

## Analyzing the Issues and Challenges of Homestays for Sustainable Tourism Development in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills

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**Abstract:** Homestays are an essential component of community-based ecotourism and rural tourism initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable tourism development. It envisages the sustainability principle contributing to the triple bottom line (TBL) framework for increasing tourism benefits to the local community towards poverty alleviation and conservation efforts. Several studies have focused on homestays as a sustainable product of ecotourism and rural tourism development. The purpose of the study is to investigate the issues and challenges of homestays in the Sikkim and Darjeeling hills and their contribution to sustainable tourism development. The study was conducted in selected towns and villages using mixed research methods for data collection and analysis. Percentage and thematic analysis were used in analyzing data. According to the study's findings, homestays face issues and challenges on TBL dimensions of sustainability such as a lack of financial assistance, marketing and promotion, limited local employment, sustainability training, education, and capacity building, cross-cultural conflicts, land degradation, green certification, and inefficient solid waste management, that have hindered their contribution to sustainable tourism development in the region.

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## 1. Introduction

Homestays are a core component of Community-based Ecotourism (CBET) and Rural Tourism initiatives which envisage the threefold principles of economic, social, and ecological sustainability with involvement and ownership of communities in decision-making, improved cross-cultural interaction zones that enhance mutual respect between host-tourists (Reimer and Walter, 2013), provide livelihood opportunities, and encourage sustainable resource use in destinations that would benefit disadvantaged local communities (Pasanchay and Schott, 2021). Rural homestays and community-based ecotourism must be viewed and operated in the context of a broader sustainability framework (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

Sustainable tourism development provides a Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework that emphasizes the importance of integrating economic development goals with environmental conservation and socio-cultural preservation, potentially leading to tourism stakeholders identifying their roles in implementing responsible practices in their day-to-day operations for destination sustainability (Kokkranikal, 2012).

Homestays in support of CBET initiatives can encourage economic incentives and local guardianship towards conservation efforts and access to sustainable use of natural resources (Bhalla *et al.*, 2016). This involves the encouragement of indigenous entrepreneurship, often in the forms of self-employment and small-scale enterprises in the developing world through the effective engagement of local communities (Kokkranikal and Morrison, 2002).

Local governments of Sikkim and Darjeeling hills are leveraging ecotourism initiatives by using rural homestays as an alternative livelihood option for communities, protecting cultural heritage, and funding environmental conservation in adjacent protected and corridor areas of the Kanchenjunga landscape (Green, 2009). Homestays in collaboration with Ngo's have supported community-based ecotourism initiatives and rural tourism development in villages throughout the region through the implementation of responsible tourism practices such as community participation and ownership to disadvantaged indigenous communities in planning and management of tourism activities (Leh and Hamzah, 2012), showcasing the experience of authentic cultural components such as ethnic foods, promotion of handicrafts, organic farming techniques, cultural dance and music etc., capacity building programs for homestay owners and community members, local entrepreneurial development, use of energy saving lights, donations for environmental conservation and solid waste management practices (Peaty, 2009) enhanced direct and indirect livelihood options which have assisted in alleviating poverty and community empowerment in the region (Cajee, 2014).

Previous studies stress that Homestays are an attractive sustainable rural tourism product (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013) but tourism businesses concentrate more on economic dimension. It contradicts the triple bottom line framework (Wise, 2016) as businesses tend to focus more on economic outcomes over social and environmental dimensions. There are various reasons with factors such as cost, lack of government support, and the seasonal nature of business that contribute to difficulties in implementing responsible practices in homestays, which hinder destination sustainability (Frey and George, 2010). Several research focus on homestays as a sustainable product of ecotourism and rural tourism development; moreover, research on homestays' contribution to destination sustainability in the context of the region still needs to be completed. To contribute to the knowledge gap and to capture critical insights into the growing sustainability agenda with the emerging role of the Homestay as a sustainable rural tourism product, the purpose of this research is to identify the issues and challenges of homestays and their contribution to the triple bottom line dimensions for sustainable tourism development in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills.

