

## Human Resources as Social Assets in Sustainable Tourism: Evaluating Impacts through Social Return on Investment (SROI)

Dinis Cahyaningrum<sup>1</sup>, Tifani Dame Hasany<sup>2</sup>, Zefanya Andryan Girsang<sup>3</sup>, Dhanny Safitri<sup>4</sup>,

Khairul Mujahidi<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1-5</sup>Universitas Mataram

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### ABSTRACT

Tourism is widely recognized as a significant driver of economic growth and employment; however, the role of human resources is often narrowly framed in economic terms, with limited recognition of their broader social contributions. This study explores human resources as social assets in sustainable tourism by integrating the concepts of social capital, community-based tourism (CBT), and the Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework. Using a descriptive qualitative approach through a structured literature review, the study examines how education, training, and community participation function as strategic mechanisms to strengthen local capacities and generate multidimensional value for tourism destinations. The analysis highlights how human resource development enhances not only technical competencies and service quality but also social cohesion, trust, and collective action within host communities. Findings indicate that investment in human resources contributes not only to improved service quality and economic gains but also to stronger community cohesion, cultural preservation, empowerment of local actors, and inclusive development processes. The application of the SROI framework provides a systematic way to capture and measure these broader social, cultural, and economic impacts that are often overlooked in conventional tourism evaluations. This study emphasizes that people-centered investment strategies are fundamental to achieving long-term sustainability in tourism development. The study concludes that human resources must be positioned as catalysts for both social and economic value creation, with important implications for tourism policy, destination governance, and community-based development practices.

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#### *Corresponding Author:*

Name: Dinis Cahyaningrum

Institution Address: University of Mataram

e-mail: [dinis@staff.unram.ac.id](mailto:dinis@staff.unram.ac.id)

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been recognized as a strategic sector with substantial contributions to both economic and social

development at global and national levels. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, tourism sector generates nearly 10% of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

[1]. In Indonesia, tourism contributes approximately 4.5% to the national GDP and provides employment for more than 22.08 million people in 2024 [2]. These figures highlight tourism not only as a driver of economic growth but also as a labor-intensive sector with significant potential for job creation. However, the role of human resources (HR) in tourism has often been narrowly perceived in terms of economic function, while its broader social values remain underexplored. Local human resources do not merely sustain operational aspects of tourism destinations; they also play a vital role in strengthening social capital, fostering community cohesion, and preserving local cultural heritage.

The participation of local workers is closely tied to community involvement in tourism, with education and training quality emerging as key determinants. Yet, the tourism workforce in Indonesia still faces persistent challenges, including limited access to education, inadequate training aligned with local needs, and weak community-based institutional capacity. These constraints underscore the necessity of developing human resources not only through technical skill enhancement but also through reinforcing their social role and community capacity to manage tourism potential sustainably. Unfortunately, discussions regarding HR needs are frequently neglected in tourism planning, often resulting in structural problems within the industry and restricting broader community participation in tourism-driven economic activities [3].

In this regard, community-based tourism (CBT) offers a promising approach by emphasizing the active participation of local communities as central actors in tourism development. CBT fosters social capital through collaboration, solidarity, and partnerships within and across communities. Such social capital serves as a foundation for sustaining destination management, strengthening rural economies, and enhancing community welfare [4]. Moreover, CBT aligns with the principles of sustainable development and contributes to achieving the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in promoting social inclusion and equitable economic growth.

To systematically capture both the economic and social contributions of human resources in tourism, a comprehensive evaluation framework is required. Social Return on Investment (SROI) emerges as a relevant tool, as it not only assesses economic outputs but also quantifies the social, cultural, and environmental value generated by development interventions. Human resources in tourism should not be regarded merely as labor but as strategic social assets capable of producing both social and economic value [5]. Therefore, integrating social capital perspectives, CBT practices, and the SROI framework is essential for a more holistic evaluation of HR contributions to sustainable tourism.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to analyze the role of human resources as social assets in sustainable tourism through the application of SROI, while integrating social capital perspectives and CBT practices. Although prior studies have highlighted tourism's contribution to national economies and community empowerment, most have disproportionately emphasized its economic dimensions while underestimating the role of HR as a strategic social asset in fostering sustainability. Furthermore, existing applications of SROI in Indonesia have largely focused on economic empowerment and small-medium enterprises, with limited attention to its integration with social capital and CBT in the context of tourism. This study thus advances novelty by conceptualizing HR not only as operational support but also as a catalyst for social capital strengthening and sustainable socio-economic value creation, evaluated through the SROI framework.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Social Capital

Social capital has emerged as a key theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of community participation in tourism, particularly within the community-

based tourism (CBT) model. It refers to networks, norms, and trust established among community members that enable more effective coordination and collective action [6]. Social capital functions as an intangible resource that strengthens social relations while facilitating the achievement of shared goals.

