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# The impact of community empowerment on sustainable tourism development and the mediation effect of local support: a structural equation Modeling approach

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## ABSTRACT

Sustainable development of tourism symbolizes a type of business activity that satisfies the requirements of both the tourists and the receiving communities. The paper aims to unearth the impact of community empowerment on the sustainable tourism development. Further, local support is incorporated as a mediating variable between the relationship of community empowerment and sustainable tourism development. For data collection, an onsite survey method is employed and the dataset of 368 respondents was analyzed to test the theoretical work. The fit of the framework is evaluated using structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM confirms that all four hypotheses have a statistically significant relationship. The study findings indicate that community empowerment has a positive impact on local support and sustainable tourism development. Further, the study shows local support completely mediates the relationship between the two variables. There is a dearth of empirical research regarding the empowerment of the community, the paper findings will contribute a substantial part to the existing literature on sustainable tourism.

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Community empowerment;  
sustainable tourism; local  
support; SEM

## Introduction

Tourism's significance stems from its ability to generate and sustain jobs, as well as its capacity to express and promote cultural identity and pride. Tourism's economic benefits can be distributed widely, and visitor revenue contributes to the creation and maintenance of new and existing amenities for residents. The concept of community development especially in developing countries is now widely accepted as a means of alleviating poverty. Community-based tourism is one of the many ways in which local communities can be uplifted and developed. However, the host community has an essential role to play in the long-term sustainability of tourism, which is owned and operated by stakeholders (Seraphin et al., 2021). Eraqi (2007) conducted a study on the opinions of local populations toward the implications of tourism growth. Rural communities must be encouraged to take advantage of the tourism resources at their disposal to sustain themselves. It is not

uncommon for governments in underdeveloped nations to sell their countries through tourism as a way to generate instant foreign cash. One key socio-cultural effect of tourism, according to number of publications, is reshaping the self-perceptions of local citizens. To make tourist development effective in local communities, it must take into account the opinions of the residents for joint association based on esteem, trust, and practicality to promote indigenous acceptance and care (Canavan, 2016; Dyer et al., 2003). Empowerment is defined as the ability to act on an individual or collective level (Ahmad & Talib, 2015). As a result of empowerment, “individuals luxuriate and enhance in their control and mastery of oneself on aspects and decisions that sharpen their living” (Hur, 2006). Sofield (2003) argued that empowerment is the most effective strategy for a community to build tourism in a sustainable manner and, as a result, increases the likelihood of successful tourist projects.

The main problem that the world is facing today is the fight against extreme poverty, which is particularly acute in developing nations, here the case in India as well. Community-based tourism is a way for countries like India, who are gifted with a wealth of natural and traditional assets, toward improving the economic situations of their poorest regions. While community-based tourism is becoming more popular in many countries, it is also gaining traction here. Tourism as a tool can be used by communities to support economic and financial development. While the issue of tourism is being addressed, community leaders in the field of development can play a significant role. A vast body of literature is available regarding the social and economic benefits of tourism that the local community can avail (Ullah et al., 2021). Tourism can be a source of foreign exchange earnings, improve standard of living of local communities, increasing village infrastructure and generating huge employment opportunities for the local population (Kayat et al., 2013; Molina- Murillo et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2019; Amuquondoh, 2010). Moreover, development of sustainable tourism can be instrumental in the sociocultural development of local communities (Lee, 2017; Bandyopadhyay et al., 2009). Concurrently, tourism development is not free from negative effects and may harm aspects on local communities, environment and culture by, for example, environmental pollution, overcrowding, traffic congestion and generating noise (Huong & Lee, 2017; Nunkoo & Smith, 2013; Segota et al., 2017, Lacher and Oh, 2012). Only a few studies have objectively evaluated the influence of community empowerment and local support on sustainable tourism development (Ahmad & Talib, 2015; Khalid et al., 2019; Thetsane, 2019).

It is imperative to recognize the positive effects on local economies and the quality of life that may be achieved when local communities are given control over the management of their tourism resources. Increasingly, it is understood that community empowerment plays an important role in improving and developing the sustainable tourism of a location. As a result of the locals’ dedication to preserve their unique culture and way of life, tourists are becoming increasingly interested in learning about other civilizations. Successful community-based tourism improves the quality of life of the local population by eradicating poverty and safeguarding resources of local areas (Sebele, 2010).

