

# Journal of Rural and Community Development

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**Author: Velan Kunjuraman**

**Citation:**

Kunjuraman, V. (2024). Challenges of community-based ecotourism development in Sukau, Lower Kinabatangan, Malaysian Borneo. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 19(3), 73–94.

**Publisher:**

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

**Editor:**

Dr. Doug Ramsey

**Open Access Policy:**

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## **Challenges of Community-based Ecotourism Development in Sukau, Lower Kinabatangan, Malaysian Borneo**

**Velan Kunjuraman**

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia)  
Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia  
[velan@ukm.edu.my](mailto:velan@ukm.edu.my)

### **Abstract**

The Southeast Asia region is popular for community-based ecotourism schemes as an alternative means of livelihood for local communities. The challenges faced by the local communities in performing community-based ecotourism projects remain active, with few empirical investigations being carried out. Adopting an interpretive research paradigm, this qualitative study based on sociological perspective was carried out between 2017 and 2019 to explore both internal and external challenges faced by the local community in ecotourism operations in Sukau village, a forerunner of ecotourism destinations in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. The study revealed that the ecotourism project participants faced numerous challenges in their ecotourism projects, and these challenges posed barriers to achieving successful ecotourism developments. The challenges identified in this study may disrupt ecotourism's potential to deliver perceived benefits to the locals, thus weakening its sustainability. Therefore, this study recommends that the relevant stakeholders, especially the state tourism department, participate in ecotourism development, as it is vital to solving the challenges faced by the local community. By doing so, the sustainability of community-based ecotourism ventures in rural areas can be maintained, potentially making it a sustainable livelihood activity.

**Keywords:** community-based ecotourism, participation, challenges, community, sociology

## **Défis du développement de l'écotourisme communautaire à Sukau, Lower Kinabatangan, Bornéo malaisien**

**Velan Kunjuraman**

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia)  
Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia  
[velan@ukm.edu.my](mailto:velan@ukm.edu.my)

### **Résumé**

La région de l'Asie du Sud-Est est populaire pour les programmes d'écotourisme communautaire comme moyen de subsistance alternatif pour les communautés locales. Les défis auxquels sont confrontées les communautés locales dans la réalisation de projets d'écotourisme communautaire demeurent omniprésents, avec peu d'enquêtes empiriques réalisées. Adoptant un paradigme de recherche interprétative, cette étude qualitative basée sur une perspective sociologique a été réalisée entre 2017 et 2019 pour explorer les défis internes et externes auxquels est confrontée la communauté locale dans les opérations d'écotourisme dans le village de Sukau, précurseur des destinations écotouristiques à Sabah, en Malaisie, à Bornéo. L'étude a révélé que les participants aux projets d'écotourisme étaient confrontés à de nombreux défis dans leurs projets d'écotourisme, et ces défis constituaient des obstacles à la réussite du développement de l'écotourisme. Les défis identifiés dans cette étude pourraient perturber le potentiel de l'écotourisme à apporter des avantages perçus aux populations locales, affaiblissant ainsi sa durabilité. Par conséquent, cette étude recommande que les parties prenantes concernées, en particulier le département national du tourisme, participent au développement de l'écotourisme, car cela est essentiel pour résoudre les défis auxquels est confrontée la communauté locale. Ce faisant, la durabilité des projets d'écotourisme communautaire dans les zones rurales peut être maintenue, ce qui en fait potentiellement une activité de subsistance durable.

**Mots-clés** : écotourisme communautaire, participation, défis, communauté, sociologie

## **1.0 Introduction**

Community-based ecotourism (CBE) functions strongly as a sustainable livelihood activity that provides multiple benefits to local communities in rural areas. However, it is subjected to criticism. Several scholars have pointed out a mismatch between theories and practicality in community-based tourism (CBT) (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014; Blackstock, 2005) and often use the term CBT interchangeably with that of CBE. Precisely, Giampiccoli and Glassom (2021) distinguished the differences between CBT and CBE in the developing country context. They argued that both concepts are not synonymous, where general tourism activity managed by the local community is called CBT. If CBT involves ecological resources, then it is called CBE. A similar conceptualization was also affirmed by Leksakundilok (2004) in 2004. Thus, it is well understood CBT and CBE have some differences and tourism scholars can conceptualize both concepts in their studies, especially studies focusing on developing countries. Therefore, in this study, CBE has been operationalized as tourism projects or activities based on surrounding natural resources which are fully managed by the local community in Sukau village.

