strategy. The “Sustainable Agritourism Practices” project brings together local farmers and tourism professionals to create experiences that allow visitors to engage with farming and rural life. This project supports sustainable farming practices, where tourists can participate in agricultural activities and learn about eco-friendly techniques. This initiative benefits the local community by increasing the revenue from tourism, promoting local produce, and fostering an understanding of sustainable agricultural practices. It also enhances the tourism experience by providing a deeper connection to Azerbaijan’s agricultural heritage and landscape.

Another significant aspect of Azerbaijan’s tourism strategy is the development of eco-tourism villages and rural lodging options, designed to integrate tourism with environmental conservation. These developments, such as eco-lodges and glamping sites, not only cater to the growing demand for sustainable travel but also provide opportunities for local communities to engage in tourism management. Eco-friendly accommodation is built with the involvement of local residents, offering them employment and income-generating opportunities. These rural tourism projects contribute to the preservation of Azerbaijan’s natural beauty while creating economic incentives for local communities to maintain their environments and traditional lifestyles.

A key component of community-based tourism development is enhancing the visitor experience, which has been prioritized through several initiatives. These developments include the creation of cultural and natural reserves, hiking trails, and visitor-friendly infrastructure that allow tourists to explore Azerbaijan’s rural and natural areas. These investments improve accessibility and encourage tourists to engage with local communities in more meaningful ways. As part of these efforts, 70 guest houses across various regions have been supported with the necessary equipment to enhance their services and increase their capacity to host tourists. Moreover, the development of Slow Food travel routes and one-day trips to the liberated areas of Karabakh provides tourists with an authentic experience of

Azerbaijan's culinary traditions, while simultaneously promoting the cultural and historical significance of these areas. These initiatives not only boost tourism but also help preserve the rural identity and traditions of local communities.

The establishment of 8 Regional Tourism Departments (RTDs) and the creation of 9 cultural, natural, and architectural reserves like the Kish, Lahij, Basgal, Yukhari Bash, Khinalig and others have been instrumental in developing regional tourism across Azerbaijan. These initiatives play a vital role in promoting rural areas, creating new tourism opportunities, and protecting cultural and natural heritage.

Methodology

Focus Group Interviews were employed as the primary qualitative research method in this study to explore the complexities of CBT in Azerbaijan. This method is particularly suited for capturing diverse perspectives, fostering group interaction, and generating in-depth discussions on the challenges and benefits of CBT (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus Group Interviews are widely recognized for their ability to facilitate the exploration of collective experiences and ideas, which is essential for understanding nuanced phenomena in tourism research (Morgan, 1997). The use of Focus Group Interviews allows for an interactive exchange of ideas among participants, encouraging the emergence of unexplored insights and addressing gaps in existing literature. As noted by Hennink (2014), this method is particularly effective in gathering contextually rich data, which is critical for studies aimed at addressing specific regional or community-based issues. Through discussions with tourism experts, this study examined three key areas: (1) the challenges derived from community resources in relation to CBT, (2) the benefits that support CBT development, and (3) the potential solutions to mitigate identified challenges.

Data Collection

Primary Data Collection: To achieve the research objectives, Focus Group Interviews were conducted in December 2024, with the participation of 12 tourism experts and key stakeholders from diverse backgrounds. The participants included policymakers, tourism business owners, local government representatives, and community leaders, ensuring a multidisciplinary perspective on CBT in Azerbaijan. Discussions were held in Azerbaijani language. The sessions, lasting over four hours,

took place at the Guesthouse in Gusar village. To facilitate communication, the author himself acted as an interpreter. The gender ratio was 60% male to 40% female, with only two participants aged between 20 and 25. Key discussion topics included the economic benefits of CBT, strategies to enhance community participation, effective resource management, and addressing challenges in rural CBT implementation. Participants were provided with discussion guidelines in advance to ensure a focused and efficient process. Author employed interactive methods, such as brainstorming, scenario analysis, and case studies of successful CBT initiatives, to encourage creativity and active participation. The data collected was carefully documented through detailed notes and audio recordings. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify recurring patterns and insights. Key findings highlighted the need for capacity-building programs in rural communities, mechanisms for equitable benefit distribution, and stronger collaboration between the public and private sectors.

