

## Metrics, Impact, and the Future of Pro-Poor Tourism: Towards a Theory-Driven Evaluation Framework

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### Abstract

Pro-poor tourism has long been promoted as a mechanism for poverty alleviation through the integration of marginalised communities into tourism value chains. However, despite extensive policy uptake and academic interest, significant gaps remain in how the impacts of pro-poor tourism are evaluated, particularly in relation to social outcomes, empowerment, and long-term community change. The current paper argues that dominant evaluation approaches, which privilege short-term economic indicators such as income generation and employment, are insufficient to determine whether pro-poor tourism genuinely benefits poorer communities or contributes to meaningful social transformation. Drawing on theories of social innovation, empowerment, social capital, and social impact measurement, the paper critiques existing evaluation practices and highlights their conceptual and methodological limitations. In response, it proposes a theory-driven, multidimensional framework for evaluating pro-poor tourism that moves beyond narrow economic metrics to incorporate wellbeing, agency, participation in decision-making, improved digital inclusion and community cohesion. By positioning pro-poor tourism as a form of social innovation, the paper reframes impact measurement as both an evaluative and empowering process, capable of capturing complex social change over time, supported where possible by integrative digital tools. The proposed framework offers scholars, policymakers, development agencies, and tourism practitioners a more holistic and ethically grounded approach to understanding pro-poor tourism's outcomes, thereby strengthening its potential as a tool for equitable and sustainable tourism development.

**Keywords:** Pro-poor Tourism; Social Impact Measurement; Social Innovation; Empowerment; Social Capital

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### 1. Introduction

The concept of pro-poor tourism is centred on forms of tourism that allow poorer members of the population to derive net benefits from the tourism industry in their region and emerged in academic discourse at the turn of the millennium [1]. Whilst the focus of pro-poor tourism has been on understanding product development, stakeholder roles and community benefits [2-4], there remains a lack of understanding as to the social impact that is had on people

and communities [5]. Therefore, there remains a significant gap as without such evidence, it is difficult to ascertain whether such forms of tourism are truly 'pro-poor' or not.

Prior research has identified that pro-poor tourism can have tangible effects in poverty reduction, despite the need for operators to still perform profitably [6]. The benefits delivered to the poor can include not just economic improvements, but also livelihood/career benefits and

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involvement in decision-making structures [7]. In this respect pro-poor tourism is viewed as a pragmatic approach to supporting poorer communities by integrating them into the sector's value chains and has been theorised as a form of social innovation and empowerment [5]. However, it is questionable from the literature base and studies conducted whether pro-poor tourism genuinely supports the poor, especially when wider considerations outside of job creation are accounted for. This is particularly true around social impacts and the wellbeing, empowerment and agency of poorer communities, which can be entrenched through digital exclusion and a lack of access to digital tools. Indeed, scholars have highlighted the political nature of the tourism industry, operating within neoliberal markets and questioned its value in sustainability and poverty alleviation work [8]. Further, whilst projects can often benefit individuals and small communities, it remains unclear what the wider ecosystem-level benefits of such pro-poor tourism approaches are [9].

The issue of impact measurement is therefore one that is central to questions of the efficacy of pro-poor tourism, as it provides the capability to measure the tangible outcomes and impacts on individuals, communities and society. Further, it allows for understanding to be developed of both the positive and negative impacts of pro-poor tourism approaches, to gather what has been termed the 'whole picture' approach for beneficiaries and wider society [10]. It also provides evidence for wider stakeholders outside of, but connected to, the pro-poor tourism ecosystem, especially policymakers, funders and NGOs [6]. The current research seeks to make an original contribution in this area, by demonstrating the problems with current evaluations of pro-poor tourism efficacy, whilst also demonstrating how pro-poor tourism interventions can be evaluated effectively using theoretical approaches based within the fields of social innovation and social impact measurement, as a means to support genuine community empowerment. Through this lens, effective impact measurement becomes not just an evaluation mechanism, but rather a tool to support pro-poor tourism interventions to become genuine social innovations rather than superficial sustainable development panaceas.

