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High degree of informality in tourismscape: a threat to tourism service sustainability

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Abstract: This case study narrates the story of selected tourism initiatives in rural areas of Bangladesh. These tourism initiatives are undertaken by individuals (e.g., local people) who are mostly of young at age. This case interestingly identifies that these initiatives are informal in nature. No formal organisation setup has been established by the entrepreneurs. This case is analysed using ANT and tourismscape theory and it is noted that informal relationship among the actor networks may threaten the sustainability of these local informal tourism initiatives in the long run.

Keywords: tourism; informal; ANT theory; sustainability; tourismscape theory.

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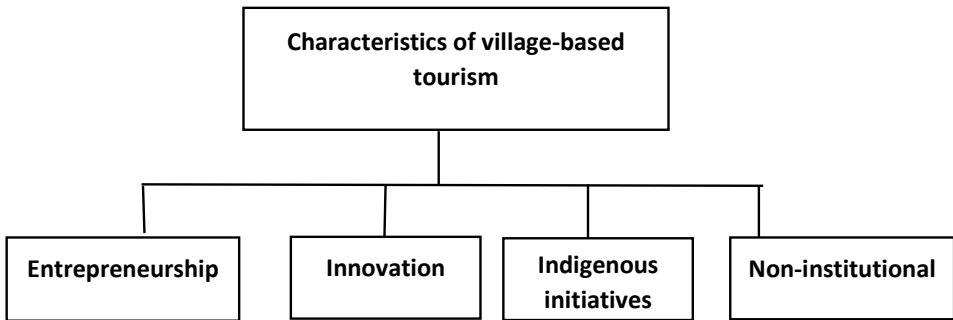
1 Introduction

Due to two linked characteristics, actor-network theory offers insightful data for tourist research. First, its capacity to deal with the relational materiality of the social world, immanent in the translation concept, which sheds light on how tourism occurs in a given

location through hybrid network practices of various actors; and second, its openness to multiple relational orderings, thereby bringing a variety of tourism spatiality into the analysis (Jóhannesson, 2005).

By combining concepts of symmetry, relational materialism, and translation, tourism might be rethought, introducing the concept of *tourismscape*. These are the actor networks that connect the transit, lodging, tourist resources, habitats, technology, people, and organisations analytically, inside and between various cultures and geographies. The relationships between objects and people scattered in time- and space-specific patterns make up *tourismscapes*. One of the components of a *tourismscape* is the individuals consuming tourism services or the individuals and organisations offering these services. Concerning the latter, countless individuals and groups offer transportation, lodging, food, instruction, and entertainment. The contributions of innumerable individuals working for large and small businesses are connected by intricate ordering systems that make up *tourismscapes*. In fact, the diversity of the constituent enterprises and the local as well as worldwide networks of firms are excellent mirrors of the complexity of building and reproducing *tourismscapes*. Naturally, visitors are also a part of *tourismscapes* since they participate in them by using services, purchasing local goods, or positioning objects (such as caravans and tents, t-shirts, rubbish and their bodies) in the actor-network. Secondly, *tourismscapes* include surroundings that combine ‘natural’ and ‘culture’, as well as constructed artefacts like hotels, dining establishments and entertainment venues. Natural items, for instance, provide particular opportunities. For example, hills cannot offer viewing opportunities; beaches cannot attract sunbathing, and so forth. Nevertheless, the unique ways in which people, technologies, and places are integrated make it feasible. Third, the extension of *tourismscapes* in time and space is made possible by various networked devices, equipment, and technology. In addition to wires, cables, microwave channels, and networks that transmit phone or fax communications, photos and images, money transfers, and computer information, these networks also include those that move people by air, sea, train and roadways. Tourism has undoubtedly been significantly impacted by the development of the railroad industry in the 19th century, as well as the automobile and aviation sectors in the 20th century (van der Duim, n.d.).

