

# Tourism-led economic transformation in developing countries: A systematic literature review

## Turizmusvezérelt gazdasági átalakulás a fejlődő országokban: Szisztematikus irodalmi áttekintés

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Tourism-led economic transformation induces structural change in developing economies, enhancing productivity and diversification. This PRISMA-based systematic review analyzed 28 peer-reviewed articles (2010–2024). Findings reveal that transformation emerges from a complex ecosystem integrating governance quality, institutional capacity, tourism resources, infrastructure and host community attitudes, rather than governance alone. Critically, transformation requires deliberate reinvestment of tourism revenues and strengthened backward linkages with local sectors. Three spatial patterns emerge, including enclave economies (e.g., Caribbean islands) with high leakage, linkage-rich systems (e.g., Vietnam) exhibiting deep local integration, and stagnant models (e.g., Sub-Saharan Africa) showing limited structural change despite visitor growth.

A turizmusvezérelt gazdasági átalakulás szerkezeti változást idéz elő a fejlődő országokban, hozzájárulva a termelékenység javulásához és a gazdasági diverzifikációhoz. A PRISMA-módszertant követő szisztematikus szakirodalmi áttekintés 28, 2010 és 2024 között megjelent, lektorált tanulmányt dolgozott fel. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a strukturális átalakulás nem önmagában a kormányzás minőségének függvénye, hanem több tényező együttes hatásaként alakul: meghatározó szerepe van az intézményi kapacitásnak, a turisztikai erőforrásoknak, az infrastrukturális ellátottságnak, valamint a helyi közösségek attitűdjének. Kritikus jelentőségű, hogy a tartós gazdaságszerkezeti változashoz elengedhetetlen a turizmusból származó bevételek célzott visszaforgatása, valamint a helyi ágazatokkal való visszacsatolási kapcsolatok megerősítése. A vizsgált szakirodalom alapján három térbeli mintázat rajzolódik ki: a magas gazdasági szivárgással jellemezhető enklávégazdaságok (például Karib-szigetek); a helyi gazdaságba mélyen beágyazott, erős ágazati kapcsolatokban gazdag rendszerek (például Costa Rica és Vietnam); valamint a stagnáló modellek (például Szubszaharai Afrika), ahol a látogatószám növekedése ellenére is korlátozott marad a gazdaságszerkezeti átalakulás.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism-led economic transformation refers to a fundamental and sustainable restructuring of a

national or regional economy (LI et al. 2025), where the expansion of tourism activities serves as the primary catalyst for shifting the productive base away from traditional sectors, as countries have typically relied on low productivity agricultural or extractive activities, such as subsistence farming. With a tourism-led economic transformation, a nation transitions to higher-productivity and globally competitive activities (SOLARIN et al. 2024), generating broad-based benefits for society. Tourism-led economic transformation differs from general tourism development. General tourism development is typically represented by

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an isolated resort community or episodic service provision with limited connection to other parts of the local market. In contrast, a tourism-led economic transformation is deeply integrated into the country's economic structure. It has extensive backward and forward linkages with local agriculture, manufacturing, and construction. Furthermore, this transformation often leads to an increase in local entrepreneurship, supplier relationships, and the development of specialized skill sets and institutional capacities that also support non-tourism sectors.

Moreover, tourism-led economic transformation differs from pure economic growth, which can be achieved by increasing visitor numbers without structural change, by demonstrating significant changes in the structure of the country's economy sectoral changes, labor productivity trajectories, export sophistication, and overall level of economic diversification. These structural changes result in less reliance on foreign capital to drive long-term economic development (LEJÁRRAGA-WALKENHORST 2013), and reduced exposure to international shocks. Thus, tourism-led economic transformation positions tourism as an active agent for structural change in a developing country's position within the global value chain, provided that the appropriate policies, institutions, and environmental context are available to transform the economic rents generated by tourism into productive capabilities and inclusive development outcomes (KERSAN-ŠKABIĆ 2024).

The issue of tourism-led economic transformation is of great importance for developing countries, given the structural challenges that hinder traditional development paths, as most of these countries suffer from a weak industrial base, lack of productive capital, and the spread of disguised unemployment in the agricultural sector, which makes tourism an attractive alternative that requires lower initial investments compared to heavy industry (CASTILHO-FUINHAS 2025) however, this attractiveness is accompanied at the same time by risks of economic dependency and external dominance (CHAPERON-BRAMWELL 2013), as excessive reliance on volatile international demand may reinforce neo-colonial patterns of exploitation and create isolated tourist enclaves that do not contribute to comprehensive local development (CASTILHO-FUINHAS 2025). Empirical evidence reveals highly divergent outcomes across geographical contexts: while Costa Rica and Vietnam demonstrate successful integration through strong backward linkages and pro-poor distributional effects (DUIM-CAALDERS

2008), Caribbean island nations and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa exhibit persistent enclave formations, substantial revenue leakages, and elite capture of benefits that constrain broad-based welfare gains (FERGUSON 2011). These disparities underscore that tourism's developmental potential is contingent upon specific institutional and spatial configurations rather than automatic.