Sustainability is a key solution to environmental pollution. The concept of sustainability has become a key focus in the literature of tourism, with a wide range of perspectives from policymakers, practitioners, and academics. The issue of community empowerment and local support in community based tourism studies has received scarce attention.

Although economic development and community based tourism are well discussed in previous studies (Cárdenas et al., 2015; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014; Lapeyre, 2010; Sebele, 2010), but the local support as an enhancing tool between the relationship of community empowerment and sustainable tourism development is lacking. The present study develops a proper research model to identify the relationship between community empowerment, local support and sustainable tourism development. The study seeks to fill this gap through an analysis that proposes a better understanding of how community empowerment might contribute to the long-term development of tourism. The findings highlighted the importance of local support in modifying the influence of community empowerment for the implementation of community-based sustainable tourist development.

## Literature review

Tourism has been demonstrated to be an agent of economic development, as it generates jobs in rural communities and establishes small and medium-sized tourism businesses (Boley et al., 2014; Chiosova, 2015; Choi & Sirakaya, 2005). Tourism, being a service business, is extremely reliant on the goodwill and cooperation of local communities. Local communities also contribute to efforts to promote tourism destination items, as they are the fundamental source of tourism image formation. The development of local communities through empowerment has been the main focus of past research e.g. (Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 2002; Sofield, 2003). Community empowerment means giving power to locals, centered on cooperative work by involving all the members of the community (Ahmad & Talib, 2015). Community-based tourism is one initiative that promotes community self-sufficiency, financial independence, and empowerment (Di Castri, 2004; Kline et al., 2019). However, many community-based tourism programs fall short of providing communities with the optimum economic benefits. One explanation for this failure is that outside managing and controller mechanisms prevent indigenous people from exercising complete authority over their economic resources (Kline et al., 2019; Nunkoo & Smith, 2013). The conceptual research framework is presented in **Figure 1**.

It is assumed that societies can execute and manage tourist plans and do not need the assistance from outside organizations (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Zapata et al., 2011). Nonetheless, tourist development started and controlled entirely by the public is more expected to help the community economically, alleviate poverty, and result in more sustainable livelihoods (Boley et al., 2017; Gurung & Scholz, 2008). To create sustainable tourism and contribute to community livelihoods, local involvement in tourist projects is critical (Gurung & Seeland, 2008; Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011; Sebastian & Rajagopalan, 2009). As community-based tourism becomes more widely recognized as a critical concern in the context of tourism that is sustainable, it may become even more widespread (Lee et al., 2018; Sakata & Prideaux, 2013). Tourism facilities can be developed by the values and interests of local communities by retaining or aggressively acquiring influence over-tourism decision-making (Mowforth & Munt, 2015).

## Empowerment of communities

Community empowerment is critical in the tourism development industry for the proper implementation of sustainable tourism development (Boley et al., 2014). Local communities are empowered when they have the right and ability to gather resources, make decisions, and influence change to attain autonomy, self-sufficiency, social fairness, and the maximum possible quality of life (Friedmann, 1992; Scheyvens, 1999, 2002). Empowerment communities is an essential element of sustainable development of tourism. Numerous authors have stressed the significance of citizens' empowerment for the benefit of local communities (Budeanu et al., 2016; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Empowered societies are better positioned to benefit from possible sustainable tourism development (Mendoza-Ramos & Prideaux, 2018; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). This means that when planning and developing tourism, local communities have a better understanding of what is appropriate for their area (Tosun, 2006). In any tourist endeavor, native societies are considered as a valuable resource and a vital component. (e.g. Bramwell, 2010; Lapeyre, 2010; Stone & Stone, 2011).