Figure 1 Characteristics of village-based tourism



Source: Compiled by the authors

This study aims to comprehend the informality of the *tourismscape* in these programmes. Since the notion of symmetry is disturbed by the exclusion of essential stakeholders in

the industry, it raises concerns about the viability of the firms in the long run. In Bangladesh, there are several new efforts for village-based tourism. Many young entrepreneurs have adopted innovative ways to deliver indigenous experiences to local and foreign tourists in informal ways (see Figure 1). This paper's rationale lies in examining rural individuals' informal, innovative tourism initiatives to assess the sustainability of the highly informal tourism initiatives. It is essential to examine the novelty in service firms as innovation has yet to be widely investigated in service firms (Akbari et al., 2020). This paper borrows theoretical concepts from ANT and tourismscape theories of tourism to examine the actors-networks of informal tourism initiatives in rural Bangladesh. This paper expects to contribute to developing rural tourism entrepreneurship and sustainable tourism literature.

1.1 Methodology

This paper is primarily based on secondary information. Four cases of informal tourism initiatives are collected from *Prothom Alo* – the major national newspaper of the country. Secondary data analysis is a process in which data from one study are utilised to address new research questions or apply new statistical methods (Coyer and Gallo, 2005). Secondary data, such as journal publications, thesis paper, and newspaper reports, were utilised in this research. However, the researchers conducted three interviews with relevant individuals (e.g., entrepreneurs, experts and industry analysts) to validate the secondary data.

2 Selected scenarios of informally arranged village-based tourism

2.1 Homestay

Jafar Tuhin's Homestay in Narshingdi has attracted the attention of foreign visitors due to his brilliant concept of offering accommodations to his guests. Young entrepreneur Jafar Tuhin, from Narshingdi, skipped the corporate rat race and now makes millions per month by entertaining tourists.

Soon after 2020, Jafar took the risk of executing his plan, birthed out of his natural knack for tourism, of launching a guesthouse service for visitors in his hometown. His homestay invites visitors near nature's splendor and is reminiscent of Bangladesh's rural culture. The chirping of birds and children making white noise marks the beginning of the day. The entire resort is highlighted by its crisp, fresh air and greenery, giving city hustlers a picturesque glimpse of heaven.

This initiative is well-known among many foreigners. In June 2022, a couple with their children from New Zealand travelled to Jafar's resort in Ekduaria. Soon after their arrival, they became charmed by the refreshing country life and natural beauty. The family had the opportunity to participate in routine village activities like fishing, playing football on a vacant field, eating fresh fruits, and even sipping tea from neighbourhood tea carts. They not only appreciated the generosity, but they also gave Jafar's initiative a rating on their travel blog, 'Away with the Steiners'. This noteworthy gesture gained widespread attention on Facebook and drew domestic and international tourists.

In Bangladesh, homestay is a relatively recent idea. It involves allowing visitors into one's home in exchange for a small fee. Visitors get the raw, real-life experience of

Bangladeshi culture while interacting with locals. Jafar had embraced this idea, designed accommodation in a section of his two-storey building, and fixed the tariff at 70 USD, or 7,000 BDT. Many visitors to Ekduaria, especially foreigners, stay at Jafar's residence since he gives them a genuine rural experience and takes them on excursions to several tourist attractions around Bangladesh.

The Taabu (Tent) Tour by Jafar Tuhin is also well-known on several travel websites. In addition to arranging trips to other locations around the nation, including Dhaka, he also supplies tents for outdoor activities. International visitors are kept in mind while designing most tent trip packages. Along with its website, 'Taabu Tour' also has profiles on Airbnb and Trip Advisor, two of the most prominent travel websites in the world. These platforms are another way that many travellers get to Tuhin and avail his services. According to Tripadvisor, Tuhin's tent is the best among 86 outdoor activity providers in Dhaka. His firm also offers vacation packages to Cox's Bazar, Srimangal, and Sundarban, in addition to tours of Dhaka and its surroundings. They range in price from 50 to 500 USD, and the cost of the package increases as the facilities do as well.