Despite the growing academic interest in tourism economics over the past three decades, the literature examining tourism as a genuine catalyst for structural economic transformation remains fragmented, conceptually ambiguous, and methodologically heterogeneous, creating a critical knowledge gap that this systematic review seeks to address. Existing studies present a paradoxical landscape, while numerous econometric studies affirm the positive correlation between tourism receipts and GDP growth (CHEN 2010, KHOSHNEVIS YAZDI et al. 2017), other studies caution against *the illusion of development*, highlighting persistent enclave formations, substantial revenue leakages, and limited backward linkages (BROHMAN 1996, AKAMA-KIETI 2007), which constrain broad-based welfare gains. Furthermore, the mediating role of institutional quality, governance arrangements, and policy configurations remains undertheorized and empirically underspecified, with limited comparative analysis illuminating why seemingly similar tourism booms yield divergent developmental trajectories across different national contexts a gap insufficiently addressed in existing Central European tourism research literature. While rural tourism is considered a tool for local development in post-socialist transition contexts (KISS 2001), the specific dynamics of structural economic transformation in developing economies remain insufficiently explored in this regional literature.

Against this backdrop, this systematic literature review pursues three distinct, interrelated objectives. First, to synthesize and critically appraise the empirical evidence on the mechanisms through which tourism expansion translates or fails to translate into structural economic change, distinguishing between transient growth episodes and sustained structural transformation. Second, to identify the contingent conditions (institutional, spatial, and policy-related) under which tourism serves as an engine versus an obstacle to broad-based economic transformation, with specific attention to regional variations between enclave-dependent, linkage-rich, and stagnant development models. Third, to elucidate how institutional architectures and policy interventions mediate

these outcomes, thereby informing evidence-based strategies for harnessing tourism potential in developing countries.

## 2. Methodology

The PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) protocol was adopted as the guiding framework for this systematic review, given its established capacity to minimize subjective bias through transparent, pre-defined procedures for study selection, data extraction, and synthesis (MOHER et al. 2009). To ensure comprehensive yet rigorous coverage of the literature, the Scopus database was chosen as the primary data source. Compared with Google Scholar which encompasses substantial volumes of unverified grey literature Scopus provides access to peer-reviewed, high-quality publications indexed in reputable academic journals (SARKIS-ONOFRE et al. 2021). Furthermore, unlike Web of Science, which concentrates predominantly on science and technology disciplines, Scopus offers broader interdisciplinary coverage spanning social sciences, humanities, and tourism studies (ESTEVAO-COSTA 2020). An additional practical advantage of Scopus is its functionality for exporting bibliographic records directly into Microsoft Excel, thereby streamlining the systematic screening and eligibility assessment processes.

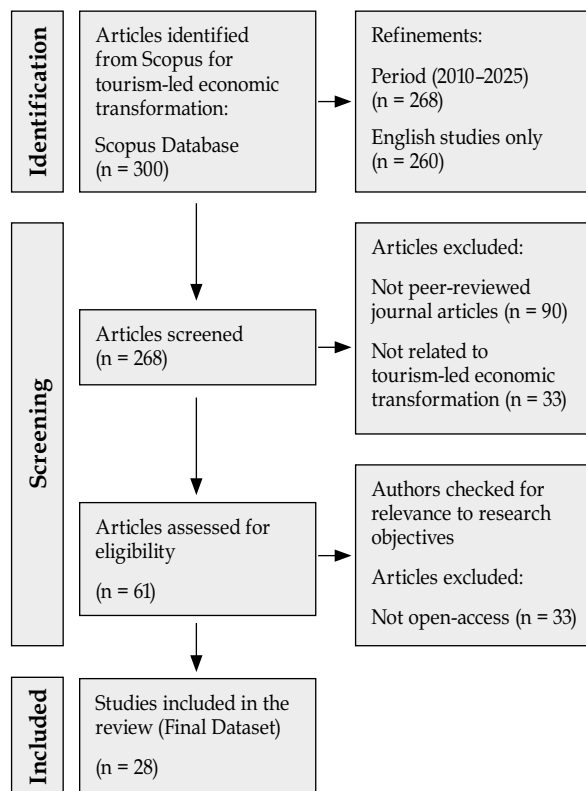
Given the study’s focus on tourism-led economic transformation in developing country contexts, the initial search strategy was designed to capture the intersection of tourism development, economic outcomes, and developing nation settings. The specific search string employed was: (“Tourism-led growth” or “Tourism economic transformation” or “Tourism development”) and (“Economic growth” or “Economic development” or “Structural transformation”). This combination of keywords was intentionally broad to ensure retrieval of diverse studies examining how tourism drives economic change, including sectoral upgrading, employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and structural economic shifts. To avoid excluding relevant research, the search was not confined to specific tourism typologies; rather, it encompassed various forms including sustainable tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, and community-based tourism where economic transformation processes are frequently analyzed within broader developmental frameworks.