## **2. Review of Literature**

UN General Assembly agreed to 17 sets of goals with 169 comprehensive targets to be completed by 2030 as part of the sustainable development agenda (UN, 2015). Responsible tourism initiatives implemented through the development of rural sustainable homestays and CBET seeks to further

improve destination sustainability dimensions encouraging responsibility of stakeholders for alleviating poverty and conservation efforts (Mathew and Sreejesh, 2017). Homestays are associated with community-based ecotourism and rural tourism, tourism initiatives indulging in responsible tourism practices and is often used as a development strategy for destination sustainability and quality of life of local communities in the Himalayan region (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013). Homestays are typically small family-owned businesses that cater to tourists interested in traditional and cultural holidays relating to local lifestyles. Homestay programs are typically serviced by local communities who own homes, particularly in rural areas that offer visitors with traditional indigenous cultural experiences and a homely environment (Salleh *et al.*, 2014).

West Bengal Homestay tourism policy and rural tourism development initiatives in Darjeeling hills (Tourism Department, 2017) have impacted the capacity to preserve traditional values and beliefs, conserve the environment, create sustainable livelihood options, promote local handicrafts, enhance stakeholders' and local people's income and capital, and accelerate the production of organic food contributing to sustainable rural tourism development (Rawat, 2019).

The Sikkim Registration of Homestay Establishment Rules 2013, initiated the construction of over 700 homestays in various villages throughout Sikkim, fostering the growth of Sustainable Rural Tourism and CBET in the State (Government of Sikkim, 2018). Sikkim Himalayan Homestays in collaboration with Ecotourism society of Sikkim (ECCOSS) an NGO, have conceptualised the potential, characteristics and cultural components of homestays and developed operation modalities and capacity building programs for local communities (Yadav *et al.*, 2018).

Some research have highlighted the importance of community-based homestays and its contribution to sustainable rural development to gain long term socio-cultural, environmental and economic benefits using a systematic literature review (Janjua *et al.*, 2021) but somehow research on issues and challenges of homestays in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills for destination sustainability needs to be addressed. Exceeding carrying capacity of village and commercialisation of culture (Ranasinghe, 2015), lack of awareness and marketing knowledge, insufficient capital for entrepreneurial opportunities, high dependency of government support, language problems, substandard facilities were some issues and challenges faced by homestays operators (Lim and Lee, 2020).

Therefore, this research will help address the issues and challenges faced by homestays and their increasingly crucial role towards fulfilling the objectives of sustainable tourism development in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills.

### **3. Objectives of the Study**

This study has the following objectives:

- To analyse the contribution of Homestays to Triple Bottom Line sphere for sustainable destination management.
- To assess the trends and range of sustainable homestay-based activities in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills.
- To identify the issues and challenges faced by Homestays towards fulfilling the objectives of sustainable tourism development in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills.

#### 4. Methodology

Mixed research methods were used to understand the research issues better to be investigated. A qualitative approach was used to comprehensively understand the Issues and Challenges of Homestays (Pusiran and Xiao, 2013) and in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews (Khadka *et al.*, 2020). A quantitative approach was used to determine the socio-economic impacts of such initiatives on the local community to measure a large sampling frame.

Purposive sampling was used for data collection, with 151 homestay owners interviewed as respondents from March to December 2021 in selected villages and towns in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. The study area has been selected based on sustainable initiatives implemented by the government in these selected villages and towns. The sample size was selected according to the need for the mixed research method; the data sufficiency has been achieved in 150 homestay owners.

Data were collected with the assistance of eighteen semi-structured questions about the research objectives of this study being asked during the interviews across the study area. Items for the semi-structured questionnaires were extracted from various studies (Ranasinghe, 2015; Lim and Lee, 2020; Janjua *et al.*, 2021; Sood *et al.*, 2017; Peaty, 2009) on issues and challenges of homestays. Data analysis was administered using percentage and thematic analysis.