Secondary Data Collection: Secondary data was sourced from existing literature on CBT, including academic articles, books, manuals, handbooks, government and tourism organization reports, and policy documents. This data provided valuable context for the study by comparing international best practices and lessons learned from other countries with successful CBT models.

Interview Results

The following table presents the key findings from the Focus Group Interviews conducted with tourism experts and stakeholders in Azerbaijan in December 2024. The interviews focused on identifying the main challenges and recommendations related to CBT development in rural areas. Participants shared their insights regarding various issues, including infrastructure limitations, coordination challenges, government support, cultural resistance, and community awareness. Based on these challenges, recommendations for improvement were provided, emphasizing the importance of local community engagement, training, government support, marketing strategies, and the use of technology to enhance the visitor experience. Table 2 below summarizes the core themes and participant perspectives that were gathered during the interviews.

Table 2: Focus Group Interview Results (December 2024)

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Key Points from Participants	Quotes from Participants
Challenges in CBT Development	<i>Infrastructure Limitations</i>	Inadequate infrastructure (e.g., transportation, facilities) hinders tourism growth.	“The road access to rural areas is a major barrier for both tourists and locals.” “Some of the villages are unreachable, and even locals struggle with transportation.”
	<i>Lack of Coordination</i>	Weak coordination between local authorities, communities, and businesses in rural areas.	“There’s no clear communication between local tourism businesses and the municipal offices.” “We need a unified platform to coordinate efforts.”
	<i>Government Support and Policy Gaps</i>	Insufficient government funding and lack of clear policies for CBT initiatives.	“We need more incentives from the government to encourage local participation.” “The government should be more involved in providing financial support for tourism projects.”
	<i>Cultural and Community Resistance</i>	Cultural resistance and reluctance to embrace CBT due to concerns over losing traditions.	“Some locals fear that tourism will ruin our traditions and way of life.” “People worry that tourists will change how we live and damage our cultural values.”
	<i>Low Community Awareness</i>	Limited awareness among rural communities about the long-term advantages of CBT.	“People don’t yet understand how CBT can improve their lives over time.” “Education about the benefits of tourism needs to be prioritized.”
Recommendations for Improvement	<i>Improved Community Engagement</i>	Need for deeper involvement of local residents in the planning and implementation of CBT.	“Community meetings should be held regularly to ensure everyone has a say.” “It’s vital that we involve every member of the community in discussions, not just the leaders.”
	<i>Enhanced Training and Capacity Building</i>	Local residents require specialized training in tourism management and customer service.	“We need workshops to learn how to deal with tourists and improve our services.” “Training programs in hospitality and tour guiding could really boost the quality of our services.”
	<i>Strengthened Government Involvement</i>	A stronger role from the government in facilitating access to resources and markets.	“The government should provide more funding and practical support for tourism projects.” “Government involvement in marketing would help attract tourists to our area.”
	<i>Marketing and Promotion</i>	Improved marketing strategies to promote rural tourism and attract international visitors.	“More effort needs to be put into promoting Azerbaijan’s rural tourism destinations abroad.” “We have beautiful landscapes, but we need better international promotion to bring tourists here.”