The systematic review followed a structured, transparent protocol for selecting and analyzing literature pertinent to tourism-led economic

transformation in developing countries. The Scopus database was selected for its comprehensive, cross-disciplinary coverage of peer-reviewed academic publications spanning tourism, development economics, and regional studies. The initial database search yielded 300 records. These results were subsequently refined through a multi-stage screening process applying pre-established inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure both scholarly rigor and topical relevance (PAHLEVAN-SHARIF et al. 2019). First, the publication timeframe was restricted to 2010–2024 to prioritize contemporary scholarship reflecting recent theoretical and empirical developments in tourism-economic research, reducing the dataset to 268 articles. Second, only English-language publications were retained to ensure consistency in data interpretation and synthesis (ESTEVAO - COSTA 2020), resulting in 260 articles. Third, the selection was further narrowed to peer-reviewed journal articles and review papers that had achieved final publication status, thereby excluding conference

Figure 1

**Systematic review flowchart: Identification, screening, and selection of studies on tourism-led economic development**



Source: own elaboration

proceedings, book chapters, and preprints to safeguard academic reliability. Following this stage, 170 articles remained. Fourth, to enhance transparency and facilitate access to primary sources, only open-access publications were retained, yielding 61 eligible studies. Finally, manual screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts against the core inclusion criteria focusing explicitly on tourism's role in driving macro- or micro-level economic transformation within developing country contexts resulted in a final dataset of 28 studies for detailed analysis.

These 28 studies constitute the empirical foundation of this systematic review. Each article was critically examined following PRISMA guidelines (PAHLEVAN-SHARIF et al. 2019), with evaluation focusing on several key aspects, including the type of economic mechanism involved, the geographical and institutional context, the methodological approach, and any documented limitations. This framework guided the extraction of evidence, which is synthesized in the Results and Findings chapter, where findings are illustrated with specific regional examples to link theoretical mechanisms to empirical practice. The complete screening and selection process is visually summarized in a PRISMA Flow Diagram in *Figure 1*.

### 3. Results and Findings

#### 3.1. DIRECT ECONOMIC MECHANISMS

The empirical literature (FABER-GAUBERT 2019, NUNKOO et al. 2020) examining the direct economic mechanisms of tourism-led economic transformation reveals a complex set of outcomes that defy simplistic generalizations, with foreign exchange earnings constituting the most consistently documented benefit (BEHURIA 2025), yet simultaneously a subject of growing debate. While cross-country econometric analyses affirm that tourism revenues improve balance-of-payments positions in developing economies, particularly for small island states and coastal nations, substantial foreign exchange leakages embedded in all-inclusive resort models have been documented in destinations such as Mauritius and select Caribbean islands (SEALY 2018). In these enclave contexts, transnational hotel chains repatriate profits, import food and construction materials, and employ expatriate managerial staff, thereby reducing net foreign exchange contributions to levels that call into question tourism's presumed comparative advantage over traditional exports.

Conversely, linkage-rich models demonstrate superior retention of tourism expenditures. Costa Rica's deliberate farmer to hotel supply chain programs, for instance, have successfully enhanced backward linkages with domestic agriculture, embedding foreign exchange earnings more deeply into local productive structures (ROGERSON 2012, TELFER-WALL 2000). Similarly, quality certification schemes and targeted SME development in Vietnam and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa reveal that deliberate policy interventions can strengthen tourism multipliers, though outcomes remain contingent on local supplier capacity and institutional support (NORBU et al. 2021, LIU 2022).