The concept of homestay reached Tuhin's mind when he became aware of CouchSurfing, a social networking and hospitality exchange service where users can request homestays or interact with local people from an international customer. After registering for CouchSurfing, Tuhin got some foreign nationals as his guests. He used to arrange their stay at his rented house in Dhaka and guide the guests with their tours. Soon after he listed his room on Airbnb, his number of customers increased, and so did his popularity. He is now entirely focusing on his homestay business in Ekduaria, where he wants to conserve the rural cultures of his village for foreign visitors (Miah, 2022).

2.2 Experiencing the lifestyle of indigenous community

Seventy-five cottages located in Bhanubil Majhergaon provide another homestay service. In Maulavibazar, they are aiming to develop community-based tourism and offer homestay services in Monipuri communities. In front of the entryway, 'Bhanubil Majhergaon Manipuri Community-based Tourism' is inscribed in bold letters, and below it, in lowercase, 'Mangal Laikai'. According to Nilanjan Singh, the place's founder, 'Mangal Laikai' means illuminating the neighbourhood. The preservation of traditions and enlightening tourists about local cultures are Nilanjan's key goals. Each of his 75 cottages has a section set aside for tourists where the beautiful Monipuri customs are prominently displayed, with the addition of loom weaving equipment in each home. The cost of the homestay service is BDT 2,000 per room, and BDT 900 covers the cost of the three daily meals per person (Rahman, 2022).

2.3 Floating guava market in Barisal

Bangladesh, like Thailand, offers a floating market that is a surprisingly underappreciated tourist attraction.

Barishal, often known as Bengal's Venice, is home to the largest floating guava market. The 200-year-old floating guava market serves more than just commercial needs; it also serves as an escape route for individuals to unwind from their busy schedules.

Bangladesh's southern region is well-known for its guavas, often recognised as 'Bengal's Apple'. Guava cultivation is a prime source of income for farmers in Pirozpur, notably in the Upazilas of Banaripara, Swarupkathi and Jhalakathi Sadar.

Twenty thousand families from 26 towns grow guava on 31,000 acres of land. The floating guava market in Bhimruli, Atghar, and Kuriana in Pirozpur's Swarupkathi Upazila supply around 60% of the local guava market's requirements.

Dealers bring the guavas in boats and sell them wholesale for Tk 250–300 every 40 kg. Early in the morning, the market opens, and it runs until dusk. Despite being available every day of the week, the guava market is at its peak during the guava season (July–August).

The peak hours of the Bhimruli Market are generally from 12 to 3 o'clock in the afternoon. As a result, it is best to arrive at the market before 11 AM because the crowds start to thin out after that time.

Bhimruli, the village of Swarupkathi, has become popular with tourists after being recently discovered as one of the tourist attractions.

Another major draw is the boat market in Atghar, Kuriana. Unfortunately, only Mondays and Wednesdays are designated boat market days, but the Guthia Mosque is another worthwhile attraction to visit on the other days of the week.

There is a small bridge spanning the canal near the market's northernmost point. Due to its excellent view of the entire market, it might be considered a watch tower. The market's breathtaking surroundings might convey visitors to Thailand or Venice in the Bengali heartland. The splendor of the surroundings gets further enhanced by rainfall and petrichor.

Nothing compares to the beauty of the floating market; the interconnected rivers, the boats carrying guavas, and the lush greenery on each end of the canal might give an individual a sensation of entering heaven. It is easier than ever to go to Pirojpur, owing to the construction of Padma Bridge, taking only 6 to 8 hours (Istiaque, n.d.).

