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## The evaluation of stakeholder maturity in the development of sustainable tourism

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**Abstract.** Purpose of study – of this research is to identify the extent of which representatives in the tourism business, government authorities, public organizations, and the local population are aware of and interpret the principles of sustainable tourism, as well as determine the key factors influencing the effectiveness of their interaction. The methodology – of the study consists of semi-structured interviews with various stakeholder groups, content analysis of conveniently transcribed material and finally a comparison with benchmark-maturity models with these achieved findings. The findings of this research can be employed to draw up recommendations for politicians, local communities and businesses about how to improve the planning and implementation of environmental, socially responsible activities. As well as the respondents as a whole have only a fragmented, sometimes inconsistent grasp of sustainable development and there is little communication between groups. Comparison with benchmark maturity models revealed significant differences between the current and the required levels of interaction. Conclusion – improving stakeholder maturity has become a key requirement for forming a balanced strategy for sustainable tourism development. It is recommended to strengthen institutional coordination, expand educational programs, and implement mechanisms for systematic cooperation, which will help reinforce the competitiveness of the city of Turkestan.

**Keywords:** sustainable tourism, stakeholder maturity, Turkestan, tourism management, stakeholder engagement.

### Intoduction

Typically sustainable tourism is seen as the vital objective for world-wide development rather than urbanity has done now, where all other nations are dirt featuring real high housing prices rather than cleanliness in a society about after only one year will force it to clean up.

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The target is to strike a balance between economic gain, ecological protection and the socio-cultural needs of the inhabitants. A number of international and domestic studies suggest the importance of all stakeholders from politicians to enterprises, civil society groups and residents in destination design that has a long future. But what effect can this have on the concept of "sustainable travel" and stakeholders' roles in carrying it out? Kazakhstan's Turkestan region is an incredibly vibrant place both scenically and architecturally.

Although on economic research, this exclusive magazine does not find substantial research on the extent to which stakeholders (tourist industry representatives, government environmental authorities, residents of the local cities in concert with these agencies to a newer stewardship standard that reflects their own traditions and meets needs. In content terms therefore the significance of this subject lies that despite Turkestan's every aspiration to become a tourist mecca there is no comprehensive study available to analyze stakeholders' in understanding and doing sustainable tourism. This hits an important point: there is a gap in current planning regarding the sustainable principles local tourist market participants know and interpret. In other words it is no easy matter to formulate specific policies at regional level while not even a systematic array of data has been compiled on local understanding and application of sustainability principles in tourism development. Many studies have found that stakeholder participation and consensus-building are the keys to achieving goals of sustainability in tourism development. From a theoretical level, the study adds points to the ongoing conversation about how various stakeholder groups might collaborate to achieve long term objectives.

Practically speaking, the findings will enable us to identify gaps in our efforts and potential growth areas for improving the effectiveness of Turkestan Tourist Management. In particular, this project is innovative for the reason that it integrates qualitative data such as content analyses and interviews with stakeholders at the level of «maturity» -and so their practical understanding like actual attitudes towards sustainable tourism. The research examines how to institute and promote sustainable tourism ideas in Turkestan city. The study centers on how players like tourist industry people, government bodies, public organizations and indigenous communities grasp the concept of sustainable tourism. The objectives of this study is to assess the «maturity» of stakeholders in the process of sustainable tourism development in Turkestan, more specifically, comprehend and apply key sustainability principles there. With this in mind, the following targets have been set:

- Identify indicators which can be used to judge stakeholders' understanding of sustainable tourism.
- Interview representatives from different organizations (government, businesses and communities) to find out how they themselves see the culture of sustainability.
- Do a content analysis to find out where the common patterns are, the many contradictions and knowledge gaps in sustainable tourism.
- Suggestions for enhancing stakeholder maturity in the process of creating and carrying out sustainable tourism initiatives at Turkestan.

The real question, then, is whether fragmented understandings of sustainability principles and inconsistent communication among stakeholders lead to Turkestan being marketed inefficiently as a sustainable tourism destination. On the other hand, an understanding at a higher level of maturity, as shown by close co-ordination and a shared vision of aims can speed up the development of sustainable practices in no small way.

## **Literature review**

The concept of sustainable tourism is based on balancing economic, environmental, and sociocultural development (Ali et al., 2017). Foundational studies emphasize the importance of including all stakeholders, including tourists and locals, corporate representatives, government agencies, and public groups (Babekova et al., 2022; Balouei Jamkhaneh et al., 2023). Stakeholder theory, in particular, is seen as a crucial component in achieving sustainability since it accounts for differences in interests, power, and resources across different groups (Dodds, 2010; Franz & Cruz, 2024). Despite the growing body of research, several scholars highlight the vagueness of the word «sustainability in tourism» (Nicolaides, 2015). This makes it challenging to put the concept into practice, as well as create and compare methodological approaches across different geographies (Odważny et al., 2019). The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an important benchmark for the tourist industry's progress. However, as prior research has shown, there are few clear allusions to the SDGs in studies on sustainable tourism, particularly when it comes to governance and the role of key stakeholders (such as visitors) (Predvoditeleva et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is also a geographical imbalance: most research concentrates on European countries, leaving the Global South, where sustainability challenges are particularly pressing, understudied.