*H1: Community empowerment has a positive and significant impact on sustainable tourism development.*

## Community empowerment and local support

It is pivotal that the local people participate in the growth and planning processes of the community. A power imbalance in the host community contributes to inhabitants' negative attitudes toward tourism (Suess et al., 2018). Additionally, when residents are involved in the training and management of tourism, they create a more favorable outlook toward tourism growth and care for tourism (Panyik, 2015). Power relations and trust are considered essential concepts in community-based tourism research regarding the views of local people toward tourism (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). Local support in planning and development of tourism, according to Murphy (1985) is a key component in determining the sustainability of tourism destination development. While taking part in the distribution of tourism advantages, implies that local inhabitants should have the same financial capacity to benefit from tourism and its connections to other industries. Tourists, as a community industry, must include not just residents who gain directly from tourism, but also local communities that benefit indirectly from the continuous expansion of tourism. Empowering communities will improve how citizens perceive tourism development and their desire to support it (Sinclair-Maragh & Gursoy, 2016).

*H2: Community empowerment has a positive effect on local support for tourism.*

## Sustainable tourism development

Sustainable tourism development aims to maximize the positive and minimize the negative effects of tourism on host communities (Bulatović & Rajović, 2016; Chiosova, 2015; Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Sustainable tourism promotes qualitative development with an emphasis on health and well-being, rather than quantitative expansion at the expense of natural wealth (Hall et al., 2015). Numerous tourism destinations and businesses have developed a variety of sustainable projects to safeguard the environment, protect native assets, preserve ethnic legitimacy, and generate financial advantages (Boley et al., 2017; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017; Nilnoppakun & Ampavat, 2016). Sustainable tourism development must be successful to benefit the local destination in a variety of ways (for example, creating high-quality jobs, boosting local economic growth, supporting eco-friendly development of tourism, empowering local communities, and maintaining the traditional values of local community), (Tolkach & King, 2015). The local population benefits in a variety of ways from sustainable development.

*H3: Local support has a positive effect on sustainable tourism development.*

## The mediating role of local support

Sustainable tourism requires active community support (Cheng et al., 2019; Moghavvemi et al., 2017). When local people are involved in tourism development strategies, they are enthusiastic about it (Park et al., 2012). Sustainability requires local community participation and a positive attitude toward tourists (Canalejo et al., 2015). The contribution of the public in tourism industry progress helps them grasp the benefits and drawbacks. Communities must fully control their tourist resources to get complete benefits from these. Community participation in tourism initiatives is vital for sustainable tourism and community livelihoods (Thetsane, 2019; Tosun, 2006; Xu et al., 2019). Due to the cumulative influence of any development, Murphy maintained that the host community should be the key stakeholder in tourism development (Murphy, 1985, 1988).

*H4: Local support mediates the relationship between community empowerment and sustainable tourism development.*

## Study site

The map of study site is presented in Figure 2. Himachal Pradesh has an abundance of tourism attractions (Parmar, 2012). It has long been the ultimate travel destination in India for visitors, artists, pilgrims, and adventurers. Tourism here is a vital industry because it contributes to the state's economic development. The current study is conducted in the southern region of Himachal Pradesh. The most popular tourist destinations in this region are Nagar, Kasol, Bhuntar, Mashobra, and Chail (Sharma, 2016; Singh, 1989). Bhuntar is part of the Kullu district and is commonly used as a gateway to the towns of Kullu, Manali, Kasol, and Manikaran. Kullu airport is also

