

# Sense Of Community Participation in Tourism Development: A Case in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA)  
2024, Vol. 16 (1) pp 869-879  
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UITM Press  
Submit date: 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023  
Accept date: 21<sup>st</sup> December 2023  
Publish date: 30<sup>th</sup> April 2024

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## Proposed Citation:

Ismail, H., Alam, M. M., Zain, N. A. M., Wan Salman, W. A. N., & Hanafiah, M. H. (2024). Sense Of Community Participation in Tourism Development: A Case in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 16(1), 869-879.

## Abstract

This study delves into the relationship between the sense of community and participation in tourism development, focusing on the dimensions of membership, influence, integration, and the fulfillment of needs, along with shared emotional connection. Specifically conducted in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, this research employs a quantitative method and a deductive approach, forming hypotheses based on the theory of the sense of community. To collect data, a 5-point Likert Scale self-administered questionnaire was distributed physically. A total of 384 samples were gathered, representing the broader population of 2,823,265 local members in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The findings of this study indicate that each dimension of the sense of community - membership, integration and fulfillment of needs, influence, and shared emotional connection - significantly influences community participation in the context of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. These insights are valuable not only for academics and researchers but also for policymakers and stakeholders in the tourism industry, offering a deeper understanding of how the sense of community can drive and enhance participation in tourism development. This research

contributes to the growing body of knowledge on tourism and community engagement and has the potential to inform strategies for sustainable tourism development in the region.

**Keywords:**

Sense of community, Participation, Tourism development, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

## **1 Introduction**

This study explores the connection between measures of psychological well-being and the sense of community, emphasizing their influence on institutional outcomes. Existing research by Boyd and Nowell (2017, 2020) and Nowell and Boyd (2014) has already established this link. The sense of community is defined by elements like group commitment, a sense of belonging, and the belief that individuals matter to the group and each other, as articulated by McMillan and Chavis (1986). In the context of tourism, this concept extends to individuals involved in the tourism industry who play a role in shaping their quality of life and the surrounding environment. Public engagement, informed by access to information and the ability to voice opinions, can lead to improved quality of plans and an increased understanding of issues, solutions, and potential knowledge gaps.

The study highlights the importance of sustainable development and sustainable tourism, which consider economic, social, and environmental factors. Sustainable tourism, as defined by the World Tourism Organization, aims to meet economic, social, and aesthetic needs while preserving ecological integrity, biodiversity, and life-supporting systems. Sustainable tourism involves various considerations, from enhancing tourist experiences to addressing economic, social, and environmental concerns.

Cox's Bazar, known for its natural beauty and the world's longest sandy shoreline, attracts over 1.5 million visitors annually. Tourism significantly contributes to the local economy by creating employment opportunities and improving the quality of life. In the 1950s, tourism began to flourish in Cox's Bazar, and it has continued to grow, benefiting from a 20-year development plan initiated by the Pakistani government. After gaining independence, the Bangladeshi government recognized the positive impact of tourism and has since sought to enhance the industry's growth and effectiveness by bringing together the public and private sectors.

The study also acknowledges the strong correlation between tourism growth and community attachments, emphasizing that people's sense of belonging in their local community plays a crucial role in their well-being and participation in various activities. Cox's Bazar is a popular tourist destination, offering a range of attractions, including Laboni Beach, Kolatoli Beach, Inani Beach, Himchori, Radar Station, Teknaf, Saint Martin, Mahesh Khali, and more. Visitors can enjoy activities like swimming, jogging, cycling, surfing, and sunbathing, and souvenir shops offer locally crafted items. Tourism significantly contributes to Bangladesh's economy, with the WTTC estimating a contribution of around US\$150 million in 2014. The country is projected to rank third

in Southeast Asia for economic gains from travel and tourism by 2025, following India and Myanmar, highlighting the substantial economic potential of the tourism industry in Bangladesh.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Tourism industry in Bangladesh**

In 2019, Bangladesh ranked 148th globally with 323,000 tourists, signifying a low number relative to its population. In 2020, it earned over \$217.90 million from tourism, accounting for 0.052% of its total revenue and 1% of South Asian tourism earnings. The definition of tourists excludes business travelers and non-tourism purposes, and repeat visits count separately. In 1995, tourism generated \$25 million, about 0.066% of the GNP, with 156,000 visitors spending \$160 each. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism contributed 0.11% of the GDP. However, in 2020, earnings decreased by 44% due to the pandemic. Bangladesh boasts captivating destinations like the Sundarbans and Cox's Bazar Sea Beach.