2.4 Boathouse in haor (wetland ecosystem)

Tangur Haor in Sunamganj is currently bustling with visitors who are in dire need of getting away from the hubbub of city life, with the expanse of water as far as the eye can reach and white clouds drifting over the blue sky. The houseboats that provide rides across the harbour are a popular tourist attraction, and the number of these boats is increasing in response to the expanding demand from visitors. Houseboats give employment to a minimum of 5,000 people, as claimed by the tourism-related entrepreneurs of the area. They further claim this business generates millions of takas in revenue, and a total of 50,000 individuals benefit from the region's tourism-based economy. The number of boats in the haor is yet to be counted accurately by the local administration; however, an estimated 500 houseboats are present.

Both large and medium-sized vessels operate in the haor, and tourists pay Tk 15,000–50,000 to rent a boat for a whole day or 36 hours. Additionally, the haor's tourism industry has immensely increased locals' job opportunities in tourism-related businesses as at least four personnel need to be employed for each boat, resulting in tourism having a considerable impact on the local economy (Dey, 2021).

Although the actual turnover in the houseboat industry is unknown, all 500 boats get booked out during the monsoon season. Tourists must make reservations for the stay at least a month in advance because of the increased demand for them, particularly during the holidays.

For visitors, each of these boats offers contemporary conveniences; the greater the fees, the better the amenities. Many people believe that houseboat rent is quite expensive, although, in reality, it takes 10–12 years to recoup the cost of one boat, according to the owner of a boathouse. Building a wooden houseboat takes two to three months, whereas building a steel houseboat takes around a month and a half. A boat costs between Tk 7 and Tk 15 lakh, and it takes five and six persons for its construction. Typically, during the monsoon, the houseboat business is at its busiest. However, even after the peak travel season, locals still utilise boats for transportation, so they are not abandoned (Dey, 2021). The encounter is one that visitors will never forget. The opulent houseboat is a step up for tourism in Sunamganj since it provides a getaway for city residents to unwind and revitalise with family and friends while taking in the wonders of natural beauty (Orpa, 2021). The overall analysis of the above cases shows that entrepreneurship, innovation, indigenous initiatives, and non-institutional arrangements are the characteristics of village-based tourism described in Figure 1.

3 High degree of informality in touristscape

The aforementioned cases illustrate that young entrepreneurs are making many inventive efforts in the tourist sector. In order to ensure client comfort, service providers in tourist zones typically provide guests with certain high-end services in remote locations. However, tourism is more than just having fun; it is also about discovering and learning about different cultures and lifestyles. Homestay and community-based tourism are distinct from traditional travel packages since they provide the authentic spirit of Bengali rural culture. Tourists from other countries strongly value the indigenous experiences offered through these innovative services. In the end, the idea facilitates the connection between visitors and locals and broadens the scope of communication in this rigid but fast network. Moreover, the country's economy benefits from these measures, but lacking some crucial elements raises questions about their feasibility. For instance, the homestay idea is well-liked by tourists from other countries, but it also prompts concerns about the tourists' social protection or security; since, in Bangladesh, robbery and acts of violence are frequent. Petty crime is also prevalent in this country, including pickpocketing and snatch-and-grab occurrences. Additionally, community-based tourism and boathouse services are provided on the outskirts of cities and hence require the support of transportation and dining facilities. Moreover, the poor management of boathouse businesses, and lack of records of the number of boats and actual turnover, indicate an informality of the business. These problems make it necessary to include decision-makers, the government, and other significant stakeholders for the smooth operation of the businesses. Incorporating such stakeholders reemerges the concept of touristscape, which values the inclusion of all the actors in the tourism sector.