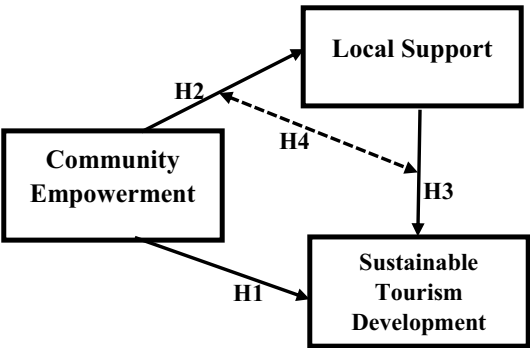


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

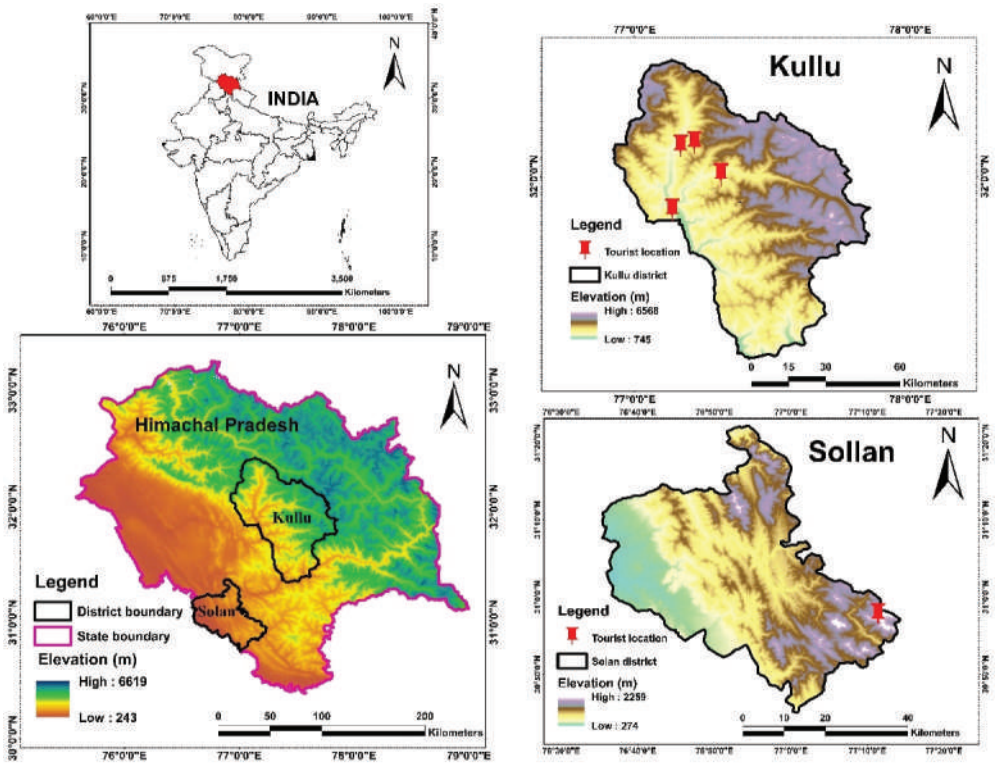


Figure 2. Study area.

located in Bhuntar. Nagar gained international attention when a non-governmental organization called “Ananda” began working for the village’s and community’s development. The project’s objective is to assist local communities in regaining their self-reliance and transitioning to a more sustainable way of life,” with a particular emphasis on introducing gardening skills to the community. These locations are frequently visited by tourists throughout the year but summer months are more enchanting with warm weather and cool winds (Singh, 1989). Those seeking picturesque beauty will find it in



this region, which combines cultural depth and history with entertainment and natural variation. The area has a tranquil atmosphere and is also home to numerous ancient temples and a castle. Murlidhar Krishna Temple is the primary tourist attraction in this region.

## **Research methodology**

### ***Instrument and measures***

In this study, all items have a response option ranging from 1–5. A five-point Likert scale was employed as measurement scale with 1 indicating strongly disagree, 2 indicating disagree, 3 indicating neutrality, 4 indicating agree, and 5 indicating strong agree. All the three constructs were estimated using previously proven methods. A total of 15 items were extracted from previous research, adapted to the present research framework. Some modifications related the wording of these items were made to fit to the present work. Community empowerment was operationalized by adopting five items from (Satarat, 2010). Five items for the construct sustainable tourism development were adopted from (Cárdenas et al., 2015). Moreover, five items to measure the local support for tourism were borrowed from (Khalid et al., 2019) and (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). Before conducting the survey, the original questionnaire was properly pre-tested by academic specialists, and no significant changes were made in response to the feedback.

### ***Data collection***

To conduct an empirical evaluation of the proposed framework of the current study, a professional team of researchers gathered data from the members of community residents, local leaders, and tour operatives. The study team visited local community members three times (in May, June, and August, 2021) to complete the survey questionnaire and invited local residents to participate. A purposive sampling method was used to collect the data from the respondents. The following criteria were utilized to pick these subjects: (1) local residents who were involved in tourism activities, (2) local leaders who were elected by local residents, and (3) tourist operators. Respondents were asked if they wanted to participate in the survey by the field research team. After presenting them with a brief description of the study's goal, we delivered the questionnaire to those who answered yes. The minimal sample size is 150 samples, according to relevant research that use the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique (Hair et al., 2010). 420 questionnaires were administered to ensure that at least 150 valid samples could be obtained. After removing questionnaires with missing data, a valid sample of 368 respondents was obtained for final analysis.