Employment creation emerges as a second direct mechanism, with studies documenting substantial labor absorption capacities, particularly for women and youth marginalized from formal labor markets in Tunisia and Jamaica (JACKMAN 2022, SUN et al. 2022). However, the quality of these opportunities remains contested. Longitudinal evidence from Mexico and the Dominican Republic reveals widespread informality, unstable contractual arrangements, significant gender wage disparities, and pronounced seasonality that generates income volatility. Regarding the "Dutch Disease" hypothesis, Croatia exemplifies risks of premature deindustrialization, where tourism booms coincided with real exchange rate appreciation and manufacturing sector contraction (BROZ-DUBRAVČIĆ 2011). In contrast, Slovenia and Costa Rica have mitigated these risks through targeted industrial policies that maintain export competitiveness alongside tourism expansion (HOLZNER 2011, INCHAUSTI-SINTES 2024).

Collectively, these direct economic mechanisms show that tourism's ability to drive structural transformation depends on the specific spatial and institutional configurations through which foreign exchange is retained. There are enclave economies characterized by high leakage and limited local integration, linkage-rich systems exhibiting strong backward connections with domestic suppliers, and stagnant models showing persistent revenue volatility without structural change.

#### 3.2. STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION PATHWAYS

Beyond direct economic mechanisms, tourism expansion drives deeper structural transformation pathways that reshape sectoral composition, labor markets, and human capital in developing economies (KHAN et al. 2020), with significant variation depending on institutional and policy

contexts. In Vietnam and select Sub-Saharan African destinations such as Ghana, evidence shows substantial growth in the services sector alongside tourism development, where services' share of GDP has exceeded 70% in major urban hubs (DOSSOU et al. 2024), though this trajectory resembles the enclave pattern observed in Croatia and Greece where service growth coincided with manufacturing decline and increased exposure to external shocks, contrasting with the more balanced diversification seen in Costa Rica. These transformations are also reflected in accelerated rural-to-urban migration to tourism hubs observed in Tanzania's Lake Victoria zone and China's Zhangjiajie region (SONG et al. 2025) and rising female participation in accommodation and food services documented in Jamaica and Tunisia, enhancing economic autonomy while being linked to low-wage, precarious employment. At the human capital level, Rwanda and Botswana demonstrate successful skills acquisition in languages and service management that improve employment prospects, whereas stagnant models in select Caribbean islands and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa reveal limited structured training and persistent brain drain (BEHURIA 2025).

Entrepreneurship and small enterprises within tourism value chains emerge as promising transformation pathways particularly in linkage-rich contexts such as Ghana and Indonesia, where targeted SME development has supported local value capture, potentially supporting broad-based development when backed by appropriate policies, though these outcomes remain contingent on governance quality and remain largely underdeveloped in stagnant enclave economies dependent on transnational corporations (ROGERSON 2012, TELFER-WALL 2000).

### 3.3. SPATIAL AND DISTRIBUTIONAL DIMENSIONS

The spatial and distributional dimensions of tourism-led transformation reveal a tension between economic growth and developmental equity. In Egypt, tourism investment concentrates overwhelmingly in Luxor and Sharm El-Sheikh, creating pronounced development corridors along the Red Sea and Nile while peripheral regions in Upper Egypt remain structurally marginalized, deepening regional disparities that stimulate rural-urban migration to these coastal and heritage centers (LIN et al. 2023). Similarly, in Tunisia, the stark contrast between developed northern coastal zones and the underserved

southern hinterlands illustrates how tourism can reinforce core-periphery structures when spatial planning remains uncoordinated (MEDDEB 2021, BOUSNINA 2023), whereas targeted rural tourism strategies in regions like Bali's interior villages and Mexico's Yucatán hinterland demonstrate that spatial diffusion becomes feasible when adequate infrastructure and institutional capacity are present (CARTE et al. 2010).

Regarding income distribution, while tourism may generate benefits for low-income groups through employment opportunities and informal activities, the phenomenon of elite capture manifests distinctly across varying contexts in GCC countries (Gulf Cooperation Council), concentrated land ownership and investment privileges have allowed dominant elites to control high-value tourism assets, thereby limiting trickle-down effects to local communities studies (CASTILHO-FUINHAS 2025, GUO et al. 2026). This pattern contrasts with experiences in Turkey's Mediterranean coast, where rising property values in Antalya and Bodrum have triggered residential displacement among traditional populations (KESKINOK 2012), commodifying cultural spaces and generating social tensions that undermine long-term sustainable development foundations. Furthermore, land-use changes associated with unchecked resort expansion in Goa (India) and Mombasa (Kenya) demonstrate how speculative real estate markets can displace indigenous communities from their traditional territories (ROUTLEDGE 2001, KARIUKI-NG'ETICH 2016), reinforcing patterns of spatial inequality that persist despite aggregate economic growth indicators (ALNAFISAH 2025).