On the other hand, in the context of community development, Blackstock (2005) argued that CBT's contribution to the enhancement of local communities is still questionable, stating CBT as 'naïve and unrealistic,' with three core elements: (a) "being too focused on industry development compared to community empowerment", (b) "ignoring the internal dynamics of communities," and (c) "ignoring external barriers such as inequality between developers and community members that affect the degree of local control" (Johnson, 2010, p. 151). Nonetheless, CBT's value as a suitable community development approach is still recognized (Moscardo, 2008; Stone & Stone, 2011; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014). For instance, a study conducted by Stone and Stone (2011) involving a CBT enterprise in Botswana argued that despite the problems (e.g., inadequate employment creation and dependence on external funds, lack of information, imbalance in board representation), the arrival of tourists, as well as the profits, actually increased. As a result, CBT has brought economic benefits to the local community, and "therefore [it is] premature to say that CBT is not useful for rural communities and unfair to generalise that CBT projects are a failure" (Stone & Stone, 2011, p. 111). Other positive outcomes from CBT observed by tourism scholars were that CBT has the potential to be regarded as a community development approach (Scheyvens, 2002; Nyaupane et al., 2006; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Zapata, et al., 2011; Hamzah & Mohamad, 2012; Kontogeorgopoulos, et al. 2014; Dodds, et al. 2016; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017; Sood et al. 2017; Agarwal & Mehra, 2019; Kunjuraman, 2021).

The study observed that the number of case studies involving developing countries is limited, warranting the need for more studies which "should focus on a greater representation of countries to provide a definite conclusion about region and country-specific factors" (Zielinski et al., 2018, p. 14). Moreover, the barriers to CBT initiatives in past literature are limited and "could also be easily overlooked by the authors who fail to identify them or did not recognize their importance" (Zielinski et al., 2018, p. 2). As such, this study takes into account the points put forth by the above critics to provide additional insight into the challenges of CBE operations faced by the local community in the context of a developing country.

Therefore, this study's main objective is to explore the internal and external challenges faced by the local community involved in CBE projects in Sukau village, Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah, since the projects began operating in the early 1990s. It is evident that the Malaysian government has positioned Sabah as one of the country's main ecotourism strategies due to its great potential to attract many tourists with its natural resources. Moreover, the Malaysia National Tourism Policy 2020–2030 highlights Malaysia as “a premier ecotourism destination by value-adding the tourist experience through product development and differentiation, high quality interpretation and service quality, as well as sustainability certification” (p. 26). Thus, a case study from Sabah was chosen to enhance the importance of ecotourism development through the participation of the local community as the main stakeholder. However, the participation of other stakeholder groups, such as government agencies and non-government organizations (NGOs), is pivotal for sustainable tourism development (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). For this purpose, locally established CBE projects, namely Bed and Breakfasts (B&Bs) and homestays in Sukau, Lower Kinabatangan, have been chosen as a case study. These CBE projects are formally registered with state tourism agencies and monitored annually. The early observation of the researcher found that CBE has brought several benefits to the local community, known as *orang sungai* (river people), to improve their livelihoods. For instance, the preservation of local culture has been protected and integrated into tourism activities. Welcome dances for tourists arriving at the homestays and food preparation always embed the local culture as a part of the tourism product. However, a vicious circle exists, as the local community faces some challenges in their CBE operation, which are categorised as both internal and external challenges.

The following sections comprehensively view the benefits, as well as the drawbacks of CBE to the local community development. Community participation challenges in CBE operation in both developed and developing countries, as recorded in previous literature, are also discussed in the following sections. Specifically, the content of the paper is divided into several parts: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

## **2.0 Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 CBE - Flourish or Fail?**

Nelson (2004) refers to CBT as tourism activities or enterprises in which the local community participates in running affairs in their respective areas and scaffolding their cultural heritage and natural attractions and assets. Rocharungsat (2005, defined CBT as having several broadly defined goals, and most importantly and is socially sustainable. Such activities are often initiated by several stakeholder groups, namely the government, NGOs, private sectors, and local communities in rural areas. CBE's contributions to the local community and the environment are manifold. Accordingly, a plethora of previous studies claimed that CBE has delivered multiple benefits to local communities, such as being a tool for poverty alleviation (Tasci et al., 2014), encouraging community participation in tourism development (Bhalla et al., 2016), protecting the natural environment (Reimer & Walter, 2013), empowering local communities' livelihoods (Zapata et al., 2011; Tran & Walter, 2014), and providing economic benefits through job creation (Bhalla et al., 2016; Walter et al., 2018). Such identified benefits of CBE on the local communities in rural areas allow them to transform their livelihoods instead