Within CBT, social capital is manifested through solidarity, cooperation, and collaboration among local residents, often in partnership with community-based institutions, to manage village potentials. Such processes not only ensure the sustainability of tourism destinations but also contribute to rural economic development and long-term community welfare [4]. Social capital facilitates communication, knowledge exchange, and the pooling of collective ideas, while simultaneously uniting diverse needs, accelerating information flows, and reinforcing community identity [6].

In tourism as a service-oriented industry, human resources (HR) represent the central driving force, since the sector depends heavily on people both as consumers (tourists) and as providers of services and products. Thus, HR is not only a technical input but also a strategic determinant of tourism performance, particularly in relation to service quality and visitor experiences [3][7]. This highlights the dual role of HR as an economic contributor and as a social asset that reinforces social capital through active involvement in CBT initiatives. Ultimately, the success of CBT-based destination development illustrates how non-economic factors such as networks, trust, and collective norms can become decisive elements in advancing sustainable tourism.

## 2.2 Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is widely recognized as an inclusive development approach that positions local communities as the primary actors in tourism governance, rather than external investors or state authorities [8]. The model promotes active community involvement in planning, management, and decision-making, thereby ensuring that tourism benefits are equitably

distributed within the host community [9]. The objectives of CBT extend beyond tourism growth, encompassing community empowerment, enhanced participation for economic, social, and cultural benefits, and equitable opportunities across community members [4].

The success of CBT largely depends on multi-stakeholder collaboration involving local residents, government institutions, and private actors. Central to this process is community empowerment, particularly the optimization of local human and natural resources. Empowerment here is understood as fostering individual and collective agency, responsibility, and initiative in tourism development. Strengthening human resources is especially critical, as educated, creative, and innovative communities are better positioned to manage tourism effectively and sustainably [10]. CBT, therefore, should not be viewed merely as a destination management strategy but as a pathway to enhance socio-economic resilience through participatory and inclusive tourism.

### 2.3 Social Return on Investment (SROI) as an Evaluation Framework

Social Return on Investment (SROI) provides a systematic method to assess the broader social value created by projects, programs, or investments by translating social outcomes into monetary terms [11]. Stakeholder experiences of change are considered as returns, producing both tangible and intangible benefits for communities and implementing organizations [12]. As such, SROI serves as a comprehensive evaluation tool that integrates social, environmental, and economic dimensions into a single framework of value measurement.

Social value in this context encompasses positive changes that stakeholders experience, some of which can be expressed in market prices, while others appear in non-economic forms such as improved relationships, social harmony, enhanced quality of life, and cultural cohesion [13]. Unlike conventional cost-benefit analysis, SROI combines qualitative, quantitative, and

financial data to produce both a ratio of benefits to investment and a narrative explaining the mechanisms of change [14].

In the context of sustainable tourism, SROI is particularly relevant for evaluating human resources not merely as labor but as social assets that contribute to community empowerment, institutional strengthening, and cultural preservation. When integrated with CBT practices, SROI provides a broader perspective on how community participation contributes to social and economic outcomes, thereby reinforcing the sustainability of tourism development.

### 3. METHODS

This study applies a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the role of human resources as social assets in sustainable tourism using the Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework. The research is conducted through a literature review, which involves systematically collecting and analyzing information from secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and official documents [15]. As explained by Sugiyono, a literature review emphasizes theoretical analysis by using relevant references and considering cultural, social, and normative aspects of the context being studied [16]. Since this research does not involve fieldwork or direct interaction with respondents, all data are obtained from existing publications. The literature review therefore provides the foundation for building the theoretical framework, while also offering deeper insights into how social phenomena can be understood and interpreted.