## 2. Current Evaluation Approach Limitations

Evaluation in pro-poor tourism has often sought to identify whether the benefits of pro-poor tourism genuinely end up in the hands of the poor communities that are meant to be the beneficiaries [4]. The dominant paradigm in pro-poor tourism evaluation is centred on economic evaluation approaches, including examinations of income generation, employment, entrepreneurship, and onwards benefits into local supply chains [11, 12]. Included here are approaches such as cost-benefit analyses and a focus on poverty-reduction indicators, rather than wider social factors; whilst

such measures are often top-down driven by global/national funders or external bodies, rather than being locally focused [13]. The measures that are frequently cited in research into pro-poor tourism, do not always provide evidence of relative value such as inequality measures, and so can obscure how these economic impacts are distributed. Benefits to poor communities therefore remain unclear, with much of the economic influx instead going to local elites or those with entrenched power [9,14]. Hampton [14] suggests that there is a need to radically rethink how pro-poor tourism initiatives are delivered and the relationships between local communities and providers.

The other evaluation issue that is faced is the paucity of longer-term, longitudinal studies that seek to understand change over time. Such types of evaluation are essential if processes such as power shifts, skills development and narrowing inequality are to be effectively measured [15]. Indeed, as Scheve's [16] noted, if we are to truly understand whether pro-poor tourism empowers, then we need to understand wider political and social factors, as well as the economic. The role of empowerment in social innovation is well documented [17] and its place in pro-poor tourism initiatives has also recently been explored [5]. This is where effective, theoretically aligned evaluation approaches centred within social impact measurement best practice can be impactful, by supporting the use of impact metrics that capture real impact over time, in a way that empowers beneficiaries [10].

### 2.1. Conceptualising a Social Impact Measurement Approach

The limitations outlined above show that the fundamental issue with current pro-poor tourism impact evaluations, is the lack of robust theoretical approaches to measurement, and clear frameworks or guidelines as to what should be measured. As Hazenberg et al. [5] noted, pro-poor tourism can be viewed as a form of social innovation that seeks to empower individuals or communities. Viewed through a social innovation lens, pro-poor tourism becomes a means to reconfigure societal structures, reshape institutions and empower the disadvantaged [17, 18].

Social impact measurement is definitionally ambiguous in itself [19, 20], but can be defined as follows:

*'The reflection of social outcomes as measurements, both long-term and short-term, adjusted for the effects achieved by others (alternative attribution), for effects that would have happened anyway (deadweight), for negative consequences (displacement), and for effects declining over time (drop-off)'* [21].

McLoughlin et al. [22] identified the need to measure outputs (easy to measure programme achievements similar to key performance indicators, such as the number of beneficiaries supported); outcomes (the softer benefits accrued by individuals such as improved wellbeing); and impacts (the wider impact to society of the outputs and outcomes achieved, such as reduced healthcare spending). What social impact measurement allows for is a mechanism to understand holistic impact across a programme or venture, in this case a pro-poor tourism innovation, that allow for a 'whole picture' approach to be developed as discussed earlier [10].

However, if we are to conceptualise pro-poor tourism as a social innovation as advocated by Hazenberg et al. [5], then issues central to social innovation such as empowerment, institutional and social change, as well as inequality, must also be considered within this [17, 18]. The notion of social impact measurement as a form of empowerment is not new, and has been explored previously, but there are also ethical concerns around how such measurement impacts programme beneficiary communities [10]. Indeed, the standardisation of impact measurement over time and the isomorphic pressures that this brings, can lead to approaches that are top-down and do not support community-led initiatives sufficiently [23]. This is contradictory to the idea of impact measurement, and concurrently pro-poor tourism, as a means of empowerment [24]. Similar criticisms have been made in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals agenda and its focus on measurable KPIs [25].