### ***Analysis of data***

The SPSS 18.0 statistical package was utilized in the current study to describe the sample structure. AMOS 23.0 was used to perform Structural equation modeling (SEM). The SEM analysis programme was used to evaluate the maximum likelihood estimation. Based on



Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) work, data analysis was conducted in a two-stage process. First, after determining the reliability and validity of the variables, we used confirmatory factor analysis to estimate the obvious levels of these variables (CFA). Second, the hypotheses of conceptual model were put to the test using SEM analysis.

## Results

Basic demographic information is depicted in Table 1. Among 368 respondents, 227 (61.68%) were male and 141 (38.30%) were female. Regarding the participants' level of education primary-secondary (14%), 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> (25%), Graduates (22%), masters/doctoral (18%), diploma (21%). In terms of age, approximately 26% of participants said that they are under the age of 30, followed by those between the ages of 31 and 40 (28%), between the ages of 41 and 60 (36%), and 60 years old or more (10%). Moreover, 57% of participants indicated that they are community members, 23% were local leaders and 20% were tour operators.

### Quality assurance for data

The CFA findings showed that the measurement model met Hu and Bentler (1999) requirements for model fit, with  $X^2 = 146$ ,  $df = 87$ ,  $X^2/df = 1.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$  CFI = 0.978, GFI = 0.950, TLI = 0.974, and RMSEA = 0.043. The scales' reliability and validity were next assessed. First, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were used to assess the measures' reliability. As seen in Table 2, all Cronbach alpha values exceeded Nunnally's recommended level of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). The values of Composite Reliability exceeded Fornell and Larcker's (1981) threshold of 0.70. Second, the validity of measures was assessed using convergent and discriminant validity. As shown in Table 2 the values of AVE > 0.50 and CR > AVE, thus, it established convergent validity. According to Table 2,

**Table 1.** Basic demographic profile of respondents.

Demographic	(n) Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	227	61.68
Female	141	38.30
<b>Age of Respondents</b>		
Below 30	96	26.1
31–40	104	28.3
41–60	132	35.8
Above 60	36	9.7
<b>Level of Education</b>		
Primary/ Secondary	51	13.8
10 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup>	92	25.1
Graduates	81	22.1
Masters/Doctoral	66	17.9
Diploma	78	21.1
<b>Type of Resident</b>		
Local leaders	84	22.8
Community members	210	57.1
Tour operatives	74	20.1

**Table 2.** Reliability and validity of measures.

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Alpha	CR	AVE	Square Root of AVE
Community Empowerment(CE)	CE1	0.801	0.852	0.865	0.563	0.750
	CE2	0.804				
	CE3	0.751				
	CE4	0.643				
	CE5	0.743				
Local Support(LS)	LS1	0.781	0.866	0.875	0.585	0.764
	LS2	0.801				
	LS3	0.774				
	LS4	0.659				
	LS5	0.803				
Sustainable Tourism Development(STD)	STD1	0.794	0.892	0.897	0.638	0.798
	STD2	0.831				
	STD3	0.821				
	STD4	0.630				
	STD5	0.895				

**Indices:** AVE = average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability

square root of AVE for a given construct was greater than the absolute value of a construct's standardized correlation with all other constructs. As a result, discriminant validity was also established (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

## Hypotheses testing

Tables 3 and 4 display the result of direct and indirect effect hypotheses. Firstly, we hypothesize that community empowerment positively influence the sustainable tourism development. As found in Table 3, which shows that community empowerment has a positive and significant effect on sustainable tourism development ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In this way, hypothesis 1 was acknowledged. Secondly, we hypothesize that community empowerment has a positive and significant effect on local support. Table 3 shows the direct effect of community empowerment on local support which is also significant ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In this way, hypothesis 2 is accepted. As found in

**Table 3.** Hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Relationship	<i>p</i> -value	Decision
H1	CE → STD	0.015	Supported
H2	CE → LS	0.004	Supported
H3	LS → STD	0.019	Supported

**Indices:** CE = community empowerment, LS = local support, STD = sustainable tourism development

**Source:** Authors

**Table 4.** Hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Relationship	<i>p</i> -value	Decision	Mediation
H4	CE → LS → STD	0.005	Supported	Full Mediation