	<i>Leveraging Technology for Better Management</i>	Utilizing technology to enhance visitor experience and streamline tourism management.	"Using digital tools for booking and marketing will help reach a wider audience." "Technology could help us streamline operations and connect better with tourists, especially younger generations."
Building the Strategic Development Mechanism	<i>Integration with National Development Plans</i>	Aligning CBT initiatives with national tourism strategies and long-term rural development programs.	"CBT needs to be integrated into national tourism policies for it to gain sustainable support." "Linking CBT to broader rural development plans could secure the long-term success of the sector."
	<i>Public-Private Partnerships</i>	Encouraging collaboration between local governments, businesses, and communities to ensure sustainable growth.	"Local governments and private businesses need to collaborate more effectively to bring tourism to rural areas." "Public-private partnerships could help provide the funding and expertise needed for CBT to thrive."
	<i>Tourism Education and Awareness Programs</i>	Implementing programs to educate local communities and visitors about the benefits and challenges of CBT.	"We need to teach the community how tourism works and how they can benefit from it." "Tourism awareness programs could help people understand what CBT is and how it works."
	<i>Developing Long-Term Sustainable Models</i>	Creating models for CBT that are not dependent on short-term funding but can generate long-term sustainable income.	"We should look for ways to make tourism self-sustaining in the long term, not just rely on external funding." "Sustainability in CBT should be a priority in the planning stages."
	<i>Building a CBT Branding and Identity</i>	Developing a unique brand for rural tourism that reflects the culture, history, and natural beauty of the area.	"Our region needs a tourism brand that highlights its unique culture and history." "Branding could make a huge difference in how tourists perceive the region."
	<i>Cross-Sector Collaboration</i>	Establishing connections between tourism and other sectors like agriculture, handicrafts, and local cuisine.	"Tourism should not be seen as separate; it needs to be linked with local agriculture and crafts." "We can integrate traditional food experiences into tourism, creating a unique package."

Source: Author's own compilation

Findings and Discussion

During the focus group interviews, participants shared their thoughts on the main challenges of CBT in rural Azerbaijan. The discussion covered many topics, but five key problems stood out: poor infrastructure, lack of coordination, weak government support, cultural resistance, and low community awareness. These challenges are connected, making it difficult for rural tourism to grow.

***Infrastructure:
A major
Barrier***

One of the biggest issues mentioned was infrastructure. “Even if we build guesthouses and create interesting activities, how will tourists reach us?” one participant asked. Many agreed that bad roads and a lack of public transport make travel to rural areas difficult. Infrastructure problems go beyond roads. Participants also talked about the need for better accommodation, clean restrooms, and internet access. “Tourists today expect basic facilities. If they don’t find them, they won’t come,” another person added.

***Coordination:
The Need for
Unity***

Another key finding was the lack of coordination among local authorities, businesses, and communities. Participants pointed out that there is no clear communication between these groups, and efforts are often fragmented. For example, tourism businesses and municipal offices in rural areas work in isolation, without a unified strategy. This lack of cooperation means that tourism development is not as efficient or effective as it could be. A more coordinated approach, where all stakeholders work together towards a shared goal, would help improve tourism management and make better use of available resources.

***Government
Support:
A Roadblock to
Growth***

Government support for CBT initiatives was also identified as a significant gap. Many participants noted that the government has not provided enough funding or clear policies to support rural tourism. Without financial incentives and a solid policy framework, local businesses and communities find it difficult to invest in tourism development. The government’s involvement is crucial, not only for providing funding but also for creating the right conditions for tourism to thrive. More support from the government would help rural areas to overcome these challenges and take full advantage of their tourism potential.

***Cultural
Resistance:
Fear of Change***

Some participants talked about cultural resistance to tourism. “We want tourists, but we don’t want our traditions to disappear,” one elder said. Many people in rural areas worry that tourism will change their way of life. Others, however, saw tourism as a way to protect culture. “Instead of losing traditions, we can share them with visitors,” a young craftsperson suggested. The group agreed that if tourism is done in the

right way, it can respect local culture and bring economic benefits at the same time.

**Community
Awareness:
The Missing
Piece of the
Puzzle**

A final challenge was that many local people do not understand how tourism can help them. One participant shared a story: “When we introduced a homestay program, some villagers didn’t want to join because they thought it would be difficult. They didn’t realize it could bring income.” Participants agreed that education is important. “If we show real examples of successful villages, people will believe in CBT,” one person suggested. Raising awareness through workshops and community meetings could help people feel more confident about tourism.