For social impact measurement to be truly beneficial and support empowerment, approaches need to ensure that frameworks are coproduced with input from a plurality of stakeholders involved in the programme or venture (including beneficiaries) [26]. However, this needs to be theoretically embedded in wider social theories in order for the impact measurement to adhere holistically to the above challenges. The question here is which theoretical approaches provide this for those seeking to understand the impact of pro-poor tourism? The current paper suggests that wider social impact measurement theory can be bolstered with a dual approach that is centred on empowerment and social capital. A nexus of ethical social impact measurement, empowerment and social capital, allows pro-poor tourism scholars to design measurement frameworks that provide holistic, ecosystem-wide evidence whilst also supporting poorer communities and ensuring their voice is heard in the measurement and evidence. As a form of social innovation, it provides a mechanism to ensure that communities are genuinely empowered and given voice, whilst being involved in decision-making structures [7, 17, 18]. Social impact measurement therefore provides scholars with the opportunity to develop evidence that can allow for the rethinking of pro-poor tourism approaches [14].

## 2.2. Economic Wellbeing, Empowerment, Digital Divides and Social Capital

Empowerment can be conceptualised as a tiered process whereby individuals, organisations and the communities that they are embedded within [27], are structured in a manner not dissimilar to the output/outcome (individual/organisation) and impact (community) levels of social impact measurement. In pro-poor tourism this becomes not just about economic wellbeing, albeit wellbeing does remain an important part of any evaluation framework [including wage levels, cost of living, career development, job security, and relative inequality [28], but also ensuring that individuals have improved wellbeing and self-efficacy, that communities are more cohesive and that the poorer beneficiaries that are the target of such interventions are integrated into decision-making structures. Understanding poorer communities' ability to be involved in decisions such as resource allocation, governance structures and their role in product/service delivery and local narratives is critical [29]. Without these additional factors, it is likely that economic gains are short-term and that much of the money that comes into regions does not reach those poorer communities, exacerbating inequality [9, 14].

A critical, yet frequently overlooked dimension of empowerment in pro-poor tourism, especially when viewed as a social innovation, is the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and digital platforms [30, 31, 32, 33]. While current evaluations focus on income, they often fail to measure the 'digital divide' that restricts marginalised communities from participating directly in the tourism value chain [32, 33]. Research suggests that ICTs are not merely operational tools but vital mechanisms for empowerment and social inclusion [34]. By adopting digital tools, local communities can bypass traditional intermediaries, retain a higher share of value and gain direct control over their destination image, a key component of the 'agency' this framework prioritizes [35, 36]. However, while 'smart tourism' concepts are applied to urban destinations, they are rarely adapted for poverty alleviation in rural contexts, leaving pro-poor initiatives technologically disenfranchised [37, 38]. Integrating technology into the evaluation framework offers a more robust measure of social impact [39]. For instance, digital literacy acts as a proxy for community resilience [40], while access to digital platforms serves as an indicator of market power and independence [41]. Therefore, any theory-driven evaluation must assess whether pro-poor tourism initiatives transfer not just capital, but also the technological capability to innovate and compete. Empirical studies in China confirm that unlike cognitive lock-in, technological path dependence positively correlates with pro-poor tourism performance, suggesting that digital infrastructure is a critical asset for long-term poverty alleviation [42].

Whilst empowerment is key, there also needs to be a focus on social capital and the community cohesion that this can bring. Social capital was identified by Tao and Wall [43] as an integral element within the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach [44]. Social capital has been shown to have three distinct levels, bonding (links between similar community members such as family and friends); bridging (links between wider societal groups) and linking (connections between people at different societal levels or outside of the community) [45]. Certainly, in a pro-poor tourism setting focused on socially innovative ventures that empower, bridging and linking social capital will likely be more important. Of course we are not arguing that building on intra-community trust (bonding social capital) is not important; indeed this can still be measured, but rather that the increase of bridging and linking social capital will be more likely to create sustainable change in societal structures and equality. Indicators here that would be of interest include inclusiveness in pro-poor tourism initiatives, community enterprise collaborations and enhanced mechanisms for conflict resolution within communities to enhance cohesion.

Together, these dimensions highlight the need for a multidimensional evaluation framework capable of capturing economic development, empowerment, and social capital within pro-poor tourism initiatives. This will now be explored.