of entirely relying on inherited traditional economic activities such as fishing and subsistence farming. It is evident that ecotourism has diminished the dependency on fisheries by the coastal communities (Porter et al., 2015) and transformed them economically with regard to employment, from being fishermen to operating ecotourism homestays in rural destinations (Hussin et al., 2015). CBE's value as a nature protection tool embraced by local communities is confirmed in a developing country like India. A study by Bhalla et al., (2016) discovered that homestay programmes have created positive attitudes among local communities within the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary, situated in the Kumaon Hills of the Indian Himalayan region. The positive attitudes are manifested as positive ecotourism-directed behaviours as a result of the communities' engagement in public-private partnerships, their involvement in tourism-related cultural programmes, and their willingness to contribute towards nature interpretation activities to support ecotourism objectives in the sanctuary. There is a general agreement that ecotourism has resulted in multiple benefits to women, empowering them socially and economically in the process (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). However, there are conflicting views by other researchers who claim that ecotourism may have failed to deliver positive socio-cultural impacts to local communities (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). Evidently, after reviewing published literature on ecotourism, Das and Chatterjee (2015) concluded that "contrary to all the positive socio-cultural impacts of ecotourism, many researchers do not consider ecotourism as a means for improving the social status of the entire community" (p. 9). Nevertheless, Sebele (2010) is optimistic that community-based ventures may provide benefits if properly run and managed. Thus, both internal and external stakeholders' leadership and networking are vital in ensuring the sustainability of CBE (Iorio & Corsale, 2014).

From the critical analysis of recently published CBE scholarships, CBE projects are confronted by several challenges often faced by local communities in many developing countries (see Table 1). A frequently cited work by Tosun (2000) states that effective community participation in the decision-making process in tourism development is impossible in most developing countries due to their centralised governments. Tosun popularised the concepts of operational, structural, and cultural factors, which urge the local community to participate actively in all tourism decision-making processes. Several limitations include centralization of power, regional power structures, domination of elites, lack of knowledge, and low awareness about tourism development issues. Such limitations are prevalent in most CBE projects in developing countries—thus, the local community participation as 'active' stakeholders cannot become a reality. In a study by Stone and Stone (2011), several challenges faced by local communities in community-based tourism enterprises in Botswana, such as lack of information, inadequate employment creation, dependence on external funds, and imbalance in board representation, were noted as factors that make it difficult for active participation in CBE. Additionally, some stakeholders in ecotourism destinations have no clear vision of what ecotourism could deliver, thus failing to realize its potential (Thompson, 2022).

Table 1. *Internal and External Challenges of CBE Projects*

<b>Identified challenges</b>	
Internal challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Incompetent community leadership and operator commitment</li><li>- Inexperienced, lack of knowledge and understanding of the industry</li><li>- Dependability syndrome</li><li>- Lack of creativity and entrepreneurship skills</li><li>- Generation Y commitment</li><li>- Unbalanced demography</li><li>- Passive community</li><li>- Informal organizational structure</li><li>- Over-commercialization</li><li>- Conflicts in community</li><li>- Lack of financial and capital resources</li></ul>
External challenges by opportunist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Misuse of the term ‘homestay’</li><li>- Exploitation of external parties</li><li>- Inefficient networking</li><li>- Method of payment</li><li>- Safety and security threats</li><li>- Lack of basic infrastructural development</li><li>- Lack of monitoring system from the stakeholders</li><li>- Lack of marketing and promotion</li></ul>

Source: Nor Ashikin & Kayat, 2010; Pusiran, & Xiao, 2013; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017.

## **2.2 Research Setting**

Sukau is located on the Kinabatangan riverbank, approximately 134 km from Sandakan and roughly 380 km (a 7-hour drive) from Kota Kinabalu City (see Figure 1). Its geographical coordinates are 5° 31' 41" North, 118° 18' 16" East and its original name is Sukau. This village is situated 40 km upstream of Abai village and about 43 km from Pekan Kota Kinabatangan, also known as Bukit Garam. The village is accessible by cruising the Kinabatangan River, approximately 100 km from the town of Sandakan. Sukau has been recognized as one of the main pioneers