Proposed Strategic Development Mechanism

The development of CBT in rural areas of Azerbaijan requires a clear and strategic approach. Different and interesting thoughts gathered from the Focus Group Interviews were analyzed, and the author summarized the participants’ ideas to create a well-structured development mechanism with 5 core pillars. These strategic pillars include community engagement and capacity building, infrastructure and product development, policy and institutional support, marketing and promotion, and collaboration between various stakeholders. Figure 3 below illustrates these main components of the mechanism.

Figure 3: CBT Development Mechanism Pillars in Azerbaijan



Source: Author’s own compilation

Pillar 1: Community Engagement and Capacity Building

At the heart of any successful CBT initiative lies the community itself. The participants emphasized that rural residents must not only be included in the tourism development process but must also lead it. Workshops and training programs are essential to raise awareness about the benefits of CBT and encourage local participation. Moreover, specialized training programs should be offered in areas such as hospitality management, business development, and cultural preservation. These programs will empower local residents with the skills needed to manage tourism-related activities effectively while maintaining their cultural heritage. Participants also highlighted the importance of nurturing entrepreneurial spirit within the community. Through supporting locals to establish small businesses such as guesthouses, family-run cafes, or guiding services, the economic benefits of tourism can be distributed more equitably. The ripple effects of such businesses could then inspire further innovation, creating a sustainable cycle of growth.

Pillar 2: Infrastructure and Product Development

Even the most well-designed tourism products cannot succeed without good infrastructure. Participants drew attention to the challenges of accessibility in rural areas, with poorly maintained roads and unreliable transportation networks discouraging visitors. Improving road conditions and transport links is, therefore, a critical step in discovering the tourism potential of remote villages. In addition to transportation, the development of eco-friendly accommodation options is also a priority. Infrastructure investments should also align with the promotion of unique tourism products. Participants proposed the creation of thematic packages, such as “Taste of Rural Azerbaijan,” which could include culinary experiences, cultural tours, vineyard tours, and cooking classes.

Pillar 3: Policy and Institutional Support

The discussions also revealed a strong consensus on the need for supportive policies and institutional frameworks to ensure the success of CBT. The creation of a dedicated CBT development unit under the State Tourism Agency will provide the necessary institutional framework to coordinate and implement tourism initiatives in rural areas. This unit would serve as a centralized body to coordinate efforts, provide

technical expertise, and monitor the progress of tourism initiatives. Financial support mechanisms, such as grants and subsidies, were also seen as vital. These resources could empower communities to invest in projects like renovating historic buildings for tourism use or setting up eco-friendly campsites.