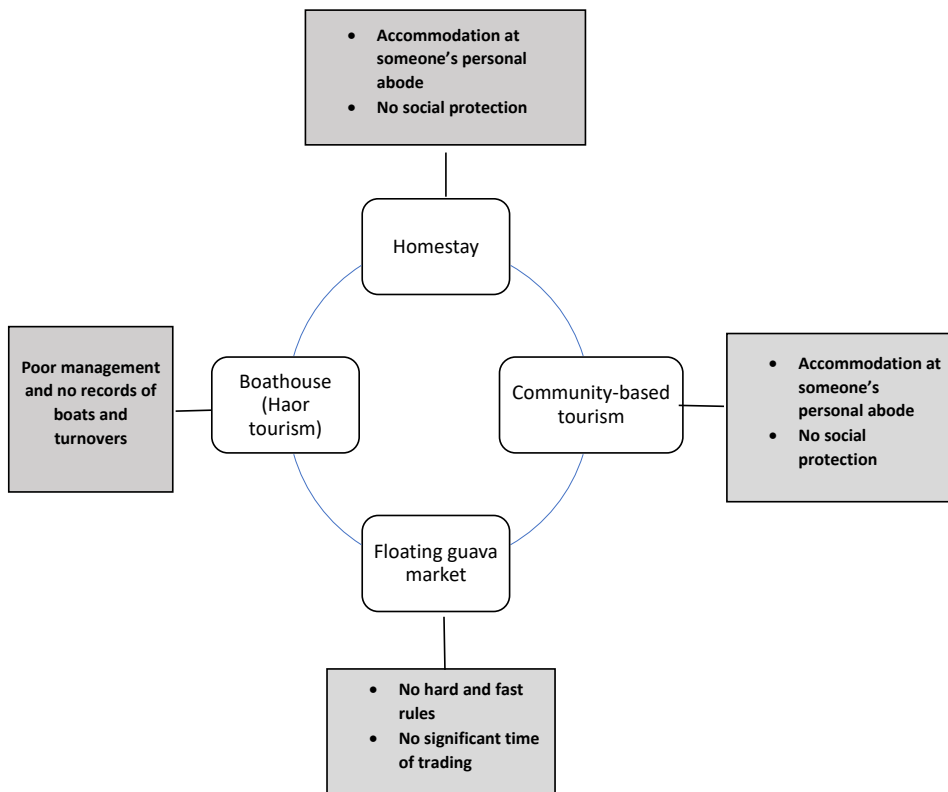
Moreover, the intermediaries that the participants in touristscape circulate define one another. A network's actors are joined via intermediaries, who specify their roles inside. Actors interact with one another through intermediaries, and this is how they translate their goals into those of other actors. In general, services (guide, transportation, counsel, food and beverage, and hospitality) act as intermediaries in the tourist industry, and in exchange, payments are made. The number of intermediaries, however, is theoretically limitless. Anything travelling between actors that clarify their ties is an intermediate (van der Duim, n.d.). In the stated village-based tourism, there are

only some intermediaries. The owners handle everything independently, including transportation, food, and accommodation. The endeavours get increasingly informal due to how tedious and difficult the entire task becomes to manage.

Securing funding or loans for young business owners is quite tricky due to the various financial barriers and economic challenges Bangladesh faces. Moreover, numerous other obstacles hinder their activities; therefore, many company owners took the risk of operating informally, which also caused chaos in the tourism industry.

The scenarios of village-based tourism are considered to have a high degree of informality because they upset the symmetry of the tourismscape. Most of the projects are individual-centric or started by a group of partners, operating the businesses in the wheel of non-institutional identities. The elements of the tourismscape of village-based tourism can threaten the viability of the businesses; hence this research questions whether the mentioned initiatives taken by the entrepreneurs will be sustainable in supporting the tourism sector of Bangladesh (see Figure 1).

Figure 2 Tourismscape of village-based tourism (see online version for colours)



According to World Bank, in emerging markets and developing countries, the informal sector – labour and business concealed from monetary, regulatory and institutional authorities – accounts for around a third of GDP and 70% of employment. A sizable informal sector is linked to low productivity, decreased tax revenues, lousy governance, excessive regulations, poverty, and income disparity, although providing the benefit of

job flexibility in some economies. As a consequence of this, firms tend to hire individuals who are less qualified and efficient. As a result, those employed in the formal economy make an average salary of around 19% more than those employed in the informal economy, which is an alarming issue for the nation (Yu and Ohnsorge, 2019).