for ecotourism development since the 1990s in the Lower Kinabatangan (LK) region of Sabah, East Malaysia. Ecotourism development was initially initiated by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) with support from the state government in the early 1990s as a social transformation approach for improving livelihoods. Today, Sukau is well-known among ecotourists, and other villages such as Bilit, Batu Puteh, and Abai, have also adopted the idea of ecotourism due to their known potentials. The main attraction of this area is watching proboscis monkeys by boating upstream to the Menanggul River. Besides proboscis monkeys, Sukau is famous for B&Bs, resorts, and homestays as CBE projects—all of which are mainly based on nature, such as fishing, river cruising, and wildlife watching. However, the homestay program adds value compared to other B&Bs and resorts, as the former offers traditional performances based on the *orang sungai* culture, which are presented to the tourists upon their arrival at the homestays, while the latter lack this tourism feature. Sukau has been chosen due to its long history in ecotourism development since the 1990s and has become the forerunner for ecotourism development in the region. Moreover, specific studies pertaining to the challenges of CBE in Sukau are limited based on previous literature. Therefore, the current study is devoted to exploring such challenges from the perspectives of involved stakeholders.

Figure 1: Old house before ecotourism.



Source: Fieldwork, 2018.

### 3.0 Research Methods

A qualitative research approach was conducted based on the interpretivist paradigm, which aims at capturing the subjective norms and realities of the informants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Several methods, such as in-depth interviews and field observation were used to collect primary data for this study. Using a qualitative research approach, this study involved a total of 14 informants from various stakeholder groups. These included 10 CBE project participants who were homestay hosts and local B&B owners, two local



government officials, one NGO director, and one local leader. The informants were selected based on non-probability purposive sampling technique, which refers to expert knowledge of the population (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To justify the adopted sample size, qualitative scholars should refer to data saturation and homogeneity of the population (Boddy, 2016). A small sample size is sufficient when the research participants belong to a homogeneous group, and data saturation can typically be achieved after approximately six in-depth interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Thus, further interviews were not conducted because the point of saturation (14 interviews) was reached, wherein responses became repetitive and redundant. Furthermore, the informants were selected based on their direct involvement and experience in ecotourism since the 1990s (see Table 2). These informants are the pioneers of CBE development, and they fully manage all stages of the projects, from marketing to receiving the guests. The community approach is evident in the CBE implementation, and their opinions, and most importantly their challenges, are vital to be explored. The identification of the informants in this study was based on the researcher's experiences and early observations, as they have been actively involved in many communities and tourism-based research projects since 2014.

Table 2. *Summary of Key Informants*

<b>Informant No. interviews</b>	<b>Role category</b>	<b>Total</b>
1-10	Local community	10
13, 14	Local government officials	2
12	NGO director	1
11	Local leader	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>14</b>

It should be mentioned that the gatekeeper was the village homestay coordinator who assisted the researcher from the beginning to the end of this research. The researcher highly appreciates the enormous support provided by the gatekeeper. Regarding the interview guide content, several issues are included: Part A was devoted to the informants' background information, their experience in tourism activities, and their motivations. Part B was aimed at identifying the challenges faced during the operation of tourism activities. Finally, part C explored the suggestions to sustain the CBE projects based on informants' perspectives. All these interview data were mainly derived from the CBE project participants who have been engaged in ecotourism for decades.

A brief demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Background Information of CBE Project Participants

Informant No.	Gender	Age	Main job	Secondary job
1	M	54	Boatman	Homestay
2	F	52	Cook	Homestay
3	M	45	Homestay	-
4	F	39	Homestay	-
5	M	49	B&B	-
6	M	55	Fishing B&B	-
7	M	51	B&B	-
8	M	55	NGO	Villagestay
9	M	40	Fishing	Homestay
10	M	41	Boatman	Homestay

Source: Author, fieldwork, 2018.

The field observation method was used to capture the physical environment of the homestays (see Figure 2) as well as village and ecotourism-related activities performed by the informants.

Figure 2: One of the pioneer homestays in Sukau.



Source: Author, fieldwork, 2018.

All observation data were documented using field notes and were collected through fieldwork. Both methods allowed the study to address the validity and reliability using four criteria of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) (see Table 4).

Table 4: *Four Criteria for Qualitative Inquiry Adopted in This Study*

<b>Types of trustworthiness</b>	<b>Adopted by the researcher</b>
<b>Credibility</b>	Credibility was established by the researcher using techniques of prolonged engagement, continuous observation and member checks. The researcher is a local Malaysian who has been engaged in ecotourism, conservation and community development projects for more than five years in the study sites. The interview and observation data were viewed by the study informants as a form of the researcher's interpretation on data collected.
<b>Transferability</b>	Transferability was enhanced in this study through the purposive sampling used.
<b>Dependability</b>	Dependability was accounted in this study through the development of details research plan, which includes the research process, audit trails of the transcripts and discussion of the project over time between two researchers.
<b>Confirmability</b>	Confirmability was enhanced through the research audit process. In this process, the researcher was aware of the variety of explanations used in discussing the phenomenon being studied.