### **2.2 Cox's Bazar**

Cox's Bazar Beach in Bangladesh boasts a remarkable 120-kilometer stretch of sandy coastline, gradually descending into the Bay of Bengal, flanked by lush hills (Hossain et al., 2013; Sofique & Parveen, 2009). Its unique features include its long, picturesque sandy shores, imposing cliffs, excellent surfing conditions, extraordinary conch shells, and delectable cuisine (Hasan & Rabbani, 2016). This beach significantly contributes to Bangladesh's expanding tourism industry and draws nearly five million visitors during peak months, comprising both locals and foreigners (Hossain et al., 2015b).

Coastal destinations, particularly beaches, are popular choices for tourists worldwide, fueling the tourism industry and economies of several coastal nations (Houston, 2008; Phillips & House, 2009). Bangladesh, situated in South Asia, offers great tourism potential due to its extensive coastline with some of the world's renowned straight and lengthy sea beaches (Hasan & Rabbani, 2016; Sofique & Parveen, 2009). Accessible to people of all socioeconomic backgrounds throughout the year, Cox's Bazar Beach attracts domestic visitors, providing respite and relaxation during holidays and special occasions (Hasan & Rabbani, 2016; Hossain et al., 2013, 2015).

Tourism at Cox's Bazar has not only facilitated economic growth and job creation but has also improved the local community's well-being (Hasan et al., 2015). During the five-day Eid-ul Azha holiday in 2016 alone, Cox's Bazar Beach received nearly 500,000 visitors, generating approximately BDT 3000 million for the local tourism industry (News, 2016). This has led to significant socio-economic transformation in the region, with approximately 10,000 people employed in the Cox's Bazar beach area, supporting an average family of six each (Ahammed, 2010). The stability of tourism in

the area depends on understanding visitor expectations, providing necessary amenities, and consistently meeting their needs and expectations.

### **2.3 Community Participation**

The importance of involving local communities in tourism development is well-recognized. Three main reasons underscore this importance: local communities have a deep understanding of changes in their area, they directly feel the impacts of tourism, and they contribute to the uniqueness of the tourist experience (Nyaupane et al., 2006). Active participation and support from the local community are crucial for the success of community-based tourism projects (Musavengane & Simatele, 2016).

Community participation in tourism has evolved over the years. It started in the 1970s as "popular participation" aimed at improving rural areas. In the 1980s, it shifted towards self-sufficiency, seeking local solutions, and the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In the 1990s, community participation expanded to encompass social, economic, and political dimensions of life (Laderchi, 2001).

The concept of involving local people in tourism has its roots in the Western world, aiming to ensure fair decision-making and equitable distribution of benefits (Malek & Costa, 2014). This shift in power balances decision-making and benefits between locals and external stakeholders, ensuring fairness and avoiding exploitation (Tosun, 2000). Community participation allows local residents to utilize their skills, knowledge, and cultural resources, shaping how they wish to showcase their culture to tourists (Armstrong, 2012).

Defining community participation can be complex and subjective, and it varies in meaning and implementation. Participation can be categorized as passive or active, depending on the level of community input in decision-making and control (Kamphorst et al., 1997). Political, cultural, and economic factors in a specific region influence the extent and nature of community participation (Tosun, 1999).

Participation extends beyond the distribution of resources; it also involves knowledge sharing and changes in the learning process (Kamarudin, 2013). Participatory tourism planning should start at the local level, incorporating local knowledge, culture, and needs, and then expand to the global level (Theerapappisit, 2012).

Different specialists have identified various levels of engagement in community participation, such as information sharing, opinion seeking, active participation, collaborative work, and empowering others (Peerapun, 2018; Matiku et al., 2021). Tosun (2006) categorized community involvement in tourism into three levels: coercive participation (minimal community influence), induced participation (some community input but limited decision-making power), and spontaneous participation (community-led decision-making). Unfortunately, tourism development often overlooks the perspectives and potential benefits of local communities (Chiutsi & Saarinen, 2017).

### **3 Methodology**

Research methodology is a systematic approach for addressing research questions, often involving measurement using tools like questionnaires. In this study, the deductive research approach was employed, beginning with established theories, developing a research framework, and deriving hypotheses from that framework (Creswell, 2014).

Quantitative research was the chosen method as it facilitates the establishment of cause-effect relationships among variables (Creswell, 2014). A quasi-experimental research design was adopted to compare pre-existing groups and measure the effects of independent variables on the dependent variable (Inkelas et al., 2006).

The study population consisted of local community members in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and a non-probability sampling method, combining convenience and purposive sampling, was used to select 384 participants (Kothari, 2004). The minimum age for participants was set at 30 years, as individuals above this age were ineligible for government jobs in Bangladesh, making them more likely to engage in non-governmental/private jobs and tourism-related businesses (Memon et al., 2019).

Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire distributed physically over a month from May 15, 2023, to June 14, 2023. The questionnaire comprised a total of 46 questions, divided into two sections. Section A collected demographic information, while Section B focused on variables measured using a Likert scale (Ladhari, 2008).

The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 respondents, including Bangladeshi academicians and local tourism professionals, who provided feedback and insights. The collected data from this preliminary investigation were analyzed using SPSS software (version 27) (Creswell, 2014). An introductory explanation in the questionnaire assured respondents of the research's purpose, confidentiality, and ethical considerations, maintaining anonymity of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

### **4 Findings**

#### **4.1 Respondents profile**

In terms of age, the respondents' demographic profile shows that the majority, constituting 70.3%, fall within the 31-40 age group, followed by 24.0% in the 41-50 age group, and 5.7% in the 51-60 age group. Regarding gender, the data reveals that 95.3% of the respondents are male, while 4.7% are female. In the context of marital status, the survey indicates that 85.4% of the participants are married, 12.5% are single, and 2.1% are unmarried. Examining monthly income, the distribution is as follows: 4.7% of respondents earn less than TK 15,000, 7.8% earn between TK 15,000 and TK 25,000, 33.6% earn between TK 25,001 and TK 35,000, 49.0% earn between TK 35,001 and TK 45,000, and 4.9% have a monthly income exceeding TK 55,000. In terms of educational qualifications, the majority of respondents hold a Bachelor's degree, representing

55.5% of the sample. Furthermore, 31.8% have an HSC/Diploma qualification, 7.3% possess a Master's degree, and 5.5% have completed SSC. Lastly, the data regarding employment status reveals that 95.1% of respondents are full-time employed, whereas 4.9% are part-time employed.

#### **4.2 Descriptive analysis**

The analysis of the mean and standard deviation values for items related to community membership reveals several insights about respondents' perceptions within the community. The item "Being a member of this community makes me feel good" stands out with a mean of 3.67, indicating a relatively high level of agreement among respondents. This suggests that community membership is associated with positive feelings and well-being. However, the variability, as indicated by the standard deviation of 0.84, also implies that some respondents might have stronger positive emotions tied to their membership than others. On the other hand, the item "Being a member of this community is a part of my identity" exhibits lower agreement (mean of 2.22) and significant variability (standard deviation of 1.47). This suggests that community membership's influence on one's identity is less uniform among respondents, with some feeling strongly connected while others do not. Items like "Fitting into this community is important to me" and "I am with other community members a lot and enjoy being with them" show moderate agreement among respondents, indicating a general sense of the importance of fitting in and spending time with community members. Overall, these findings highlight the diverse and nuanced ways in which individuals perceive their membership and interactions within the community, contributing to a richer understanding of their community involvement and the factors influencing it.

The examination of mean and standard deviation values for items related to influence within the community offers valuable insights into how respondents perceive their interactions and connections with fellow community members. Notably, the item "I care about what other community members think of me" records a relatively high mean of 3.83, indicating a strong level of concern about the opinions of others within the community. The low standard deviation of 0.64 suggests a high level of consensus among respondents in this regard. This implies that the evaluation and judgment of other community members play a significant role in the lives of the respondents. Furthermore, the item "I can trust people in this community" exhibits a moderate agreement among respondents with a mean of 3.05. However, the standard deviation of 0.99 indicates that the level of trust varies to some extent, with some respondents displaying higher levels of trust than others. In terms of community problem-solving, "If there is a problem in this community, members can get it solved together" shows a mean of 3.43, indicating a general belief in the collective problem-solving capacity of the community. However, the standard deviation of 1.03 suggests variability in respondents' confidence in this aspect, with some being more optimistic about the community's collaborative abilities than others. Regarding hope for the community's future, the item "I feel hopeful about the future of this community" scores a mean of

3.62, indicating a positive outlook on the community's prospects. The low standard deviation of 0.65 implies a high degree of agreement among respondents regarding their hope for the community's future. Items such as "Members of this community care about one another" and "It is important to me that I am valued or accepted by others in this community" reflect moderate agreement among respondents, demonstrating a general sense of care and importance placed on acceptance within the community. These findings collectively shed light on the significance of trust, collective problem-solving, and hope for the community's future, as well as the role of peer evaluations and the importance of being valued and accepted by other community members in influencing the respondents' level of community participation and engagement.