### 3. A Pro-poor Tourism Social Impact Framework

When developing a framework for social impact measurement in the pro-poor tourism field, scholars need to consider what the appropriate areas of measurement are, and whether quantitative or qualitative measures are most appropriate. In all likelihood, a mixed-methods approach would offer the most appropriate approach, blending measurable change in the form of outputs and outcomes (through surveys and wider economic or community data), whilst also allowing for narratives to be gathered through interviews or other measures, to explore and explain the mechanisms of change within communities in order to understand the social innovations at the heart of pro-poor tourism [5, 22, 46]. Such a mix of data can enable not just longitudinal change to be captured in terms of economic development or softer outcomes like improved wellbeing, but also wider issues of identity, agency and power that are central to social innovation [17, 18]. Indeed, to move towards impact measurement in pro-poor tourism along these lines, would align with the strong tradition of social innovation, centred on collaboration, ideation, empowerment and change [47].

Wider government data on areas such as healthcare, employment, education and economic development are also important. Embedding this within a coproduced,

participatory research approach is also crucial in ensuring bottom-up relevance, involving individuals from the poorer communities of focus to shape the definition of output, outcome and impact indicators [13]. Whilst the current paper is not focused on providing an exploration of participatory research, it is perhaps worth briefly noting key factors related to this area. Participatory research has been noted as particularly impactful in reshaping institutions and directly transforming lives [48], which given the focus here on pro-poor tourism as a social innovation is quite pertinent. This is an area that has already seen scholarly attention in tourism, especially around participatory approaches, community governance, (as examples, see: [49, 50]), whilst participatory approaches in evaluation more generally is a well-researched field (as examples, see: [51, 52]). It is important to flag participatory approaches here as an important element in social impact measurement approaches to pro-poor tourism, but as this is not the core focus of the paper, it is left to readers to explore these areas further.

Table 1 below outlines the indicative social impact measurement framework for pro-poor tourism, centred on the areas identified earlier in the paper, including economic development, empowerment and social capital. This is based upon both the wider literature review that we have conducted in the development of this paper, as well as our extensive experience of social impact measurement in relation to social innovation. Furthermore, the identification of the thematic areas of economic development, empowerment and social capital, are grounded in both the prior literature in pro-poor tourism, and the wider social innovation literature, as key underpinners of change/impact. The authors do not posit this as a final framework, rather as an indicative starting point that pro-poor tourism initiatives or ventures can build on to understand the impact of the work been done in poorer communities. Adoption of such an approach, grounded in social impact measurement, social innovation, empowerment and social capital theories, allows for the holistic approach to understanding pro-poor tourism's impact to be undertaken.

Table 1. Core areas for social impact measurement in pro-poor tourism. See the Appendix

It should be noted that Table 1 is not presented as a final checklist of impacts to be measured in pro-poor tourism initiatives/programmes, or indeed in wider tourism interventions. Rather, this is presented as a guiding framework of the kind of outputs, outcomes and impacts areas that can be present. What is more important is that researchers and practitioners in the field, identify relevant outputs, outcomes and impacts for their own projects that are aligned with the thematic model of the table, modelled on economic development, empowerment and social capital. However, where our suggested indicator areas are

applicable, they can be adopted and following this suitable measures identified for capturing these changes.

#### 4. Conclusion: Rethinking Impact for a Fairer Tourism Future

The key argument of the current paper is that without theory driven, socially innovative and community led evaluation frameworks, pro-poor tourism risks becoming a technocratic development tool that is useful for certain stakeholders, but that does not provide a genuine mechanism for poverty alleviation, social justice or sustainability. Current evaluation practices are short-term and dominated by economic KPIs, whilst failing to adequately capture the complex social processes that underpin pro-poor tourism programmes/ventures. This means that it becomes difficult to understand whether pro-poor tourism genuinely reduces inequality, empowers communities and improves social capital and wellbeing. For scholars, practitioners and policy-makers, this limits our understanding of the sector.

By building on the work of Herzenberg et al.'s [5] work to post pro-poor tourism as a social innovation, the current paper has sought to extend this by demonstrating the need to understand social innovation processes through effective and ethical social impact measurement. The proposed framework presented in Table 1 seeks to move beyond merely using economic indicators, to also understand wider social impacts related to broader theoretical concepts of empowerment and social capital. Crucially, the framework also recognizes the pivotal role of technology, asserting that in the modern era, digital inclusion is a prerequisite for economic and social empowerment. By seeking to develop evaluation frameworks that capture this social impact, the researcher argues that mixed-methods approaches that are anchored in measuring areas such as wellbeing, self-efficacy, social capital, governance participation and community cohesion, provide a better measure of pro-poor tourism performance. Such an approach enables a “whole picture” understanding of impact [10], acknowledging both intended and unintended consequences of tourism interventions.