For instance, the researcher is a local Malaysian who has vast experience in tourism and biodiversity research in the LK region, which has enabled him to build support and rapport from the gatekeeper and local communities in Sukau to conduct the research. The fieldwork was conducted between 2017 and 2019 after confirming the willingness of informants to participate in this study. All the interviews were conducted in the informants' homes and offices, and audio was recorded after obtaining permission. To protect the data, a confidentiality technique was used where all the informants' identity were protected and, in this study, referred to by the use of informant numbers. Approximately one hour was spent for each interview session with the informants. All interview data were transcribed verbatim in English, followed by the next step—thematic analysis. The themes were developed based on the research objectives and were guided by similar previous studies on the topic (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). All the data were transcribed manually by the researcher to protect the authenticity of the data, even though there are available qualitative data analysis software. Six stages of thematic analysis were followed and presented in Table 5. On the other hand, the field notes were reviewed and refined multiple times to complement the main interview data for this study.

Table 5. *Stages in Qualitative Data Analysis Technique*

Stage of analysis	Data analysis process	Examples
1	Familiarizing with your data	Raw data gathered through in-depth interviews and observation methods
2	Generating initial code	Used highlighters and pens to identify the suitable codes in the transcripts
3	Searching for themes	Themes were identified exploring internal and external challenges for presentation of findings
4	Reviewing themes	Reviewing the themes based on study objective
5	Defining and naming each theme	Naming and revisit the themes for final checking
6	Writing reports	Presentation of findings based on researcher’s interpretation

Source: Kunjuraman & Hussin, (2017); Pawson et al., (2017); Sood et al., (2017).

#### 4.0 Findings

Two major themes were developed based on the interview data: internal and external challenges. Table 6 provides details of the themes and associated sub-themes.

Table 6. *Themes and Subthemes Representing the Challenges Faced by the Communities in Sukau*

Major themes	Underlying sub-themes
Internal challenges	Lack of capital resources Lack of knowledge on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Lack of trained human resource  Lack of marketing and promotional activities
External challenges	Competitions among ecotourism providers (Homestay vs locally owned B&Bs, and locally owned B&Bs and other private B&Bs and resorts)

Source: Author, fieldwork (2019).

## 4.1 Internal Challenges

**4.1.1. Lack of Capital Resources.** The informants in the study faced difficulties in upgrading their homestay facilities to be at par with other commercial B&Bs. They realized that the absence of proper facilities at their homestays could be detrimental to the tourists' satisfaction and expectations. The arrival of seasonal tourists to the homestay programme affected the homestay operators' income until they were left with no financial resources to upgrade their present homestay's condition. For instance, a number of informants agreed to this matter as follows:

The income from the homestay is little and not static (fixed). Due to this, we are unable to invest more in the maintenance of our homestays (personal communication, informant number 3, homestay operator in Sukau, June 2, 2018).

We receive less income from the homestay and it is only sufficient for our daily survival (personal communication, informant number 1, homestay operator in Sukau, March 5, 2018).

It was observed that the poor income from the homestay programme hindered the operators from planning future developments for their homestays. Based on the findings of this study, in 2019, homestay operators received a seasonal monthly income of below 2,000 MYR (\$430.43 in U.S. dollars) from the homestay program. However, this amount is insufficient for them to innovate their homestay programs. The side income from the homestay only supports the households to perform their daily activities, and some of the informants use this for their children's education and health expenses. The study suggests that regarding the innovations of the homestay program, this could be set up according to the tourists' expectations in terms of its appearance and equipment (see Figure 2). For instance, painting the homestays with colours based on the traditional concept (see Figures 1 and 2), in line with the orang sungai tradition (local culture). Moreover, upgrading the homestay's equipment to something new is another necessity for the homestay operators, as this is in keeping with the guidelines for homestays set by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC). It is inconvenient for tourists to use equipment that looks extremely dated and severely worn, provided by the homestays.