The concept of "maturity" is frequently used in research on the long-term growth of organizations, projects, and supply chains (Kopyrin, 2021; Kulakhmetova & Espenbetov, 2023). Maturity refers to the extent to which sustainability principles have been integrated into management processes and procedures at all levels. In general, such models help to determine where an organization or destination is in the «evolution of sustainability» and to plan future measures for improvement. A new study proposes a maturity evaluation approach to suit the objectives of destination managers (Nicolaides, 2015). This model addresses concerns such as the "ambiguity" of the sustainable tourism idea and the overcomplicated nature of some current indicators. The authors emphasize the need of incorporating digital technologies (online platforms, booking systems, and social media) into the assessment because they have a rising impact on visitor flow management. Another study highlights three crucial gaps in assessing maturity (target gap, assessment gap, and primary gap) and demonstrates how a well-formulated model can reduce the mismatch between management expectations and the reality of sustainable development (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020).

According to research, a comprehensive understanding of sustainability cannot be reached without considering the diversity of stakeholder groups. Some scholars divide stakeholders into primary, secondary, and critical groups (Dodds, 2010), while others propose a "matrix of relationships" among stakeholders, indicating how different types of interactions might help to support the attainment of long-term goals (Franz & Cruz, 2024). Another viewpoint focuses on eco-tourism, claiming that the absence of a comprehensive paradigm for managing interests and sharing power among stakeholders stifles genuine change (Rudnicka, 2016). In terms of stakeholder management «maturity», numerous areas require further development: improving communication, taking into account differing values and interests (Odważny et al., 2019), developing methods to quantify «quality» of engagement (Babekova et al., 2022), and using new technologies.

According to previous study findings, travelers as a stakeholder group are frequently overlooked in most studies, despite their major influence on setting tourism demand and views

of a destination (Предводителя et al., 2024). When defining and applying sustainability indicators, the emphasis is typically placed on local inhabitants, businesses, and government officials, whereas tourists' values, behavior, and opinions are analyzed in a fragmented manner (Атамась & Котельников, 2016). On the one hand, maturity models provide a more logical way to incorporating sustainability by demonstrating a «development ladder» (Nicolaidis, 2015; Silvius & Schipper, 2015). On the other hand, the literature repeatedly underlines the limitations of putting complicated indicator systems into practice. According to certain studies, many metrics fail to account for changing conditions or geographical variances (Усенова & Баймбетова, 2022). Furthermore, digitization, which creates new methods for acquiring and analyzing data on visitor behavior and resource availability, is rarely included into traditional models and indexes (Nicolaidis, 2015).

An analysis of the offered papers reveals many substantial gaps: Insufficient definition of the "sustainability" idea in tourism, as well as the complexities of measuring it practically (Odważny et al., 2019; Атамась & Котельников, 2016). Most indicator systems fail to completely include visitors as a stakeholder group (Предводителя et al., 2024; Silvius & Schipper, 2015). There is a dearth of general maturity models for understanding stakeholders' complicated interactions, including the role of interests and power (Rudnicka, 2016). Rare direct allusions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in terms of governance and visitor involvement, as well as a geographical bias toward European scenarios (Предводителя et al., 2024). Many proposed models need further empirical validation, modifications, and comparison studies in different regions (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020; Кулахметова & Еспенбетов, 2023).

Therefore, studies on sustainable tourism indicates a growing interest in comprehensive models that assess the «maturity» of destinations and organizations in the context of sustainable development. Foundational study proved the importance of stakeholder theory (Babekova et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2017), while more recent studies aim to provide tools for comprehensive assessment (Nicolaidis, 2015, Предводителя et al., 2024). However, there are several methodological, conceptual, and spatial restrictions. In the years to come, unified metrics and maturity models will be necessary, taking into consideration geographical variances and development dynamics. To gain a broader global perspective, it is necessary to establish relationships with the SDGs agenda and expand research beyond Europe. Increasing the empirical component by conducting cross-cultural and longitudinal studies to validate the utility of maturity models and monitoring systems. The implementation of these criteria will not only theoretically refine the concept of «sustainability» in tourism, but will also increase the practical value of the models developed, resulting in more effective stakeholder management and long-term growth of destinations for tourism.

## **Research methods**

This study used a multiple-method research approach to assess stakeholder maturity in Turkestan's sustainable tourism sector. The literature review lays the theoretical groundwork by identifying gaps in existing research on sustainable tourism, stakeholder involvement, and maturity models, as well as evaluating case studies from successful destinations. Such a research design allows for an in-depth exploration of the contextual characteristics of the region, as well as the identification of participants' subjective understanding of the principles of sustainable development.

To form the sampling, was used purposive criterion-based that ensured the representativeness of key stakeholder groups. The final group included 15 key stakeholders (or informants), among them: 4 representatives of government bodies, 5 executives or managers of tourism enterprises, 4 local community leaders, and 2 representatives of non-governmental organisations.

The selection criteria for respondents were as follows: participation in the implementation or planning of tourism initiatives in Turkestan; professional experience or residence in the region for at least three years; willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview that involves the discussion of sustainable tourism topics.

The sample formation was completed upon reaching theoretical saturation — the point at which subsequent interviews no longer provided fundamentally new information, confirming the adequacy of the sample size for the purposes of the study.

As a main method of collecting empirical data, semi-structured interviews played the main role, which was conducted using a pre-tested guide list. The interviews were conducted in person ( $n = 11$ ) in offices and conference rooms, as well as remotely ( $n = 4$ ) via the Zoom platform between December 2024 and February 2025. The average duration of an interview was 55 minutes (ranging from 35 to 80 minutes).