#### 5. Results

Table 1 infers that the local community in East Sikkim is highly aware and involved in homestay programs, with higher levels of active community participation in decision-making, ownership, local control, empowerment, awareness, and education as a sustainable community-based tourism product as compared to the district of North Sikkim. The table illustrates that there are 4300 homestays in East district of Sikkim, with 2032 rooms available for occupancy, comprising 2083 double rooms and 134 single rooms. North Sikkim comprises of 60 homestays with 225 rooms, 223 double and 4 single rooms with an occupancy capacity of 450. In contrast, 742 local and 143 non-local employees are involved in the homestay business, indicating solid levels of sustainable livelihood opportunities and tourism benefits received particularly by communities of East Sikkim. Homestays have contributed to poverty alleviation through employment and income opportunities and resulted in the empowerment of local communities in Sikkim, which has resulted in the growth of Sustainable rural tourism and community-based ecotourism. Even though most districts in Sikkim have high occupancy capacities, there is a lack of marketing and promotion of sustainable homestays, as well as lower levels of awareness and education imparted to local communities in North Sikkim concerning local ownership, sustainable livelihood opportunities and bottom-to-top active participation in tourism policy planning and decision making, which would contribute to sustainable tourism development.

Table 2 indicates that there are 59 homestays with 1090 rooms, comprising 917 double rooms and 143 single rooms, with a total capacity of 2150 in the Rangli-Rangloit block and Takdah Cantonment rural villages of Darjeeling. The villages of Kalimpong block comprise 41 homestays with 730 rooms, 424 double and 65 single, for an occupancy capacity of 1219. Further, the total number of local employees in the entire rural village of Darjeeling hills comprises 1098 employees and 205 non-local

**Table 1: Capacity of Homestays in Sikkim (Registered & Non-Registered, 2019)**

*Capacity of Homestays in Sikkim (Registered & Non-Registered, 2019)*

Sl. No	Area (District)	Total no. of homestay	Total no. of rooms	Total no. of beds		Total	No. of employees capacity	
				Double	Single		Local	Non-local
1	East	545	2032	2083	134	4300	478	119
2	West	289	857	803	100	1706	130	22
3	North	60	225	223	4	450	45	0
4	South	334	873	858	24	1740	89	2
Total Homestay		1228	3987	3967	262	8196	742	143

*Source:* Department of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Govt of Sikkim

**Table 2: Capacity of Homestays in Darjeeling Hills (Registered & Non-Registered, 2021)**

SL. No	Area (Block)	Total no of Homestay	Total no of Rooms	Total no of Beds		Total Capacity	No of employees	
				Double	Single		local	Non-Local
1.	Rangli- Rangloit Block & Takdah Cantonment	59	1090	917	143	2150	479	97
2	Sittong G.P.C	51	957	632	78	1667	389	63
3	Kalimpong Block	41	730	424	65	1219	230	45
Total Homestay		151	2777	1973	286	5036	1098	205

*Source:* Primary Data Collected through Field Survey

employees. This indicates intense levels of local community ownership, active participation in decision-making, and sustainable livelihood opportunities provided particularly to rural communities in the region. Homestays have contributed to poverty alleviation and empowerment of local communities, which has resulted in the growth of Sustainable rural tourism and community-based ecotourism development in Darjeeling hills. Though the table indicates high carrying capacity levels of homestays, there needs to be quantitative data that measures the contribution of homestays to TBL dimensions of destination sustainability.

**Table 3: Trends and Range of Sustainable Homestay based Activities in Sikkim & Darjeeling Hills**

SL. No	State/ District / Block	Name of Villages	Name of Homestays (Surveyed)	Homestay based Activities
1	North Sikkim	Lachung, Lachen, Passingdong, Lingthem, Mangan, Mangshilla, kabi, Tingwong, Hee-Gyathang, Yumthang Valley	Lazomla Homestay, Soenamla Homestay, Our Guest Camp, Lingthemlyang Homestay, Lachung Khim Homestay, Lachung Sikkim Homestay, Our guest camp Lachung, Bayul Homestay, Keerong Cottages, Delight Royal Lachung, Our Guest Lhakhim homestay, Khenkhim regency, Tenzing's Homestay, Mayalyang Homestay, Suhor Lee Homestay, Rum Lyang Homestay & Others.	Cultural Songs and Dances, Tribal Music and literary Arts, Festive celebrations, local folklores and storytelling, Traditional method of making local butter and cheese. Milking yaks, Paddy Cultivation and Harvesting, Traditional games sports, Collecting and cooking wild edibles, Meeting Traditional healers, learning tribal language, kitchen gardening
2	West Sikkim	Darap, Pelling, Dentam, Yuksom, Rinchenpong, Kaluk, Uttarey, Shreebadam, Okhrey, Hee-Bermoik, Khecheopalri, Kanchendzonga National Park (KNP),	Yuksom Village homestay, Azing model Farmhouse, Chungda Hidden Homestay, Sukhim Homestay, Adhikari Homestay, Daragaon Retreat Gurung Homestay, Cherry village Homestay Resort, Rinchenpong Homestay, Yangsum Heritage Farm, Mandarin village Resort, Ghonday Village Resort, Kaluk Village Resort, Eshab Homestay, Okhrey Village homestay, Royal Barsey Homestay, Step away Chayatal Heritage Homestay, Lalliguras Village Homestay & Others.	Cardamon weeding and harvesting, Kiwi Plantation and plucking, local Tribal cuisine, Star Gazing, ploughing organic fields, Processing Traditional Organic Wine making, Sheep rearing; Evening traditional limboo cultural programme called Chabrung & Dhaan Naach