Edward Huijbens suggested the concept of neighbourhood tourism as a way to lessen the difficulties and maintain the choice of recreation available. This idea holds that individuals make short-distance trips throughout their area. Edward Huijbens, a Wageningen University & Research (WUR) professor, is credited with developing the notion. He pushed for the possibility of experiencing tourism nearby rather than taking a long trip to far-off destinations (TEDx Talks, 2020). In many regions of the world, he has substantially contributed to landscape development theory and practice, urban environment, and sustainable tourism. Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival made his idea timelier than ever.

Figure 2 depicts the informal sections and tourismscape of the aforementioned village-based tourism.

3.1 High degree of informality (non-institutionalised relationship) in tourismscape may pose threat to sustainability

To complement the creative initiatives launched by young entrepreneurs, some organisations, however, are attempting to institutionalise the informal industries. Such an organisation is Bondhushabha. Bondhushabha is a reader forum for the *Daily Prothom Alo*, a widely read newspaper in Bangladesh. The members of this cultural and social organisation strive to make Bangladesh a better place. They realise the significance of tourism and leisure for a better, more developed mind, and as a result, a few innovations have been devised to encourage both urban and rural people to work in this field. They have adopted a novel concept known as voluntourism, which gives visitors a chance to interact with locals and help them learn skills that tourists are well-versed in. This method will enable the younger generation in rural regions to acquire hard and soft skills that will help them survive in today's fast-paced but competitive society. Additionally, it can serve as a source of extracurricular activities for undergraduate students to comprehend the difficulties underdeveloped regions face and acquire an appreciation for societal progress. Furthermore, Bondhushobha realises that village-based tourism in Bangladesh is yet to be institutionalised. Therefore, they have another concept where visitors travel to locations to reinforce the 'homestay' concept in various households, where voluntourism and homestay might be interconnected. By embracing the homestay idea, rural households will therefore discover a new source of supplemental income. Similarly, tourists will be able to interact with locals in their natural setting and identify business opportunities and gaps. Moreover, it will aid in institutionalising the new efforts and reducing the drawbacks of informal groups (Prothom Alo, 2022).

The scenarios discussed earlier lack a corporate structure and hence are a challenge to sustainability. The informal sectors need more competent and efficient staff, appropriate management, backup plans, guaranteed income, social security, a solid structure, and a value chain. This calls into doubt the organisation's long-term survival in the market. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic damaged the low-income population, particularly the informal sector workers with precarious jobs and no access to social or health protection. It affected almost 1.6 billion employees in the informal economy (Swarna et al., 2022). Therefore, young entrepreneurs' new informal or indigenous initiatives may not sustain

in the tourism industry, which would ultimately place the sector in a dismal condition. One of the informal tour operators echoed the same view and claimed “he is not hopeful to continue the business in the long term.” Moreover, the importance of tourism cannot also be overlooked. According to van de Duim, a professor at Wageningen University, the tourism industry is the world’s largest employer. One in every 12 jobs is tied to tourism, and more than 240 million people rely on it for their livelihood. Tourism is the primary economic engine in 46 of the 50 least-developed nations. Additionally, 40% of visitors to emerging countries are from wealthy nations. More importantly, tourism is still a growing sector despite the global economic downturn, so making the industry sustainable is becoming more popular. van der Duim asserted, “Sustainability can no longer be a choice; it must be a mandate” (Didde et al., 2010).

The harmony of tourismscapes and actor networks is disturbed by the removal of crucial stakeholders. Due to these problems, village-based tourism is extremely improvised and endangers sustainability.

The options previously considered need a corporate framework, which makes sustainability a challenge. The informal sectors lack a reliable structure, a value chain, skilled and effective employees, unified management, contingency planning, steady income and social security. The company’s ability to survive in the market for the medium-haul is now in question. Further research is required to examine whether informal relationships among different actors in tourismscape threaten the tourism business sustainability in the future.