**4.1.2. Lack of ICT Knowledge.** The study discovered that the informants (homestay and B&B operators) had limited knowledge of ICT, subsequently challenging them further in the running of their CBE. At present, the world is embracing the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) using technological advancements to maximize effectiveness and profits. ICT adoption in CBE projects, particularly in the homestay programme, needs to be reinforced by the homestay operators to receive economic benefits and reduce costs. Even though the homestay operators in the village are already adopting ICT in managing their homestays, the effectiveness is still questionable. It was observed that some of the homestay operators have little interest in utilizing current ICT platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Agoda*, *Traveloka*, and similar social media platforms due to their lack of knowledge. The informants revealed that so far, there are no available training programmes related to ICT knowledge for the homestay programmes operators in the village. This is an

important issue, and it is suggested that the relevant stakeholders organise training programmes and workshops for the homestay operators in the village.

Figure 2: *New house after ecotourism.*



Source: Author, fieldwork 2018.

To add to the poor outreach of the homestays in Sukau, this study also reveals that while proper homestay websites for Sukau and other similar social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Instagram* do indeed exist, they are underutilized and poorly managed. Social media plays an important role in promoting homestay facilities and products to tourists without involving a high cost. Marketing strategies for homestay programmes can be done systematically by the homestay operators if they have sufficient knowledge regarding the use of ICT. The lack of knowledge of ICT among the homestay operators was clarified by the local leader in the village as follows:

Lack of knowledge on ICT is one of the challenges faced by the homestay operators in the village. We know little about the ICT usage in the homestay programme but we are not that ‘good’ as compared to outsiders who are able to create websites for promotional activities about the ecotourism projects. We are left behind when it comes to the promotional and marketing issue of the homestay (personal communication, informant number 11, Local leader in Sukau, July 20, 2019).

This claim by the informant supports the observation data in this study, where the informant has little knowledge about ICT to enhance the marketing of their homestay programme to their prospective clients (tourists). However, this issue

needs to be carefully identified in the future if this challenge is successfully resolved. For instance, the local community needs to accommodate the supply of ecotourism activities if tourist arrivals rapidly increase.

On the other hand, the issue of lack of knowledge is very subjective and needs further exploration. According to the informants, the limited knowledge of ICT in ecotourism can be traced to the early development of ecotourism projects in the village, where there were no specific training programmes and workshops organised by the homestay committee and local organisations.

*4.1.3. Lack of Trained Human Resources.* This study unveils that the lack of trained human resources in the homestay committee of Sukau hinders the homestay operators from receiving the benefits of ecotourism. The homestay operators are aware of basic homestay management due to their continuous involvement since its introduction in the 1990s. However, the homestay operators are not well-informed about current issues involving the homestays. Current updates of homestay management, such as innovations in homestay accommodation and service quality dimensions, are rarely communicated to them. This is because they are not engaged in any training programmes or skill development workshops by either the government or private sectors. Based on personal observations in 2018 and 2019, the homestay operators are generally veterans and practise fishing as the main livelihood activity in the village. Some of them are homemakers, while others work at nearby privately owned B&Bs.

The homestay operators do not have high educational attainment, and most of the time, they learn by doing. The researcher observed that the ‘trial and error’ experience is valuable to them and also applies to homestay programme management. For instance, in the early stages of the homestay development, the homestay operators did not know how to welcome the tourists or fulfil their demands and expectations. However, at present, they are familiar with the basic hospitality issues of the homestay program due to their continuous efforts and experiences in managing the homestay program. Based on the observation data, it was discovered that ICT adoption in the homestay programme and its relevant training are limited among the homestay operators. Thus, the lack of trained human resources in the homestay programme in Sukau remains an internal challenge for the local community since the establishment of the homestay programme to date.

*4.1.4. Lack of Marketing and Promotional Activities.* The study reveals that the success and visibility of the homestay programs in Sukau have proven to be rather unattainable with the limited knowledge of matters related to high technology and web presence. There are very limited attempts by the homestay operators to market their homestays via the usage of technological platforms. It was observed that no proper initiative had been taken by the homestay operators and their homestay committee to promote their homestays to the outside world. The importance of marketing and promotional activities in the homestay program is acknowledged by the informants—most of them believe that more tourists will visit the village’s homestays if information stating that the homestays provide nature-based and cultural activities is conveyed to their potential clients. For instance, an informant said that the main problem behind homestay programs becoming unpopular among tourists was due to the lack of promotional activities. Thus, such challenges are within the community, and they are not aware of the importance of technology in promoting their homestays to outsiders.