The researcher conducts a review of selected literature to analyze the role of human resources as social assets in sustainable tourism within the SROI framework. The data collection process in this study relies on identifying and assessing relevant secondary sources to support the analysis. This involves systematically searching for and extracting information from books, reports, journal articles, and other written documents that provide insights

related to the research focus [17]. The main objective is to compile sufficient evidence to enhance the researcher's understanding of the topic using existing knowledge. The literature review applies a rigorous selection process, concentrating on studies that discuss human resources as social assets in sustainable tourism within the framework of Social Return on Investment (SROI). To ensure relevance, articles are identified through targeted keywords such as (a) social capital, (b) community-based tourism, (c) social return on investment, and (d) sustainable tourism.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Social Capital in Tourism Development

Social capital has emerged as a critical foundation for sustainable tourism development, as it provides the intangible resources necessary to support cooperation, trust, and collective action. The concept extends beyond simple interpersonal relationships, encompassing shared values, social norms, and collaborative networks that enable communities to mobilize and manage resources effectively [6]. Within tourism, social capital functions as a vital asset that connects individuals, groups, and institutions to pursue collective goals such as cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and socioeconomic well-being.

Scholarly evidence underscores the strategic role of social capital in determining the resilience and sustainability of tourism destinations. Syahriar & Darwanto shows in Colo Tourism Area that strong local traditions enhanced mutual trust among residents, which subsequently materialized in the establishment of community institutions such as paguyuban and local associations. These institutions not only became platforms for participatory decision-making but also functioned as mechanisms of social control, ensuring that tourism development aligned with community values and sustainability principles [25].

Similarly, Triristina et al. found in Wonomerto Village that the success of Sumber Biru Tourism was deeply embedded

in strong social relations. Despite religious diversity, tolerance, kinship ties, and cooperative practices such as gotong royong became key drivers of collective trust and entrepreneurial growth [4]. This reflects how cultural norms and social solidarity can reduce potential conflicts while enabling communities to embrace tourism as a shared opportunity.

The literature identifies three core dimensions of social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the trust and solidarity that exists within tightly knit groups, reinforcing internal cohesion. Bridging social capital represents connections across different groups, facilitating collaboration and the exchange of resources. Linking social capital involves vertical relationships with external stakeholders such as government agencies, NGOs, or private actors, which expand community access to institutional support and resources [4]. When these three dimensions interact effectively, they enable communities not only to preserve local wisdom but also to engage more inclusively in the tourism economy.

Human resources (HR) play a critical role in reinforcing these dimensions of social capital. Pajriah in her study of Ciamis Regency, emphasized that tourism education and guide training enhanced not only professional competencies but also interpersonal trust and social networking [5]. This suggests that HR development contributes to the creation of social capital by strengthening collaboration, professionalism, and collective ownership of tourism initiatives. Thus, in the context of tourism, HR must be understood as both an economic contributor and a social catalyst capable of sustaining community cohesion and resilience.

#### **4.2 Community -Based Tourism (CBT) as a Participatory Model**

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) represents a participatory approach to tourism that prioritizes the active involvement of communities at all stages of destination development—planning, implementation, and evaluation. Unlike

conventional top-down models that often marginalize local voices, CBT seeks to balance economic growth with social equity, cultural preservation, and ecological sustainability. Its strength lies in its ability to cultivate a sense of ownership, empower marginalized groups, and ensure that tourism benefits are distributed equitably across society.

The Indonesian experience provides a rich context for understanding CBT as a tool of community empowerment. Triristina et al. in their study of Wonomerto Village, highlighted how local traditions of cooperation and tolerance enabled the community to collectively manage Sumber Biru Tourism. Despite religious diversity, the community mobilized through shared values of kinship and gotong royong, creating an inclusive environment that fostered entrepreneurship and local innovation [4].

Pajriah further shows that tourism education and guide training in Ciamis Regency significantly enhanced community capacity by improving technical skills, expanding social networks, and reinforcing interpersonal trust [5]. These findings underscore that CBT does not operate in isolation from human resource development; rather, it thrives on building competencies that allow communities to act as both managers and beneficiaries of tourism.

The case of Mekarsari Tourism Village further illustrates CBT's participatory potential. Here, local resources such as tea and coffee farming, along with dairy cattle breeding, were transformed into tourism attractions and flagship products. Residents actively participated by providing homestays, organizing cultural events, and engaging in educational activities related to farming and animal husbandry. Capacity-building initiatives, such as digital marketing training, website development, and comparative studies in Yogyakarta, further reinforced local empowerment [24]. Several challenges remain, particularly in relation to marketing strategies, product integration, and institutional management, as reflected in the underutilization of the Tourist Information Center (TIC).