Before the start of each interview, all participants signed an informed consent form, where they received clarifications regarding confidentiality and were informed about their right to withdraw at any stage.

The interview guide included three thematic sections corresponding to the key aspects of maturity:

- Awareness – the level of understanding of the principles of sustainable tourism and related international regulations;
- Engagement – participation in management processes and the ability to influence decision-making;
- Implementation – the presence of specific practices and initiatives that reflect the principles of sustainable development.

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed word for word by the research team. All transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 and MAXQDA 2022 software for subsequent analysis. A three-stage content analysis was applied, following the logic of grounded theory:

- Open coding – identification of key meaning units and the creation of initial codes;
- Axial coding – grouping of codes by themes and identifying relationships between them;
- Selective coding – integration of themes into a unified categorical structure reflecting the concept of stakeholder maturity.

In the study it was used concise operational terminology of three key components of maturity:

- Awareness – the respondent's ability to articulate at least three basic principles of sustainable tourism (economic, environmental, and sociocultural) and their ability to provide examples of how they applied;
- Engagement – regular participation (at least once per quarter) in working groups, public hearings, and governance processes related to tourism development;
- Implementation – the presence of sustainable practices or projects (such as environmental certification, cultural heritage preservation initiatives, etc.) with confirmed participation of the respondent within the past two years.

Assessment of maturity was realised by using a three-level scale (low, medium, high) based on the totality of relevant codes, which ensures the reproducibility of the methodology and allows for interregional and international comparisons.

This method considers not only stakeholders' public statements regarding sustainability, but also their genuine perspectives, potential barriers, and motivations. As a result, strengths and weaknesses in understanding sustainable tourism principles were identified, along with practical recommendations for promoting stakeholder maturity in the region.

## Results and discussion

The study's findings are presented using both qualitative data from pertinent stakeholders and quantitative context. After summarizing the general characteristics of Kazakhstan's tourism growth, interview data demonstrating the level of awareness, coordination, and resource availability among important actors is analyzed. This method enables the identification of institutional and managerial hurdles to sustainability in the context of an expanding tourism industry. The dynamics of Kazakhstan's domestic tourist flows from 2020 to 2024 are shown in table 1, which shows a consistent increase trend.

**Table 1 – Dynamics of Domestic Tourist Flow in Kazakhstan, 2020-2024.**

Year	Domestic visitors, million people	Change from the previous year, people	Growth rate vs previous year (domestic flow), %
2020	4,46	—	—
2021	6,91	+2 446 900	+54,82
2022	8,61	+1 697 500	+24,57
2023	9,57	+962 100	+11,18
2024	10,50	+930 300	+9,72

Note: compiled by the authors based on the source (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025)

According to the figures, domestic travel rose from 4.46 million in 2020 to 10.50 million in 2024. After the pandemic depression, domestic demand recovered and increased, as seen by the period's overall rise of 6,036,800 persons (+135.26%). The growth rate steadily stabilized at +24.57% in 2022, +11.18% in 2023, and +9.72% in 2024 after reaching its peak of +54.82% in 2021. Another indication of the sector's growing economic importance is seen in Figure 1, which illustrates how the key tourism indicators changed in index values (2022 = 100). The number of foreign tourists and visitors climbed significantly more rapidly to 195.7 and 325.5 in 2023 and 2024, while the number of local visitors increased to 111.1 and 122.0. Furthermore, the number of lodging services rose dramatically to 125.8 and 164.0 (figure 1).



Figure 1 – Dynamics of Key Tourism Indicators in Kazakhstan, 2022-2024

Note: compiled by the authors based on the source (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025)

All things considered, this indicates that the inbound segment has been growing at a faster rate, coinciding with more moderate growth in domestic travel and continuously increasing economic performance throughout the lodging infrastructure. When combined, these indications show that the major tourist sites are growing in the face of rising demand, which inevitably puts greater strain on infrastructure and necessitates more coordinated managerial choices. In this situation, the interpretation of qualitative data becomes particularly crucial because the problems with coordination, lack of awareness, and resource limitations mentioned in the interviews typically come to the fore during times of expansion, when the consequences of managerial errors are more severe.

This part demonstrates the research's primary findings on stakeholder maturity in Turkestan's sustainable tourism, focusing on the difficulties and opportunities revealed during interviews with representatives from various stakeholder groups. The findings are evaluated in terms of sustainability maturity and contrasted with past research on sustainable tourism practices and stakeholder collaboration.

The primary finding of this study is that stakeholders in Turkestan have varying levels of awareness and comprehension of «sustainable tourism». While sustainability is widely recognized as critical to the tourism sector, many individuals are unfamiliar with or misunderstand the basic ideas of sustainability, which encompass environmental, social, and economic components. Government authorities and tourism companies often prioritize economic sustainability, emphasizing growth and infrastructure development while ignoring the social and environmental effects of tourism. Local communities, on the other hand, show a more implicit understanding of sustainability through their dedication to cultural heritage and environmental conservation, even if they are not always able to connect these ideas to official sustainability frameworks. These findings are consistent with those of Ali et al. (2017), who emphasize the challenge of operationalizing sustainability due to its ambiguity and context-

dependence. Similarly, Babekova et al. (2022) argue that the lack of a widely accepted definition of sustainable tourism stymies efforts to successfully integrate sustainability themes. This lack of clarity among Turkestan stakeholders may limit the development of coordinated plans for sustainable tourism, emphasizing the need for a more standard and cohesive approach to defining sustainability in the area.