However, the efforts to market and promote homestays through various physical and virtual platforms are extremely limited for the homestay operators compared to other B&Bs in the village. The B&Bs are doing quite well in their marketing and promotional activities by using virtual platforms such as websites and social media to attract more tourists. However, in the homestay programme, it was observed that email was used as the main medium of communication with the outside world by the informants. For example, the homestay coordinator receives bookings from tourists via email and makes the necessary preparations before the arrival of the tourists. The limited ICT knowledge among the homestay operators has caused them to confine their communication to only the use of emails, arguably a medium that does not provide effective promotion of the homestay programs to tourists, as it is an inappropriate tool for promotional and marketing activities. Based on the findings of the study, some informants agreed that the lack of marketing and promotional activities for the homestay programs remains a challenge for them and could decrease the number of tourists. As one homestay operator mentioned, “Lack of promotion about the homestay leads to a decrease in the number of tourists to the village. So, we [the homestay operators] should work together to overcome this” (personal communication, informant number 2, homestay operator in Sukau, June 20, 2018). A local leader also supported this view, “Lack of promotional activity has been the challenge for us and we do not have any specific committee [publicity committee] to deal with it” (personal communication, informant number 11, local leader in Sukau, July 20, 2019).

It is worth noting the potential of technology to promote the CBE projects in Sukau to outsiders effectively. As noted earlier, the private B&Bs are aware of the potential of technology and have their own websites and social media platforms to promote their products and services. Such establishments are primarily owned by locals, and some are owned by outsiders. They have a comfortable facility to offer tourists. It is also noted that they receive sufficient clients as a result of technology usage.

*4.1.5. External challenges.* Competition among ecotourism providers (Homestay vs. locally owned B&Bs, and locally owned B&Bs and other private B&Bs and resorts).

The study clearly revealed that the homestay operators are competing with other locally owned B&Bs in terms of price and facilities offered. For instance, the price offered by the B&Bs is slightly higher compared to the homestays, and the facilities are more in line with the tourists’ expectations. The minimum price charged by the B&Bs is 75 MYR (\$18.50 in U.S. dollars) per night, depending on the package offered. Similarly, the homestay operators charge 75 MYR per night, including meals and activities for the tourists, leading to competition among the homestays and B&Bs. There is a common perception among homestay operators that tourists logically prefer to stay at B&Bs for a lower price and better facilities than homestays. There is a dilemma among the homestay operators: They want to reduce their prices to attract tourists, but they are unable to do so due to minimal profit margins. The observation data indicates that the homestay hosts are offering some discounts to regular customers who visit more than twice. In business, competition among service providers is common, and day by day, new competitors are emerging. This is relevant in the context of Sukau, where outside investors are keen to invest in the service sector, especially by establishing new B&Bs and resorts. It is timely for homestay operators to start becoming innovative in solving their problems and challenges in their homestay programme.



Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher's observation data revealed that locally owned B&Bs face the same challenges as homestay operators. Based on the observation data, the majority of B&Bs, lodges, and resorts are owned by outsiders, and this has become a challenge for locally-owned B&Bs in Sukau. Competition among them is evident in this study, where informants (local B&B owners of Sukau) were optimistic about taking necessary marketing and promotional strategies to upgrade their ecotourism businesses. Within Sukau, the most famous lodge is the Sukau Rainforest Lodge, a charter member of the National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World Brand, known for its excellent facilities. Competition among locally-owned B&Bs and foreign-owned lodges and resorts is evident through the prices of the packages offered and their hospitality attributes. Hospitality issues in the service industry are crucial for service providers to sustain their businesses through the steady arrival of tourists and the revenue generated from them. It is a challenge for locally owned B&Bs to remain competitive in the ecotourism market, and proactive measures are always necessary to compete with other world-class service providers like the Sukau Rainforest Lodge.

## **5.0 Discussion**

The local communities in Sukau face many internal and external challenges in their CBE operations, which may impede the social transformation process initiated by ecotourism since its introduction in the 1990s. However, it is evident that homestay operators have encountered numerous challenges, both internally and externally, which hinder their empowerment (Cole, 2006). This study offers an opportunity for local communities to express their thoughts and opinions regarding the challenges in implementing ecotourism, particularly homestay programs, which have been overlooked in previous literature, thus highlighting the importance of community participation in ecotourism development (Murphy, 1985). The lack of capital resources among homestay hosts, who continuously strive to improve their facilities, has led to financial struggles, aligning with findings by Bello et al. (2017), Kunjuraman and Hussin, (2017) and Kunjuraman (2021). This financial instability may lead to the perception that CBE is less attractive and financially unstable, thereby limiting its success (Dodds et al., 2016).