The success of CBT is also inseparable from the role of local champions, individuals who mobilize communities and act as catalysts of change. In Mekarsari, the leadership of a community figurehead was instrumental in initiating tourism programs, forming official tourism institutions, and building partnerships with government and youth organizations. This demonstrates that CBT's success depends not only on resource availability or infrastructure but also on the synergy between social capital, human resource development, and local leadership.

#### **4.3 Human Resources and Social Return on Investment (SROI) in Tourism Developmen**

Social Return on Investment (SROI) provides a comprehensive analytical framework for evaluating the contribution of human resources as social assets in sustainable tourism. Unlike conventional cost-benefit analysis, SROI emphasizes broader value by integrating quantitative, qualitative, and financial data to demonstrate how investment in people generates social, cultural, economic, and environmental transformation [11][13]. In tourism, HR are not only service providers or guides but also key agents who shape social networks, reinforce collective norms, and safeguard cultural identity. Measuring SROI thus enables systematic assessment of how local capacity building translates into long-term social benefits.

Empirical applications of SROI in Indonesian tourism programs show consistent patterns: investment in HR generates multiplied social and economic value. The Ghanjaran Park Program, for instance, recorded an SROI ratio of 1.59:1, indicating that each Rp1 invested produced Rp1.59 in social benefits, including higher income, job creation, and enhanced skills [18]. Even greater outcomes were observed in the SIBA Batik Kujur Program with a ratio of 1:5.39, reflecting not only economic gains but also strengthened social cohesion, employment opportunities for women, and collective pride through cultural preservation [19]. These findings highlight how

empowered HR can transform traditional skills into both economic identity and social capital.

The Piwang Beach Program reported an even higher SROI of 8.26, underscoring the profound social impacts of community-driven tourism. In addition to boosting local businesses, the program contributed to non-economic outcomes such as reduced youth delinquency, stronger community participation, and increased awareness of cultural and environmental conservation [14]. Even cases with modest ratios, such as the Semut Island Ecotourism Program (1.05), still demonstrated tangible benefits in terms of capacity building and long-term economic opportunities [20]. These examples show that SROI ratios should not be interpreted merely as numbers but as reflections of the quality and depth of human empowerment achieved in each destination.

Taken together, these findings reveal that investing in HR within community-based tourism produces multidimensional impacts that extend beyond economic returns. Capacity development, social cohesion, cultural preservation, and community ownership are forms of social value that can be systematically captured through SROI. Thus, HR in tourism must be recognized not only as a labor force but as strategic social assets that determine destination sustainability. Applying SROI to sustainable tourism development underscores that the social value generated by HR constitutes a fundamental pillar for balancing community welfare, cultural preservation, and economic growth.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study shows that human resources in tourism are not only workers but also key social assets that drive sustainable development. By combining the perspectives of social capital, community-based tourism (CBT), and the Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework, it becomes clear that investment in people creates benefits far beyond economics. Education, training, and community participation strengthen trust,

cooperation, and cultural identity, which in turn improve service quality and ensure that tourism contributes to long-term community welfare.

Based various Indonesian CBT initiatives indicates that SROI provides a robust framework for capturing these wider benefits, where investment in education, training, and community participation consistently produces returns that surpass purely economic measures. Importantly, the analysis shows that social capital—expressed through bonding, bridging, and linking networks—functions as both a prerequisite and an outcome of effective human resource development. When nurtured inclusively, these networks mitigate risks of exclusion and elite capture, ensuring that tourism benefits are more equitably distributed.

Theoretically, this research advances the conceptualization of human resources as catalysts for social value creation in sustainable tourism, moving beyond conventional productivity-based views. Practically, it underscores the need for policymakers and practitioners to design HR development programs that integrate technical capacity with community leadership, intercultural competence, and institutional strengthening.

Future studies should complement this literature-based inquiry with empirical SROI measurements across diverse tourism contexts, particularly by incorporating perspectives from marginalized groups. Such work will deepen understanding of how human resources contribute to resilient, inclusive, and sustainable tourism systems.

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