4 Implications of engaging in informal tourism

The informal tourism sector is typically defined as enterprises that operate in the tourist industry but are not official members of any professional organisation. One of the experts interviewed by the present researchers acknowledged that he needs more information about informal tourism as those entrepreneurs are not connected to mainstream tour operators. Vendors, transportation providers, musicians, dance troupes, and others comprise the tourist sector’s informal economy. Although these players are not officially acknowledged as tourism sector contributors, they have a substantial influence on attracting tourists and GDP growth. Mauritius, for example, received USD 2.005 billion in foreign tourism receipts. Furthermore, the overall contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in 2017 was MUR 110.0 billion, representing 23.8% of total GDP, and it is predicted to increase by 4.5% by 2028. Surprisingly, these informal sectors generate foreign currency and stimulate employment opportunities in the informal sector. This aids in lowering the unemployment rate and leading the country toward a more robust economy (Lebouc et al., 2019). ‘Informality’ as a worldwide economic concept and normative standard for measuring economic activity is based in Western cultures and is enforced through legal, fiscal, and development frameworks. However, according to research, the informal or formal economic dichotomy obscures economic diversity in Global South tourism destinations. Non-compliance with tourist regulations as a gauge of formal/informal economic activity demonstrates a gap between current legal structures and how small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) networks operate. As unincorporated associations, unregistered tourism enterprises, and SMEs operating to varying degrees outside of officialdom, a wide variety of economic forms of tourism activity may be

claimed, reshaping the paradigmatic dichotomy between formal and informal tourism economies (Pécot et al., 2018). However, in the tourism business, informality translates to a shadow economy. Shadow economy activities include:

- 1 the employment of ignorant and unskilled employees who legally or illegally benefit from tourism
- 2 unethical use of natural resources and the environment, which affects the quality of destinations and harms the growth of the tourist industry base
- 3 unilaterally establishing the pricing of tourism products and services
- 4 poor conduct that overlooks safety and security elements of tourism.

One of the respondents of this study also confirmed that informal tourism usually employs semiskilled people, sometimes creating tourist dissatisfaction. Many tour firms have gone bankrupt due to the cessation of tourist operations and relying on government cash and food aid. Coordination, protection, and empowerment of all tourist stakeholders following the COVID-19 pandemic are thus an alternate strategy (Mopangga et al., 2022).

Furthermore, because informal players are often more likely to sustain in regions with weak institutions, informality is lower in nations with fewer regulatory gaps. As a result, informal actors typically analyse the costs and benefits of acting informally. For example, if the consequences of engaging in the grey economy are substantial, an individual will not engage in it. As a result, regulatory authorities should enact and enforce stringent laws limiting the proliferation of informal activities. Strict restrictions and heavy penalties to limit the grey economy are likely to dissuade informal participants. Furthermore, regulatory agencies may develop programmes to enlighten informal actors about the repercussions of operating informally and advise them on formalising their firms (Mwesiumo et al., 2021).

5 Conclusions

The harmony of tourism landscapes and actor networks is disturbed by the removal of crucial stakeholders. Due to these problems, village-based tourism is highly improvised and endangers sustainability. The options previously considered lack a corporate framework, which makes sustainability a challenge. The informal sectors lack a reliable structure, a value chain, skilled and effective employees, proper management, contingency planning, steady income and social security. In research on Malaysian public service bus, Nguyen et al. (2019) also found that complete decentralisation negatively affects the sustainability of public service due to unwarranted flexibility and autonomy in the organisational arrangement. Thus, a robust corporate framework has been suggested for long-term survival and quality service.

The inception, management, and continuance of tourism services in rural households require uniform actions by all the relevant stakeholders. The cases discussed in the paper present the informal arrangements of local tourism services. This paper questions the viability of these entrepreneurial exercises in the long run. The loosely linked actor networks may sometimes be unable to play complementary roles to make this happen for a more extended period. Further research may be carried out to explore the ways to make

strong connections among the different actors without distorting the informal nature of the tourism business.

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