The identified challenges pose a threat to the sustainability of CBE, particularly homestay programs in Malaysia, which have been utilized by the government as tools for local community development for decades. The findings of this study resonate with similar challenges found in other CBE projects in developing countries, as reported by scholars such as Hussin (2008), Mohd et al. (2010), Pusiran and Xiao (2013), Stone and Stone (2011), and Kunjuraman and Hussin (2017). These studies highlight that local communities, as the main stakeholders, are currently grappling with numerous challenges in managing their businesses. On the other hand, competition among ecotourism service providers, which limits social capital, is prevalent in this study. Social capital elements such as networks, trust, and cooperation (Putnam, 1995) are affected by this competition. These competitions may intensify, leading to tension among ecotourism service providers (Thompson et al., 2017). In the initial stages of ecotourism development, local communities appreciated external support (Pawson et al., 2016) from government and NGOs. However, their participation was often ad hoc in nature, with a constant absence of continuous monitoring (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). This phenomenon may lead to the ineffectiveness of the CBE program at the study site. Thus, social capital among local communities and development agencies is considered poor, which

could jeopardize the future of ecotourism in the village. One of the most important elements in CBE success is marketing and promotion. Yet, this study revealed that the lack of marketing and promotional activities to reach out to tourists through technology platforms remains a challenge. This is consistent with a study by Kunjuraman and Hussin (2017) on a CBE project in Dagat, Sabah, Malaysia, where the local community faced difficulties in promoting their homestay programs to outsiders due to poor marketing and promotional strategies. As a result, the slow uptake of technological innovations by ecotourism entrepreneurs hampers their business efforts (Thompson et al., 2017).

On the other hand, the study also reveals that the lack of trained human resources in CBE operations makes it difficult for the CBE project participants to sustain their operations. Lack of skills like basic hospitality management training remains a challenge for veterans in providing the best services to visitors. Thus, future generations are encouraged to engage in CBE operations in the village to ensure the sustainability of the CBE projects. The findings of the study are consistent with those of Hussin (2008), Aref (2011), and Kunjuraman and Hussin (2017). From the researcher's perspective in this study, the overall CBE projects in Sukau are performing well because the motivation of local communities (CBE project participants) remains high and continues to progress. Motivation to upgrade their standard of living through CBE projects is considered one of the poverty alleviation strategies by the informants of the study.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

CBE holds potential as a development tool and a poverty alleviation strategy in many parts of the world. Moreover, CBE projects often become integrated into the development agendas of many developing economies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014; Tasci et al., 2014). However, it is not easy for CBE to be viable and ensure long-term sustainability due to practical difficulties, as reported (Dodds et al., 2016). The study observed that external support from the government, NGOs, and other private sectors is needed to support CBE financially and practically, especially the homestay programs in developing countries (Zielinski et al., 2020). Therefore, local communities can enhance their homestay management and facilities, motivating them to actively participate and contribute to the dependability syndrome simultaneously (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013). However, the positive mindset of CBE project participants could overcome such syndromes whenever they earn sufficient income from ecotourism. For management implications, this study proposes continuous support from relevant stakeholders in the form of social capital through capacity building. Skills training programs are also equally pivotal to enhancing local communities' knowledge of CBE management, enabling them to remain competitive. Moreover, introducing capital incentives to CBE management is suggested to provide good services to visitors, which can be facilitated by relevant stakeholders, especially government agencies.

The study contributes to the theoretical discussion on the applicability of stakeholder participation theory in ecotourism research, as evident in its exploration of the relationships among stakeholders (local community, government, NGO, and private ecotourism providers) in ecotourism development. This further adds to the body of knowledge on CBE (sociology of tourism). The exploration of stakeholder theory in CBE projects has been limited in previous literature, and this study fills that gap within the context of a developing country. However, the study only focused on the

challenges faced by local communities in CBE projects, which may hinder the success of ecotourism as a developmental approach in rural destinations. Future research should explore more thoroughly the motivational factors behind these communities continuing to engage in CBE projects despite facing several challenges. Strategies such as financial capital, knowledge capital, and mentor-mentee programs could motivate the younger generation to become involved in CBE-based projects in the village, securing the future sustainability of ecotourism. Insights into these motivational factors are valuable as they provide evidence of how effectively ecotourism can function as a development tool for local communities. Additionally, future research could investigate the impacts of COVID-19 on CBE operations in rural areas in many developing countries, adding new knowledge to the existing ecotourism literature.

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