The paper also has wider implications beyond theory, especially for policy-makers or practitioners. Indeed, in suggesting such a holistic approach to impact measurement centred on empowerment and social capital, the research suggests that there is a need to move-on from pure economic return on investment models to an approach centred on equity and empowerment. Further, when seeking to use tourism as part of an international development agenda, stakeholders should seek to coproduce participatory research/evaluation designs with local communities in order to embed community-defined indicators into project design, and to allow local priorities and lived experiences to shape how success is defined and

measured. This can in-turn strengthen community partnerships, enhance legitimacy, and identify opportunities for more inclusive practice across the tourism industry. This is an area that practitioners and policy-makers can collaborate with researchers on, both in terms of mapping suitable measurement indices for the three thematic areas identified here and the outputs, outcomes and impacts within them, as well as in testing these out in the field. Indeed, we would argue that co-research and coproduction projects focused on this development would warrant an excellent stream of further research.

Ultimately, rethinking how impact is measured is central to the future credibility and effectiveness of pro-poor tourism. Theory-driven evaluation not only enhances accountability but also aligns measurement with transformative goals, ensuring that pro-poor tourism contributes meaningfully to a fairer, more inclusive, and resilient tourism future. Social impact measurement approaches, when embedded in participatory research designs and aligned with social indicators grounded in empowerment and social capital, can provide a lens for future evaluation. In such an approach, effective impact measurement becomes more than just an evaluation mechanism, rather it is a tool to support the development of socially innovative pro-poor tourism interventions, rather than current approaches that act merely to evidence the efficacy of sustainable development panaceas.

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## APPENDIX

Table 1. Core areas for social impact measurement in Pro-poor tourism

Area	Output	Outcome	Impact
<i>Economic Development</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Income generated</li> <li>Wages vs. cost of living</li> <li>Job security (staff turnover)</li> <li>Local supplier integration</li> <li>Income retained locally</li> <li>Number of businesses with online booking capability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Life satisfaction</li> <li>Financial resilience</li> <li>Self-efficacy</li> <li>Entrepreneurial orientation</li> <li>Reduced commission paid to intermediaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Income inequality</li> <li>Reduced welfare dependency</li> <li>Local Gross Domestic Product</li> <li>Taxation payments</li> <li>Market independence / Direct market access</li> </ul>
<i>Empowerment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diversity in ventures</li> <li>Beneficiaries in decision-making positions/structures</li> <li>Community representation</li> <li>Training provided</li> <li>Digital literacy training hours delivered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-efficacy</li> <li>Wellbeing</li> <li>Locus of control</li> <li>Cultural capital</li> <li>Enhanced qualifications</li> <li>Ability to manage online reputation/reviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Career progression</li> <li>Educational attainment</li> <li>Social mobility</li> <li>Improved earnings</li> <li>Gender/class equity</li> <li>Digital sovereignty (Control over destination image)</li> </ul>
<i>Social Capital</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inclusiveness in pro-poor tourism initiatives</li> <li>Community enterprise collaborations</li> <li>Conflict resolution mechanisms</li> <li>Community meetings</li> <li>Enhanced access to healthcare</li> <li>Creation of digital community networks (e.g., WhatsApp groups for coordination)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community cohesion</li> <li>Social networks</li> <li>Bonding, bridging &amp; linking social capital</li> <li>Health locus of control</li> <li>Increased connectivity with global peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced crime</li> <li>Reduced health problems</li> <li>Reduced social exclusion</li> <li>Global digital integration</li> </ul>

**Nb.** Please note, the relationships between the above listed outputs, outcomes and impacts are not linear and are merely presented here as indicative areas of focus for researchers looking to operationalise social impact measurement in pro-poor tourism.