3	South Sikkim	Kewzing, Ravangla, Kitam Wildlife Sanctuary, Maniram Village, Assangthang, Yangang, Chalamthang, Temi, Turuk, Namchi,	Nolina Boutique Homestay, Chalamthang Homestay, Bon Farmhouse, Dhuni Homestay, Tungna Homestay, Selep Homestay, Chefung Khim Homestay, Green Magpie Homestay, Barbet Homestay, Great Cormorant Homestay, Iora Homestay, Kewzing Village Homestay, Sosing Homestay & Others.	Orchid nursery visit and Flower plantation techniques, Dotho (Sikkimese Hot stone herbal bath) Bird watching, Local Bamboo arts and crafts, Nature Interpretation & Birding Tutoring, Homemade Millet based beverages, Traditional organic wine making, Yoga & Spiritual discourse.
4	East Sikkim	Rumtek, Reymindu Assam linzey, Aritar, Pastanga, Yakten, Phadamchen, Dzuluk, Gnathang Valley, Rongli, Lassing Village Rangpo (Rangpo Khola)	Assamlinzey Homestay, Gnathang Valley Homestay, Rolep Homestay, Woodstock Inn Homestay, Kenjongla Homestay, Rangpo Khola Homestay, Malinggo Homestay, Teen Talley Village Homestay, Pinasha Homestay, Waterfall Homestay & Others.	Cooking traditional Cuisine, Nature Photography, Fishing, Orchid Cultivation & flower show Cultural Dance and Music, Milking cows, Shopping, and education on local handmade souvenirs from the villages
5	Rangli-Rangloit Block & Takdah Cantonment	Bara Mungwa, Chhota Mungwa, Chegra Khasmahal, Kolburg Khasmahal, Rayak Khasmahal, Soriang Khasmahal, Takling Khasmahal, Takdah, Tinchulay	Manjushree Homestay, Bara Mungwa Priya Homestay, Camp five Homestay, Theeng's Homestay, Sherpa Homestay, Go Green Homestay, Camp Inn Rai cottages, Tinchulay Gurung Homestay, RS Homestay, Tinchulay Himalayan Homestay, Kusom Homestay, Tinchuley Dunzom Homestay & Others.	Permaculture Farming, Organic farming using Mulching method, Ethno-medicinal traditions and practices engaged by homestay owners of indigenous groups, Beekeeping, Orange cultivation and plucking,

6	Sitting II & III G.C.P Block	Latpanchar Forest, Toryak Khasmahal, Upper Mamring Khasmahal, Lower Mamring Khasmahal, Ahal Dara, Lanku Khasmahal, Rolak Khasmahal, Selphu Khasmahal	Sitting Homestay, Heritage Homestay, Avacado Homestay, Nature lover Homestay, Latpanchar Hornbillnest Homestay, Latpanchar Homestay, Smile Homes latpanchar homestay, Orange Tree Homestay, Ahal Homestay, Hamro home Sivalik Homestay and Others.	Nature Photography, Beekeeping & Honey Making, Orange Orchard Walks, Butterfly watching, learning traditional methods of Organic farming, Night Tent Camping.
7	Kalimpong Block I & II	Kaffir Khasmahal, Kankebong Khasmahal, Mazeok Forest, Samalbong Khasmahal, Sillery Gaon, Loleygaon, Samthar Khasmahal, Lava Forest & Bazaar, Pedong Khasmahal	Sinchula Homestay, Lava Feathers India Homestay, Misty Mons homestay & Café, Mansovar Homestay, Mayalyang Homestays, Denzong Homestay, Kagay Honeycomb Homestay, Green Valley Homestay, Mount View Nomad Village Homestay Kaffer Homestays, Samthar Homestay, Ammihud Homestay and Others.	Cactus & Orchid Nursery, Nature Photography, Village Walk around the property, Beekeeping & Honey Making, Cooking lessons on traditional food, Night Tent Camping. Cultural Dance and Music