**Indices:** CE = community empowerment, LS = local support, STD = sustainable tourism development

**Source:** Authors

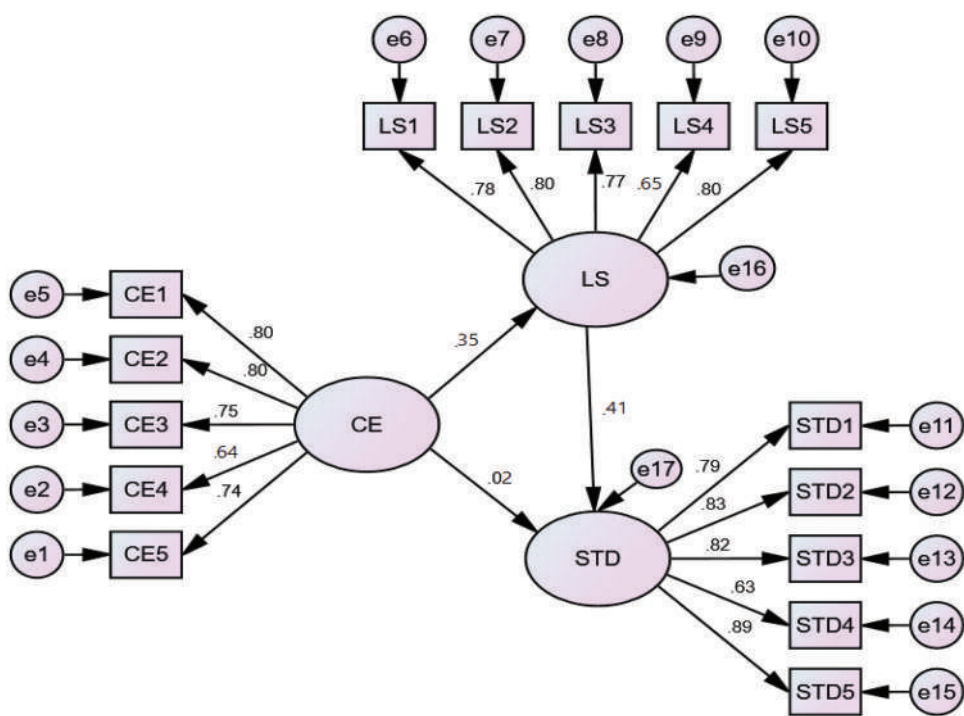


Figure 3. Structural model.

Table 3, local support has a direct positive and significant effect on sustainable tourism development ( $\beta = 0.41, p < 0.05$ ). In this way, hypothesis 3 is acknowledged. The results of the structural model are displayed in Figure 3.

The indirect impact of community empowerment on sustainable tourism development is shown in Table 4. Hypothesis 4 claimed that community empowerment has an indirect effect on sustainable tourist development through local support for tourism. To validate this hypothesis, Baron and Kenny's (1986) four conditions must be met. The first criterion is satisfied for this mediator effect, as the independent variable (community empowerment) has a positive and substantial effect on the dependent variable (sustainable tourism development). The second condition indicates a positive link between the independent and mediator variable, local support being the mediator variable. Validation of hypothesis 2 satisfies this requirement. A relationship between the mediator variable – local support and the dependent variable – sustainable tourist development – is required for the third condition. The confirmation of hypothesis 3 satisfies this requirement. The fourth requirement specifies that when the mediator variable is included in the model, the association between the independent and dependent variables should be eliminated – or at the very least minimized. When these three factors were included in the model, the influence of community empowerment on sustainable tourism development vanished (from 0.168–0.024) and was not significant. As a result, we could conclude that local support mediates the relationship between community empowerment

and sustainable tourism development completely. Thus H4 is also supported, since we see that community empowerment has an indirect effect of (0.144) on sustainable tourism development through local support.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore community empowerment and its impact on sustainable tourism development supported by local residents. The current study focused on local people's empowerment and its significance in assuring the tourism industry's long-term viability. The study inferred that the developed model is a full mediation model. The sustainable tourism development is significantly influenced by community empowerment and local support. Moreover, it was also found that local support has a full mediation effect between the relationship of community empowerment and sustainable tourism development. So, to uplift the rural areas especially with diverse natural tourism resources the state as well as the local government should give empowerment to the communities and also should involve the locals in decision-making processes.