Pillar 4: Marketing and Promotion

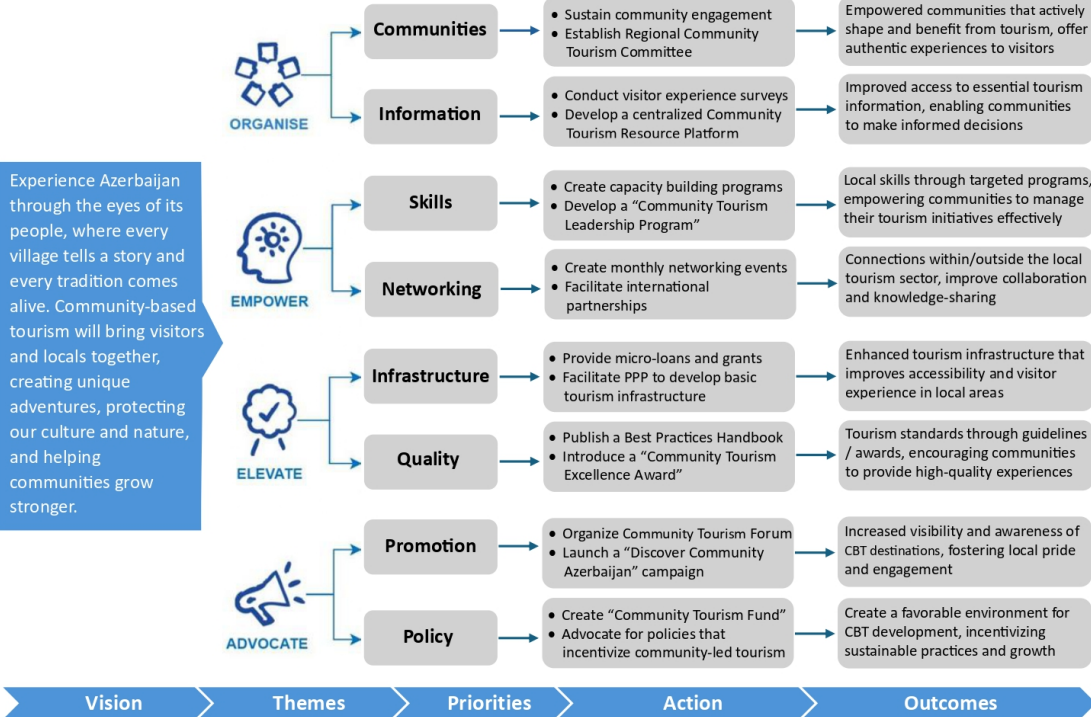
Effective marketing is the bridge that connects both domestic and international tourists to rural destinations. Participants proposed the creation of a CBT platform that not only provides information but also tells the story of rural Azerbaijan. This platform could feature profiles of local hosts, interactive maps of attractions, and testimonials from previous visitors, creating an emotional connection with potential tourists. In addition to the platform, collaboration with international tour operators was another key recommendation. Because integration of CBT experiences into existing travel packages can gain greater visibility and reach a wider audience at rural destinations.

Pillar 5: Stakeholder Collaboration

Lastly, participants emphasized the importance of collaboration between all stakeholders involved in CBT. Local communities, NGOs, private businesses, and government agencies must work together to ensure that tourism initiatives are inclusive and sustainable. Such partnerships will create a supportive network for the development and promotion of rural tourism, ensuring that all stakeholders are invested in the success of CBT initiatives. Establishing community tourism committees was suggested as a way to formalize this collaboration. These committees would serve as platforms for decision-making, where community members, business owners, and policymakers can voice their ideas and concerns.

Based on the interview data, the author compiled a Proposed Strategic Development Framework for CBT in Azerbaijan. This framework illustrates the vision for CBT with 8 key priorities, each accompanied by 2 action areas and specific outcomes. The framework provides a clear, structured approach to addressing key challenges and opportunities identified during the interviews, ensuring a sustainable and inclusive development of CBT. It serves as a roadmap for stakeholders to support steady growth and successful development of the CBT sector throughout the country.

Figure 4: Proposed Strategic Development Framework



Source: Author's own compilation

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations are proposed for the successful development of CBT in Azerbaijan, focusing on creating a strategic development mechanism that is both sustainable and adaptable to the needs of local communities.

Establish a National Policy Framework for CBT (Note: CBT has been integrated into the Azerbaijan Tourism Strategy, with one of the 9 Pillars focusing on destination development, cultural heritage and communities). A clear national policy that supports the development of CBT is crucial. This policy should promote local empowerment, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation. It should include guidelines for community engagement, tourism standards, and governance structures that ensure transparency and accountability.

Develop Community Capacity-Building Programs: Community members must be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to actively participate in and benefit from CBT. This can be achieved through targeted training programs focused on hospitality, environmental conservation, entrepreneurship, and management. Capacity-building initiatives should also encourage the formation of local tourism associations or cooperatives, which would allow communities to collaborate and manage tourism initiatives more effectively.

Implement Collaborative Governance Models: Collaborative governance is essential for ensuring that community-based tourism is not just top-down or bottom-up, but a balanced approach involving all stakeholders. A strategic mechanism should promote dialogue and partnerships between local communities, government authorities, tourism businesses, NGOs, and academic institutions.