Source: Authors' Own Compilation



Community members of Lingthem, Tingvong, Dentam, Rinchenpong, Toryak, Bara Mungwa, Reymindu, Kewzing, Turuk and Samthar villages of Sikkim and Darjeeling hills are involved in the implementation of various sustainable tourism practices in their homestays such as the traditional method of making local butter and cheese, organic farming, orchid plantations, cardamon cultivation, beekeeping, organic wine and honey making. In the group discussion with local people, they highlighted that they were concerned regarding seasonality, lack of financial support from government and human resources and high risk of operating costs associated with sustainable practices in homestays.

Discussions with homestay owners of Sinchula homestay, Hornbill Nest homestay, Samthar homestay, and Rangpo Khola homestay from various rural villages in the region indicate a lack of effective marketing and promotions on the experiential concept and responsible practices of homestays, as well as low levels of online marketing by destination management organizations in the region.

According to the local self-governing village bodies and tourism associations of Rangli-Rangloitblock, Sitting GPC, Kalimpong block, Rinchenpong, Tingvong, Lingthem, Lachung, and Lachen villages, Covid 19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the tourism industry. Imposed restrictions and stringent health regulations have resulted in a limited tourist inflow that has led to numerous closures of rural homestays, unemployment and income loss, financial difficulties, and operational challenges. Further discussions suggest numerous issues concerning seasonality, lack of training and support for the informal sector, limited employment, free riding and freeloading problems, and a lack of education on sustainability imparted to homestay owners and community members.

In an interview, Mr Rajan Chettri of Nolina Homestay and Mrs Pema Bhutia of Rinchenpong Homestay stated, “We face challenges such as limited employment for locals, problems of pricing caused by leased out homestays by some owners, and cross-cultural conflicts with tourists in terms of misinterpretation of indigenous language, prejudices, and stereotyping of traditional food habits, dance forms, and music.”

Mr Karthok Lepcha, an environmental volunteer and homestay owner of Lingthem, stated that “There is a lack of proper signages, environmentally friendly dustbins, shortage of water refilling points in some homestays, improper vigilance by villages bodies with strict penalties must be imposed on polluters”. Mrs. Deena Gurung, a resident and owner of Gurung homestay in Latpanchar ecotourism village stated that “Rural homestays in Latpanchar village lack awareness on solid waste management, there is lack of infrastructure support like dustbins, collection vehicles, waste collectors. There is also a problem regarding burning solid waste in the landfills”. She further suggests the need to implement green certification programs for homestays as an indicator to encourage environmental and social responsibility, particularly in practices around the periphery of ecotourism zones in the region.

## **6. Discussions**

### ***6.1. Homestays Contribution to Triple Bottom Line (TBL) Sphere for Sustainable Destination Management***

Homestays as a component of CBET have been popularized in Sikkim to provide authentic, transformative, and educational experiences to tourists on the indigenous landscape’s natural and cultural

heritage. The principles of CBET in Sikkim are based on high-value and low environmental impact tourism, encouraging community participation for sustainable destination management. Homestays contribute to the fulfilment of sustainable tourism criteria's encompassing environmental, sociocultural, and economic dimensions (Khamsavay and Christian, 2021).

- Homestays, as a component of CBET, inculcate environmentally friendly practices in actions such as recycling, renewable sources of energy, safe disposal of wastes, environment-friendly structures, and regulating and maintaining carrying capacity. Implementing energy conservation practices and renewable energy use in local homestays is a basis for environmental sustainability (Porwal *et al.*, 2019).
- Homestays enhance prospects for economic multipliers by improving economic linkages, such as sourcing local products and services. It aids as a sustainable livelihood occupation for disadvantaged communities, encouraging community empowerment through business ownership of micro-enterprises, generation of local employment, encouraging social equity by including women and youth, and community participation for economic sustainability (Janjua *et al.*, 2021).
- Homestays showcase traditional aesthetics linked to local architectural and cultural values. It helps in Guest-Host interaction and cross-cultural understanding, cultivating respect among tourists for local culture through the promotion of local handicrafts, ethnic cuisine, weaving, handlooms, and cultural performances while revitalizing community motivation for the protection of indigenous knowledge and preservation of cultural heritage for sociocultural sustainability (Janjua *et al.*, 2021).