The study's main finding is a lack of coordination among the various groups participating in Turkestan's tourism development. While there is general recognition of the need for a sustainable tourism model, stakeholders usually function in silos, with little collaboration between government agencies, tourism businesses, local communities, and public organizations. Government leaders underlined the significance of sustainability, but noted that their efforts did not always align with those of other parties. Tourism businesses expressed support for sustainability, but their actions were typically driven by financial imperatives, and there was insufficient advice or incentive to focus on long-term sustainability goals. Regional communities, notwithstanding their concerns about tourism's environmental and socioeconomic consequences, are usually excluded from decision-making processes. This finding coincides with the literature on stakeholder theory, which emphasizes that successful sustainability projects require active participation from all relevant parties. Without collaboration among stakeholders, the development of sustainable tourism in Turkestan risks becoming fragmented and unproductive. The lack of collaboration among stakeholders is also consistent with Balouei Jamkhaneh et al. (2023), which shows that sustainable tourism programs usually fail due to inadequate stakeholder participation. The study underlines the importance of increasing communication and collaboration across various groups in order to foster shared ownership of sustainability objectives and activities.

The research study revealed several challenges to implementing sustainable tourism practices on figure. Impediments to sustainable tourism include a lack of understanding among stakeholders, especially local people and small businesses. Although stakeholders understand the value of sustainability, they usually lack the necessary tools, skills, and information to effectively implement sustainable practices, as noted by Dodds (2010).

The emphasis on immediate financial gains, along with tourism's seasonal nature, results in a preference for short-term profit over long-term sustainability. Tourism businesses, particularly those in underdeveloped countries, may lack the funds to invest in sustainable practices if they do not see an immediate return on investment (Franz & Cruz, 2024). Poor regulatory frameworks: While certain government initiatives promote sustainable tourism, a lack of comprehensive and enforced law creates gaps in implementation. Stakeholders noted that, while regulation exists, its implementation varies, weakening efforts to promote sustainable practices in the tourism industry (Ali et al., 2017). Cultural and social factors: Local communities frequently struggle to balance the preservation of their cultural and environmental heritage with the economic benefits of tourism. These communities struggle to balance economic development and cultural preservation in the absence of a shared understanding of sustainability (Nicolaidis, 2015) (figure 2).



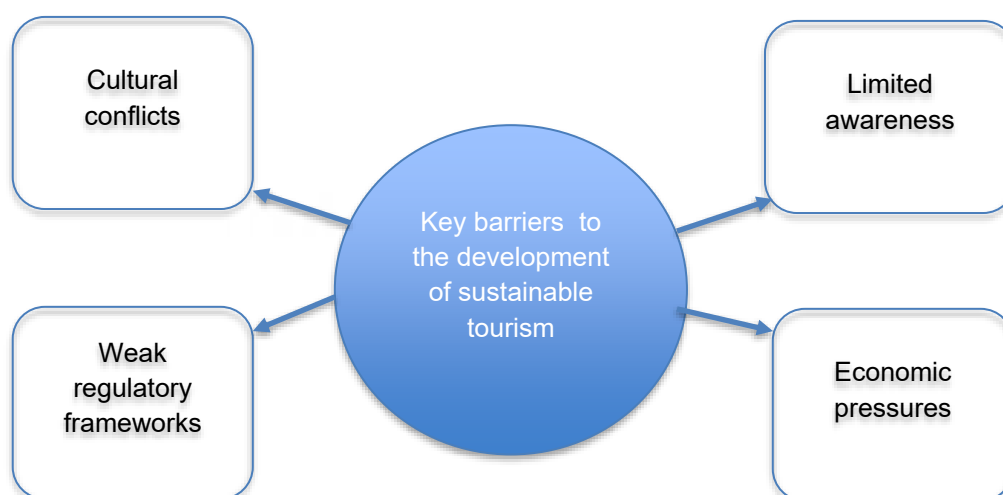


Figure 2 – Impediments to implementing sustainable tourism practices

Note: compiled by the authors based on the source (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025)

Some research indicated that low awareness and economic factors can impede the adoption of sustainable tourism strategies. It is evident that overcoming these barriers will demand not just improved education and training, but also a greater commitment from both the government and the private sector to reward sustainable practices (Odważny et al., 2019).

The paper proposes many potential methods for boosting the sustainability maturity of stakeholders in Turkestan (figure-3). Education and training: Stakeholders in the tourism industry, particularly local communities and small businesses, need targeted education and training on sustainable tourism practices. Training programs that emphasize practical application and present real-world examples of successful sustainable tourism could assist bridge the awareness-to-action gap (Предводителева et al., 2024).

Expanded stakeholder collaboration: Enhancing collaboration between government agencies, the commercial sector, and local communities is a critical step toward long-term maturity. Creating forums for continuing debate and collective decision-making could aid in aligning divergent groups' interests and developing more effective environmental policies (Копырин, 2021).

Promoting sustainable practices: Stakeholders, particularly tourism businesses, have expressed a need for financial incentives to encourage sustainability initiatives. This could include tax breaks, grants, or subsidies for businesses that pursue environmentally friendly methods. Public recognition or certification schemes could also help to improve the image of sustainable tourism and encourage businesses to adopt more environmentally friendly practices (Babekova et al., 2022) (figure 3).