### 4.3 Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Std. $\beta$	T-statistics	P-value	Result
H <sub>1</sub> : Membership > Community Participation	0.451***	10.149	.001	Supported
H <sub>2</sub> : Integration Fulfilment Needs > Community Participation	0.229***	5.257	.001	Supported
H <sub>3</sub> : Influence > Community Participation	0.212	5.405***	.001	Supported
H <sub>4</sub> : Shared Emotional Connection > Community Participation	0.109	2.455***	.001	Supported

The analysis of hypotheses indicates that hypothesis one, which states that membership has a positive impact on community participation, is strongly supported with a standardized beta (Std.  $\beta$ ) of 0.451 and a high t-statistic of 10.149, resulting in a p-value of .001. Hypothesis two, proposing that integration and fulfillment of needs influence community participation, is also significantly supported, with a Std.  $\beta$  of 0.229, a t-statistic of 5.257, and a p-value of .001. Likewise, Hypothesis three, suggesting that influence is linked to community participation, is supported with a Std.  $\beta$  of 0.212, a t-statistic of 5.405, and a p-value of .001. Lastly, Hypothesis four, which postulates that shared emotional connection affects community participation, is supported with a Std.  $\beta$  of 0.109, a t-statistic of 2.455, and a p-value of .001.

Hypothesis	Result
H1: There is significant effect of membership on community participation in tourism development in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh	Accepted
H2: There is significant effect of influence on community participation in tourism development in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh	Accepted
H3: There is significant effect of integration and fulfilment of needs on community participation in tourism development in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh	Accepted

H4: There is significant effect of shared emotional connection on community participation in tourism development in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh	Accepted
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## 5. Discussion

Talò et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between a sense of belonging in a community and active participation within that community. They found that increased participation leads to a stronger sense of belonging and connection in the community. The two concepts, sense of community and community participation, were found to have a mutually reinforcing relationship. When people participate in their community, it enhances their sense of belonging, and a strong sense of community motivates further participation.

Effect of Membership on Community Participation in Tourism Development (H1): The study confirmed that membership has a significant and positive effect on community participation in tourism development. This suggests that when local people are involved in tourism, the entire community in Cox's Bazar is more likely to participate in tourism activities. The involvement of all community members, not just those in the tourism industry, is crucial for sustainable tourism development.

Effect of Influence on Community Participation in Tourism Development (H2): The research established that influence has a significant and positive impact on community participation in tourism development. The study indicates that specific individuals within the community, who have a positive impact, can encourage more people to participate in the tourism development of Cox's Bazar.

Effect of Integration and Fulfilment of Needs on Community Participation in Tourism Development (H3): Integration and fulfilment of needs were found to have a significant and positive influence on community participation in tourism development. A community must cater to the needs of its members to maintain their connection and engagement. Different communities serve different purposes, bringing people together and helping them fulfill their requirements.

Effect of Shared Emotional Connection on Community Participation in Tourism Development: The study affirmed that shared emotional connection has a significant and positive effect on community participation in tourism development. When shared emotional connections among community members increase, the level of participation in tourism also increases. This suggests that bonding over shared experiences and pleasant moments fosters a sense of community and motivates people to contribute to the growth of tourism in Cox's Bazar.

In summary, the study underscores the importance of community participation in tourism development and how it is closely related to a sense of belonging, influence, integration, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections within the community. When these factors are promoted, tourism development in Cox's Bazar, and similar areas, can thrive and benefit both the community and the industry.



## **5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research by Talò et al. (2014) underscores the interconnectedness of a sense of belonging within a community and active participation in that community. Their findings highlight a reciprocal relationship where heightened participation enhances the sense of belonging, and a strong sense of community motivates further engagement. The study's four hypotheses shed light on the critical factors influencing community participation in tourism development in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Firstly, the significant and positive effect of membership (H1) on community participation emphasizes the pivotal role of local involvement in tourism. This implies that the participation of all community members, not just those directly tied to the tourism industry, is indispensable for sustainable tourism growth. Secondly, the influence (H2) of specific individuals within the community on community participation is acknowledged as a powerful catalyst. Their positive impact encourages greater involvement in Cox's Bazar's tourism development. Thirdly, the study's confirmation of integration and fulfilment of needs (H3) as factors with a significant and positive influence on community participation underscores the importance of addressing the diverse requirements of community members. Different communities may have distinct purposes, but bringing individuals together to fulfill their needs is a universal key to fostering engagement. Lastly, the research highlights the profound impact of shared emotional connections on community participation. The data suggests that shared experiences and emotional bonds among community members significantly increase participation in tourism. This underscores the role of a sense of community in motivating contributions to Cox's Bazar's tourism industry. In essence, the study reaffirms that community participation is integral to tourism development and is closely tied to the sense of community, influence, integration, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections within the community. Promoting and nurturing these aspects can fuel the growth of tourism in Cox's Bazar and similar locales, benefiting both the community and the tourism industry.

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## 7 Acknowledgment

This research was funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia through Universiti Teknologi MARA under Special Research Grant (Dana DUCS-F): 600-UITMSEL (PI. 5/4) (099/2022).

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