## **6.2. Issues and Challenges of Homestays**

### **6.2.1. Issues and Challenges of Homestays for Economic Sustainability in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills**

- **Lack and delayed financial and monetary assistance to Homestays for sustainable development:** Tourism Businesses in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills are vulnerable to seasonality and high risk of costs associated with sustainable practices in homestays. Community members in numerous rural villages of Sikkim (e.g., Lingthem, Tingvong, KabiandYangang villages) lack financial requirements to provide financial assistance from banks/cooperatives for loans. The Skilled Youth Start Up Scheme initiative implemented by the commerce and industries department, Government of Sikkim, intended to generate employment in rural areas; providing a 50% subsidy to below-poverty-line families remains a challenge for most rural community members unwilling or unable to repay the loan amount as per the stipulated period assigned by the Department due to lack of working capital.

The Government of West Bengal has provided incentives with a sum of 1.5 lakhs as financial assistance to eligible homestays for promoting homestay tourism and sustainable occupation of rural communities in the state. The initial capital provided is not sufficient for poor communities in building homestays (e.g., Samalbong, Lanku, Rolak, Toryak and Samthar Villages in Darjeeling hills) based on standards prescribed in the West Bengal homestay tourism policy, 2017. This

indicates issues regarding the effective implementation of financial and monetary assistance from such initiatives.

- **Marketing and promotion of Homestays for Destination Sustainability:** Promoting rural tourism Homestays in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills are marketed by the Department of Tourism, Govt of Sikkim and Department of Tourism, Govt of West Bengal. There are issues with effective Homestay branding and marketing with limited information about Homestays and inaccurate descriptions of facilities and lacking the experiential concept of Homestays (e.g., Sinchula Homestay, Manjushree Homestay, Samthar Homestay, RangpoKhola Homestay). Most rural Homestays lack an online marketing strategy (e.g., Website, online booking) in comparison to other destinations having gold category Homestays marketed by the State Tourism Boards and Third-Party online travel (OTA) and local companies (e.g., Airbnb, Booking.com, Make my trip.com, Our guest.in) operating in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills.
- **Covid-19 Pandemic and its impact on destination Sustainability:** The ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic has limited the inflow of tourists to Sikkim with stringent health and safety protocols and operational guidelines imposed on the industry by the state. The pandemic has crippled the highly dependent tourism economy with a revenue loss and the shutdown of numerous rural homestays. This has also resulted in widespread unemployment and loss of income to vulnerable rural communities in Sikkim despite concessions offered by the tourism department to registered homestay providers. The challenge for the sustainability of tourism in Sikkim is the responsibility of all stakeholders to manage tourism growth and implement continuous operational training and monitoring strategies for Homestays that creates a safe destination image for tourist. During the pandemic survey, homestays in Darjeeling hills are confronted with financial problems and operational challenges. Several homestays had closed operations due to prolonged shutdowns in the state for more than 15 months. It has resulted in the loss of revenues and incomes to homestay owners belonging to vulnerable rural communities residing in many villages of Darjeeling hills.
- **Seasonality nature of tourism in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills:** The peak tourist season in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills occurs approximately for three months (e.g., Spring season from March to May) and a week-long lean season during (Autumn season from October to November) every year. Tourism seasonality affects Homestays and ecotourism, which remain closed or operate in a minor way for the rest of the year. The nature of seasonality completely breaks the consistent income and employment required for the sustainability of rural people. The state Government developed a sustainable tourism policy in 2018, integrating new tourism products (e.g., nature-based tourism, adventure tourism, culture-based tourism & village homestays) to tackle seasonality. The policy implementation requires inter-department coordination and convergence, which remains a current challenge in the state.
- **Free Loading and Free Riding:** The cost of externalities related to maintaining natural and cultural tourism attractions are a concern to several indigenous local communities residing especially in protected areas and remote rural villages (e.g., Tingvong, Lingthem, Takdah, Loleygaon, Khanchendzonga National Park, Kitam wildlife sanctuary etc.). Attractions add value to the Homestay experience but are slowly losing visitor attractiveness and value due to several factors