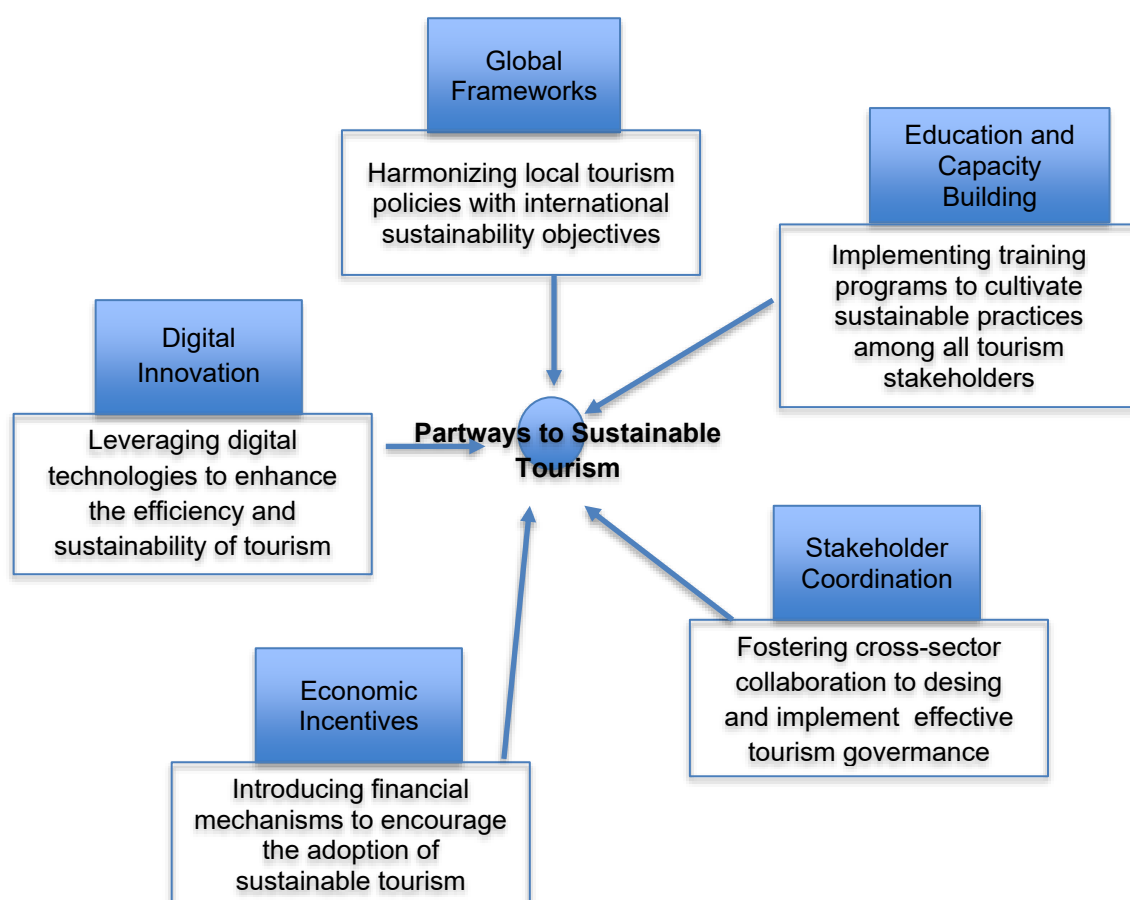


Figure 3 – Potential solutions for improving the sustainability maturity of stakeholders in Turkestan  
Note: compiled by the authors based on the sources

**Employing digital technologies:** The current study focuses on how digital technology might enhance sustainability initiatives. Online platforms, data analytics, and social media can all be used to monitor tourism flows, optimize resource utilization, and engage visitors in sustainability initiatives. Incorporating digital tools into sustainability projects can help improve tourist management efficiency and effectiveness (Ali et al., 2017).

**Coordinating with global frameworks:** Aligning local sustainability activities with international standards such as the Sustainable growth Goals (SDGs) can help steer tourist growth in an environmentally responsible way. Incorporating the SDGs into local tourism strategies can provide a clear set of targets and indicators for all stakeholders to work towards, ensuring that sustainability is pursued holistically and integrated (Balouei Jamkhaneh et al., 2023).

Furthermore, thematic analysis of the research paper included the following: Data coding refers to the identification of major themes and categories given by respondents. Comparative analysis compares discovered patterns to existing stakeholder maturity models. Semantic analysis entails discovering hidden meanings and viewpoints on sustainable tourism among different responder groups. To analyze data more effectively, three key components of stakeholder maturity were identified:

- Awareness and knowledge of sustainable tourism principles.

- Encourage stakeholder engagement and interaction.
- Practical implementation of sustainable concepts.

Furthermore, stakeholders differ in their awareness and grasp of sustainable tourism principles. In the tourism business, 60% of respondents identify sustainability primarily with environmental concerns such as natural resource conservation and pollution reduction, while only 30% consider economic and social factors such as developing local communities and cultural heritage conservation. A huge gap in educational programs and training further reduces their understanding. Government officials recognize the importance of sustainable development, with 70% believing it is relevant; nonetheless, the lack of a coherent plan, combined with financing limitations and coordination issues, impedes successful implementation. Public organizations are the most mature in terms of comprehending sustainable tourism, integrating all major factors; yet, their impact is restricted due to a lack of engagement with business and government. 50% of the local people is unfamiliar with the notion of sustainable tourism, while 80% acknowledge its negative consequences on the environment and quality of life, such as overcrowding, increased prices, and infrastructure degradation. Furthermore, residents feel excluded from the tourism planning process, emphasizing the need for increased community involvement and education.