### 3.4. INSTITUTIONAL AND GOVERNANCE FACTORS

The institutional and governance framework constitutes a decisive factor in determining whether tourism expansion leads to comprehensive economic transformation or reinforces patterns of inequality. When strong state capacity and effective policy coordination are present, as evidenced in Botswana's centralized investment promotion frameworks and Rwanda's strategic coordination of tourism revenues, structural transformation is facilitated through deliberate diversification strategies that avoid the enclave trap (LIN et al. 2023). In contrast, fragmented governance and weak regulatory enforcement in Kazakhstan's Almaty region and select urban peripheries tend to undermine investor confidence and limit developmental benefits, perpetuating dependency

dynamics rather than fostering linkage-rich development (SOEMITRO-ADNYANA 2016, SAKYPBEK et al. 2025).

Public-private partnerships have produced divergent outcomes across developing contexts: whereas well-managed collaborations in Southeast Asian transition economies demonstrate potential for coordinated infrastructure development, poorly designed arrangements in Tanahampo (Bali, Indonesia) resulted in the exclusion of local fishing communities and the creation of unsustainable fiscal burdens that constrained inclusive development (WESTOBY et al. 2021). Furthermore, corruption represents a major risk by distorting investment allocation and eroding institutional trust, particularly evident in governance-deficient environments where opaque land titling and discretionary licensing prevail, undermining the potential for productive backward linkages (KARADAG et al. 2025), whereas international organizations exert a dual influence sometimes supporting sustainable development through technical assistance in Eastern European transition economies, yet at other times imposing structural adjustment constraints on highly indebted small island states, thereby affecting the achievement of inclusive tourism development.

### 3.5. SUSTAINABILITY AND LONG-TERM VIABILITY

Sustainability and long-term viability of tourism-led economic transformation face mounting challenges (NI et al. 2026) across environmental, economic, and cultural dimensions, threatening the foundations upon which developmental aspirations rest and necessitating comprehensive governmental responses that transcend traditional growth metrics. Environmental constraints manifest starkly in the breaching of carrying capacity limits at popular tourist destinations (TELLO CHAN et al. 2025a, 2025b). Climate change exposure poses existential threats, as witnessed in low-lying island nations and mountain economies dependent on skiing, where extreme weather events disrupt operations and demand costly investments. Furthermore, the Covid19 pandemic severely tested economic resilience, exposing the fragility of tourism-dependent economies such as Aruba, Macau, and Seychelles, which experienced GDP contractions exceeding 20% in 2020 (KHAN et al. 2020), demonstrating that excessive reliance on a single sector creates major economic volatility akin to the “resource curse” and calling for renewed attention to diversification strategies.

Cultural exploitation represents a subtler yet consequential threat to long-term sustainability (BAI-WENG 2023), as the staged performance of heritage and the marketing of heritage sites to meet tourist expectations may erode intrinsic cultural values and the social cohesion of host communities that constitute the destination’s unique distinctiveness.

## Conclusion

This review demonstrates that tourism can contribute to achieving economic transformation in developing countries, but it is not an automatic outcome of increasing tourist arrivals. The findings reveal that transformation operates through distinct economic mechanisms, manifests across three divergent spatial patterns: enclave economies, linkage-rich systems, and stagnant models depending on governance quality, and is critically mediated by institutional capacity and policy coordination. Rather, it is a development pathway that depends on the interaction of public policies, institutional capacities, and the effective utilization of tourism resources to convert potential into broad-based productive and social gains. The findings highlight a complex balance between tourism’s positive aspects, such as generating foreign exchange, creating employment opportunities, and enhancing productivity, and potential risks, including weak local economic linkages and revenue leakages, which may limit the achievement of inclusive development. The review also indicates that the success of tourism in supporting structural transformation requires adopting comprehensive policies that go beyond merely increasing visitor numbers. Evidence from Vietnam demonstrates that deliberate strategies strengthening backward linkages, developing SME capacity, and ensuring equitable benefit distribution can foster linkage-rich transformation, whereas enclave and stagnant models lacking such coordination failed to achieve structural change. Such policies should strengthen linkages with the local economy, develop workforce skills, improve the investment environment, and ensure a fair distribution of economic benefits.

Global crises, such as the Covid19 pandemic and the growing impacts of climate change, have exposed the fragility of economies heavily reliant on tourism, particularly enclave-dependent destinations such as Aruba, Macau, and Seychelles, yet they have simultaneously opened opportunities to redirect the sector toward more diversified, sustainable, and resilient development models.

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