Empowering communities and mobilizing local support for tourism is one of the most widely acknowledged aspects of tourism. There is a direct link between community empowerment and the growth of sustainable tourism because local communities are well aware about how to handle the problems arising because of increased tourism. Tourism with the help of local support is an effective strategy for sustainable tourism development (STD) by ensuring that all members of the community benefit and that natural resources are protected (Ellis & Sheridan, 2015). Locals that want to see long-term tourist growth should expand community communication channels and encourage citizens to participate in decision-making (Cheng et al., 2019). Snyman (2012) argued that tourism should be community-driven, with community members in charge of tourism infrastructure and facilities in their immediate vicinity. The local community experiences both positive and negative results of tourism, either directly or indirectly, and so their engagement is critical for better managing the impacts and reaping the advantages provided by tourism operations (Cole, 2006). With the support of local communities, sustainable tourism promotes cohesiveness and rejuvenates the relationship between the local population and tourists. It is evident that the importance of tourism cannot be denied in improving the economic conditions of developing countries. It has benefitted the local and host communities in several ways. Tourism brings with it both positive and negative effects. Sustainable tourism development helps in promoting the positive impacts while at the same time reducing the negative impacts (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

The research has studied the relationship between sustainable tourism development, community empowerment and local support. Further, it has also investigated the role of local support as a mediating variable to improve the relationship between community empowerment and sustainable tourism. Community empowerment provides a way out to achieve the sustainable development of a place. When the communities are given the power to make decisions about the proper utilization of local resources, it will increase the

positive benefits to the local population. It is not possible to achieve sustainability without local support. Sustainable tourism has the potential to be a significant source of long-term growth, as long as it continues to meet the needs of the target population under their stated expectations. It is clear to local inhabitants that tourism may have a good impact on their community and they much value the positive ones: more recreation options, a better quality of life, and a better living standard of their community. Empowering local people through tourism is an excellent technique for cultivating positive attitudes and enhancing the quality of life. It is recommended that local governments use a participatory strategy to put residents at the center of tourist development by enhancing beneficiary involvement in actions that affect them but over which they have little authority, such as infrastructure construction (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010). Planners should implement a thorough social integration and participation strategy that includes members of a varied range of social groups and backgrounds in the creation of tourism attractions. According to the findings, it is evident that the sustainable tourism development is positively and significantly influenced by community empowerment and support by local people.

### Implications

Tourism has emerged as an important industry in Himachal Pradesh. The state has enormous potential for rural tourism as well and to put Himachal Pradesh on the developmental path sustainable tourism is the right vehicle. The new studies should be conducted in other areas of Himachal Pradesh to identify whether the resident communities are supportive of or dissatisfied with tourism development. In the future, this data can be utilized by the government and other organizations to produce appropriate tourism benefits by involving the local populations in decision-making and implementing processes. Local citizens who are empowered help to mitigate the negative impact of tourism, which contributes to the long-term viability of tourism development. As a result, tourism planners must empower local communities by engaging them in STD project decision-making. Local communities must have proper information, skills, and ability to participate in STD activities as part of the tourism development process. As a result, it has been advised that central and local governments should educate local inhabitants on a continual basis in order to raise STD awareness among community members. More realistically, local residents and leaders can form tourist advisory boards, training programmes, workshops, focus groups, and public hearings, resulting in the development and sharing of local people's skills and talents.

### Limitations and future research

The study's findings indicate numerous directions for future investigation. The sample for this study was selected from local population of the study area so the future studies might be conducted on a wider population for better generalizability. Future research could look into the moderating effect of other variables on the link, such as policy intervention, private participation, and so on. It is suggested that future researchers expand the proposed conceptual framework by integrating such moderating variables. The study examined the direct effect of community empowerment on sustainable tourism

development by incorporating the mediating effect of one variable, future studies can be conducted by including multiple mediating variables between community empowerment and sustainable tourism development. The current study included local inhabitants and local leaders as respondents, but future studies might include other groups, such as NGOs and tourism officials, for multi-group analysis. Finally, additional study is needed to examine and quantify the economic impact of such developments, particularly at the household level.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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