Stakeholder participation and interaction in sustainable tourism are still minimal, with just 30% of respondents reporting successful collaboration among groups. Key constraints include a lack of frequent meetings and communication channels, competing objectives among businesses, governments, and public organizations, and a general lack of trust. Despite these difficulties, industry and government officials have expressed an interest in organizing a tourism business forum to promote collaboration. In terms of practical application, sustainable tourism initiatives are unpredictable and lack a systematic approach. The tourism industry continues to put short-term profits ahead of long-term sustainability, while government programs receive insufficient funding. Public organizations actively support sustainability measures, although they frequently confront low engagement from both local communities and enterprises, limiting the impact of their initiatives (table 2). Insufficient stakeholder's maturity in sustainable tourism. The level of maturity varies every organization, although sustainability principles are generally interpreted in fragmented ways. Public entities have the highest level of maturity, whilst the local populace has the lowest. Lack of efficient stakeholder contact. Poor communication leads to a lack of coordination, making it harder to pursue long-term goals. The need for a systematic approach to sustainable tourism. A comprehensive strategy for sustainable tourist growth is essential, taking into account economic, environmental, and social factors.

A comprehensive plan for sustainable tourist development is essential, taking into consideration social, environmental, and economic variables. The interviews revealed an unequal level of stakeholder maturity in sustainable tourism, as well as insufficient coordination and a reliance on local (isolated) activities. While certain stakeholders have a good understanding of sustainable development, the broader perception is typically limited to environmental concerns or altogether absent. Implementing a comprehensive education plan, building a collaborative platform, and supporting sustainable initiatives would boost stakeholder maturity and ensure Turkestan's continued growth as a competitive and sustainable destination.

**Table 2 – Summary of results**

Criterion	Tourism business	Government authorities	Public organizations	Local population
Awareness of sustainable tourism	Medium (focus on ecology)	High (but lacks a unified strategy)	High (includes all aspects)	Low (limited understanding)
Stakeholder interaction	Limited, informal	Fragmented	Limited (lack of dialogue)	Almost absent
Practical implementation of sustainability principles	Localized initiatives but lack systemic approach	Weak support due to funding shortages	Active efforts but lack of coordination	No influence on processes

Note: compiled by the authors based on the research

The results of this study underline the difficulties of achieving sustainability maturity among Turkestan's tourist stakeholders. While the importance of sustainability is widely understood, its implementation is hampered by misunderstandings, a lack of coordination, and fiscal constraints. The identified problems, which include lax regulatory frameworks and competing economic and cultural interests, highlight the need for a more coordinated approach to sustainable tourism. However, the report does identify some viable alternatives, including more education, stakeholder participation, financial incentives, and the use of digital technologies. Resolving such issues through targeted interventions and connecting local efforts with global sustainability frameworks can help Turkestan's tourism industry become more sustainable and equitable. Finally, establishing a shared vision and commitment among all stakeholders will be critical to advancing the region's sustainable tourism practices.

## Conclusions

The study aimed to answer the question of how well stakeholders in Turkestan understand and put into practice sustainable tourism principles. The aim of the study was to gain insights from various stakeholders on the application of sustainable tourism principles: how local communities, tourism companies, government departments and non-profit bodies perceive sustainability and to what extent they put it into practice. In particular, the study measured such understandings, motivations for doing things in certain ways or not at all; and interpretations about sustainable tourism theories using qualitative techniques such as content analysis and semi-structured interviews. The reports pointed out that understanding and applications of sustainable tourism principles vary by different stakeholder groups. While large tourism companies and government agencies are wary of sustainability, small businesses and local communities employ a discordant approach. There is no coordination between these entities, nor do they share information evenly. Thus, prospects for genuinely sustainable tourism in the area are slim.

Our study confirmed that the level of «maturity» of stakeholders in Turkestan – that is, the combination of their awareness, degree of engagement, and practical implementation of sustainable tourism principles – remains uneven. Below are the key empirical findings,

supported by direct quotes from interviews and related to stakeholder theory, as well as the maturity level framework.

Firstly, the majority of tourism business representatives and some government officials interpret sustainable development in a narrow sense, limiting it primarily to the environmental aspect. As one tour agency owner noted: «In our understanding, sustainable tourism is, above all, about caring for the environment; we know much less about the social or economic aspects». This response reflects the presence of a cognitive gap described in the maturity model: an insufficient level of knowledge creates a barrier to progressing towards more mature stages, which take into account all three dimensions of sustainability – environmental, economic, and sociocultural.

Secondly, the interview data revealed that government authorities and large businesses dominate strategic processes, forming a vertically oriented governance model. At the same time, NGOs and representatives of local communities feel excluded from decision-making. As one respondent stated: «We are concerned about the consequences of the tourism boom, but we are rarely invited to participate in discussions – we feel left out». From the perspective of stakeholder theory, such asymmetry in access to resources and influence reduces the legitimacy of decisions being made. According to Dodds, R. (2010), this situation hinders the transition from a declarative model of engagement to a collaborative one – which is more mature and sustainable.