Create Sustainable Infrastructure and Services: This includes eco-friendly accommodations, waste management systems, renewable energy solutions, and reliable transport links to connect rural communities with tourism hotspots. The development of basic infrastructure should be done in a way that reflects the unique cultural and natural heritage of each community, ensuring that it enhances the visitor experience while minimizing negative environmental impacts.

Promote Community-Led Marketing: To differentiate Azerbaijan's CBT offerings in a competitive global tourism market, communities should be involved in the creation and promotion of their own tourism products. Community-led branding campaigns can highlight the authentic cultural experiences, local craftsmanship, and natural beauty unique to each region.

Ensure Long-Term Economic Sustainability Through Diversification: Economic sustainability is central to the success of CBT initiatives. Communities should not rely solely on tourism but should diversify their sources of income to mitigate the risks of market fluctuations and seasonality. Encouraging local agriculture, handicrafts, and small businesses to complement the tourism sector can help build a resilient local economy. This could involve creating "tourism product packages" that integrate local agricultural products, handicrafts, and experiences such as cooking classes or farm visits.

Develop an Effective Monitoring and Evaluation System: For any development mechanism to be effective, it is essential to monitor and evaluate its progress and impact. A participatory monitoring system should be implemented, where local communities play a key role in assessing the social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism development. This can include regular feedback loops, community meetings, and impact assessments to ensure that the development mechanism is responsive to local needs and evolving circumstances.

Develop Regional and International Collaboration: Regional cooperation with neighboring countries can enhance the appeal of Azerbaijan as a tourism destination by offering integrated tourism products that span multiple countries. International collaboration with tourism organizations, NGOs, and global best practices can also provide valuable lessons and resources for developing successful CBT models. By engaging in international tourism networks, Azerbaijan can attract more global visitors while ensuring that local communities are an integral part of the development process.

Develop a CBT-Focused Tourism Education and Research Hub: Finally, the creation of a research center focused on CBT could facilitate the continuous exchange of knowledge, data, and innovations. This center could act as a hub for training local communities, conducting research on sustainable tourism practices, and fostering innovation in the tourism sector.

Conclusion

To sum up, CBT in Azerbaijan has the potential to bring great benefits to rural areas, support local cultures, and boost the economy. However, there are several challenges that need to be overcome for CBT to be successful. These challenges include poor infrastructure, a lack of cooperation among different groups, not enough support from the government, cultural resistance, and a lack of awareness in the community. These issues are all connected, and solving them will need teamwork from local communities, the government, and businesses. Providing training for the community, improving roads and services, and improving communication between different groups are all important steps. It's also important to raise awareness in the community about how CBT can provide long-term benefits. This can help reduce resistance to change and get more local support for tourism projects.

It is important to remember that CBT projects are meant to support local communities, so they should be managed and run by the people living there. The level of community involvement depends mostly on the type of CBT project. To encourage locals to take part in CBT, communities should work together and create tourism services and products based on their skills, knowledge, and strengths, with guidance from experts. Another key point is that the way profits are shared should be improved so that more money is used for projects that help the community. Also, more benefits should go directly to households instead of being shared only at the community level. To make the most of CBT, community members should form small groups with people who have similar skills and work together in tourism activities. Policymakers should create a plan to make sure locals are fully involved in the tourism industry. To support tourism growth at the district level, the government should set up tourism offices in each district to monitor tourism activities and policies. More research is needed on CBT education and how schools and universities can help with its success and development.

The strategies suggested in this research provide practical steps to help develop CBT in Azerbaijan. Through making sure that tourism projects fit with national goals and encouraging partnerships between the government and private companies, Azerbaijan has the chance to lead the way in community-based tourism in the region. This will not only benefit the local communities but also support the larger goal of sustainable tourism, which is important for the future.

In conclusion, while there are challenges, there is also a lot of potential for CBT to succeed in Azerbaijan. With the right approach and teamwork, it is possible to create a tourism industry that is good for the economy, respectful of local culture, and fair for the people living in rural areas. This could lead to a brighter future for these communities and sustainable tourism in the country.

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