Thirdly, the practical implementation of sustainable practices is constrained by fragmented actions and a lack of cross-sectoral trust. A representative of the regional akimat noted: «We understand the importance of sustainable development, but unfortunately, government efforts are often not supported by business or the public». Business representatives, in turn, emphasise the lack of economic incentives: «Environmental initiatives are certainly good, but without financial benefits or tourist demand, it's difficult for us to invest in them». Within the maturity model, this situation corresponds to the partial practices stage, where actions remain uncoordinated and the motivational base is weak and unstable.

Finally, respondents' interviews indicate the presence of institutional and cultural barriers. These include: fragmented legal and regulatory frameworks, the absence of tax incentives, and the dominance of short-term economic logic. These challenges correlate with the concepts of regulatory gap and short-termism, which, according to research, are among the key factors contributing to the stagnation of sustainable tourism initiatives in developing regions.

The study also highlights a variety of critical issues, such as the insufficient inclusion of visitors as active stakeholders in the sustainability discourse, as well as the challenges caused by a lack of comprehensive, region-specific maturity models for assessing sustainability. According to the paper, achieving higher levels of maturity in Turkestan's tourism sector requires greater collaboration, greater focus on capacity-building activities, and the creation of local models that take into account the region's distinct socio-cultural, economic, and environmental context. The study recommends operational strategies that include systematic stakeholder participation and enhanced communication methods and mechanisms for continuous learning and adaptation. The tourism industry of Turkestan can grow while supporting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aim for sustainable development. The research adds to sustainable tourism knowledge by providing detailed insights into the fast-growing tourist destination's operational dynamics.

The study encourages additional empirical investigation, particularly in Central Asia, because this region faces new challenges and possibilities in sustainable tourism development (figure 4).

Stakeholders' active participation needs to be encouraged by the authorities, as well as should concentrate on policies and programs that are in line with sustainable tourism goals and encourage stakeholder participation. As a result of our study, it was found that NGOs and sustainable Advocates must lead advocacy efforts, disseminate information, and monitor the progress of sustainable measures. Local communities should be able to actively participate in tourism decision-making, gaining financially from sustainable practices while preserving cultural assets.

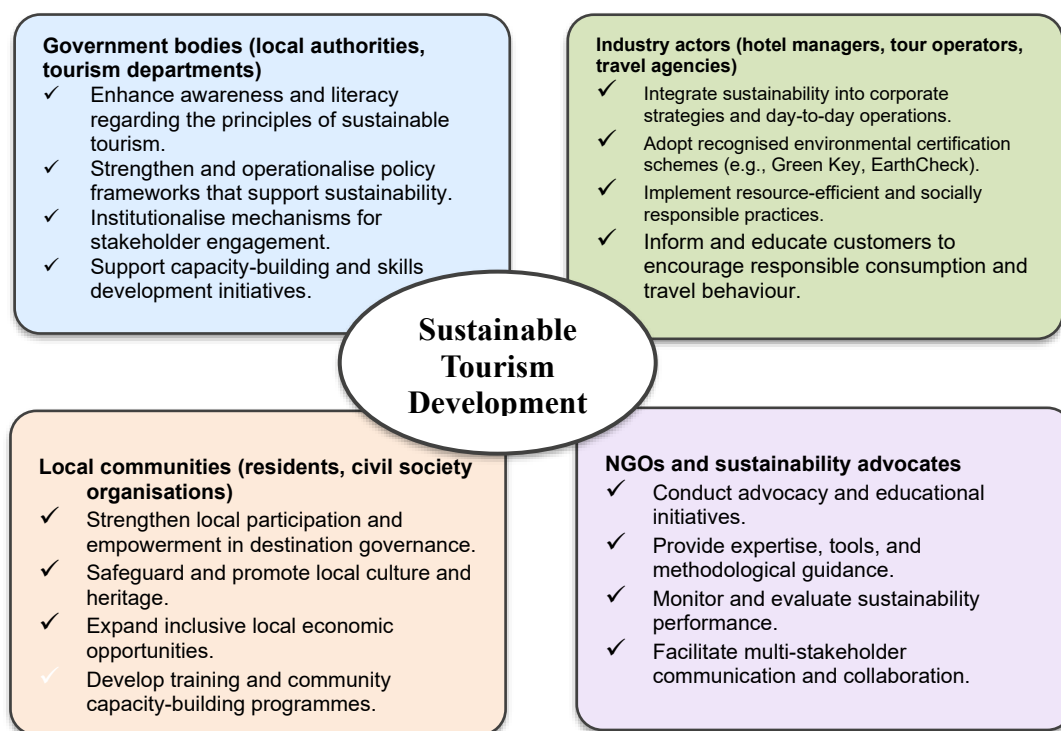


Figure 4 – Recommendations for sustainable tourism by stakeholder group

Note: compiled by the authors based on the research

The research provides deeper insights about how different stakeholders influence sustainable tourism policy development in developing regions. The barriers that include limited sustainability principle understanding and poor cross-sectoral coordination and institutional and sociocultural constraints demonstrate the necessity for a comprehensive governance transformation approach in the tourism sector. Our proposed measure, based on both empirical data and theoretical models, demonstrates the need to strengthen stakeholder engagement. Their implementation - through educational initiatives, developing partnerships, economic incentives, and the strengthening of trust-can lay the foundation for a balanced, inclusive, and environmentally responsible tourism in Turkestan, aligned with both local priorities and the global Sustainable Development Goals.

### Gratitude, Conflict of interest

The authors provided financial support for this article, and there are no conflicts of interest.

### **Authors contribution**

All of the authors contributed to the research and findings for this scholarly publication. Ensure the investigation's methodological procedures, draw analytical outcomes, comment on critical viewpoints, format, and submit the article. Conducting a literature review, acquiring data, and analyzing results. Conducting a preliminary investigation of the research issue and reviewing the gathered information.

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### **Тұрақты туризмді дамытудағы мүдделі тараптардың жетілуін бағалау**

**Аңдатпа.** Зерттеудің мақсаты – Түркістан дестинациясы мысалында тұрақты туризмді кешенді бағалау және барлық туризм саласының мүдделі тараптарын атап айтқанда: туристік бизнес, мемлекеттік органдар, қоғамдық ұйымдар мен жергілікті халық өкілдерінің тұрақты туризм қағидаттарын қаншалықты түсініп, қолдануын анықтау, сондай-ақ олардың өзара іс-қимылына әсер ететін негізгі факторларды зерделеу. Зерттеудің ғылыми маңыздылығы мүдделі тараптардың рөлі мен олардың «жетілу» деңгейінің тұрақты туризмді дамытудағы теориялық тұжырымдамасын кеңейтуге бағытталған. Ал практикалық құндылығы алынған деректерді басқарушылар, жергілікті қауымдастықтар мен бизнес үшін экологиялық және әлеуметтік жауапты жобаларды жоспарлау мен іске асыруды жақсарту бойынша ұсынымдар әзірлеу мақсатында қолдану мүмкіндігінде. Зерттеу әдістемесі – сапалық тәсілге негізделген: мүдделі тараптармен жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбат жүргізіліп, стенографияланған мәтіндерге контент-талдау жасалды, сондай-ақ алынған деректер «жетілу» модельдерінің теориялық негіздерімен салыстырылды. Негізгі тұжырымдар мүдделі тараптардың тұрақты туризмді түсінудегі әркелкілігі мен өзара қарым-қатынасындағы кемшіліктерді көрсетеді. Зерттеудің нәтижелері – тұрақты туризм қағидаттарын түсіну деңгейінің біркелкі еместігі, топтар арасындағы коммуникацияның жеткіліксіздігі және іс-қимылдардың үйлеспеуі анықталды. Сонымен қатар, тұрақты тәжірибелерді енгізуге кедергі келтіретін негізгі шектеулер белгіленді. Эталондық



модельдермен салыстыру ағымдағы және қажет деңгей арасындағы айырмашылықтың айтарлықтай екенін көрсетті. Қорытындылар – мүдделі тараптардың «жетілу» деңгейін арттыру тұрақты туризмді дамытудың теңгерімді стратегиясын қалыптастыру үшін шешуші мәнге ие. Институционалдық үйлестіруді күшейту, білім беру мүмкіндіктерін кеңейту және тұрақты өзара әрекеттесу тетіктерін енгізу Түркістан дестинациясының бәсекеге қабілеттілігін күшейтуге мүмкіндік береді.

**Кілт сөздер:** тұрақты туризм, мүдделі тараптардың жетілуі, Түркістан, туризмді басқару, стейкхолдерлардың байланысы.

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### **Оценка зрелости заинтересованных сторон в развитии устойчивого туризма**

**Аннотация.** Данная статья посвящена оценке «зрелости» (maturity) заинтересованных сторон в развитии устойчивого туризма на примере дестинации Туркестан. Цель исследования – провести комплексную оценку уровня «зрелости» заинтересованных сторон в развитии устойчивого туризма на примере дестинации Туркестан и определить, насколько представители туристического бизнеса, государственных органов, общественных организаций и местного населения осознают, интерпретируют и применяют принципы устойчивого туризма. Дополнительно поставлена задача выявить ключевые факторы, влияющие на эффективность их взаимодействия при планировании и реализации экологических и социально ориентированных инициатив. Методы исследования – использованы полуструктурированные интервью с различными группами стейкхолдеров, контент-анализ транскрибированных материалов, а также сопоставление полученных данных с существующими моделями зрелости. Применены абстрактно-логический, сравнительный и качественный методы, обеспечившие всестороннее изучение уровня осведомлённости и характера межсекторального взаимодействия. Результаты исследования – могут быть использованы для разработки рекомендаций для политиков, местных сообществ и бизнеса по улучшению планирования и реализации экологически и социально ответственной деятельности. Кроме того, респонденты в целом имеют лишь фрагментарное, порой непоследовательное представление об устойчивом развитии, а взаимодействие между группами слабо развито. Сравнение с эталонными моделями зрелости выявило значительное расхождение между текущим и необходимым уровнем взаимодействия. Выводы - повышение зрелости стейкхолдеров является ключевым условием формирования сбалансированной стратегии устойчивого развития туризма. Рекомендовано усилить институциональную координацию, расширить образовательные программы и внедрить механизмы системного взаимодействия, что позволит укрепить конкурентоспособность дестинации Туркестан.

**Ключевые слова:** устойчивый туризм, зрелость заинтересованных сторон, Туркестан, управление туризмом, взаимодействие стейкхолдеров.

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