(e.g., Free riding of homestay owners selling their homestays merely as an alternative accommodation at a heap price for economic profits at the cost of community benefits, irresponsible and hedonistic tourists freeloading on community utilities, upsurge in the growth of Homestay and Village tourists in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills). The challenge for policymakers is the level of intervention required in the marketplace while taking responsibility for sustainable destination management through regulatory coercion tools such as laws and guidelines (e.g., Code of Conduct, fines on the polluter pays principle, community ownership, international partnerships etc.) for sustainable development.

- **Lack of Support from Homestays to Informal Sector:** There is a lack of support from homestays to the rural informal sector such as local guides, youth & women drivers, local artisans making Indigenous cultural souvenir products such as Handicrafts (e.g., Bamboo Handicrafts & Toys (Fruit & Vegetable baskets, Mugs, Traditional Wooden Hammers, Scissors etc.), Wooden Mask, Choose (folding table), Bagschok (Centre table), Lepcha Hat, Lepcha Handloom weaving products Lepcha Dress, Shoulder bags, cushions, table cloths, Doko (Hand weaved Conical V-shaped Bamboo Basket etc.). Most Rural Homestays lack marketing or management skills in understanding the process of creating quality handicraft products and generating end value. The challenge for most homestays is providing direct access to consumers (e.g., local guided services, sale of Handicrafts etc.) while assuring consistent quality standard products for creating end value and enhancing revenue generation for sustainable livelihood opportunities to socio-economic weaker members of the local community. The informal sector also contributes to the natural and cultural protection of resources in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills.

### ***6.3. Issues and Challenges of Homestays for Social Sustainability in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills***

- **Lack of education on sustainability:** The field study on homestays revealed that most rural homestay owners needed to gain knowledge on the concept of sustainable homestays or had ambiguous perceptions of sustainable practices. The community members and homestay owners in rural villages (e.g., Samalbong, Tackling, Royak, Dentam, Turuk, HeeBermoik etc.) lacked prior education on the responsibilities as per the sustainable tourism criteria and indicators, certification programs recognized by Global sustainable tourism council of India for effective, sustainable management of homestays. The challenge for sustainable tourism education, awareness and mobilization to rural communities from Government and International funding agencies is imperative for sustainable tourism development in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills.
- **Training and Capacity Building:** There are issues such as lack of continuity, gaps in existing training modules and short duration of training and capacity building programs on hospitality management (e.g., ethnic and traditional cuisine, housekeeping, Food & beverage services etc.) to homestay owners and community service providers. Sikkim tourism department and Ministry of tourism, through the Institute of hotel management (IHM) and the Homestay Association of Sikkim (HAS), are responsible for providing insights on the latest market trends and modules for managing homestays sustainability as a sustainable livelihood option for rural communities. The

gaps in existing training modules pose a challenge to training and building capacities programs imparted to Homestay service providers in Sikkim and Darjeeling's rural communities. These hills are crucial for sustainable development.

- **Cross Cultural conflicts between Guests and Homestay Owners:** There are cross-cultural conflicts between several homestay owners and guests arising due to cultural indifferences. There are inter-racial prejudices and inferior-superior relationships between host and guest, resulting in conflicts and a lack of respect for cultural values, traditions and food habits showcased by rural homestays in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills. The challenge of sensitizing travellers on respect for local culture and heritage is crucial for sustainable tourism development in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills.
- **Limited employment to locals in Homestays:** The rural indigenous local community members, especially unemployed youth and women, should be encouraged and expected to be employed in Homestays to ensure equitable distribution of benefits from tourism. There is a lack of local employment in Homestays in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills due to several reasons, such as costs incurred in paying salaries and maintenance, capacities of local people not being adequately strengthened, socio-economic inequality, especially to weakest members of the community, rural to urban migration, leasing out of some homestays to people outside the state. The challenge for government and tourism boards is to stress and ensure regulations on local employment and build capacities, especially for indigenous women and youth, for destination sustainability.

#### ***6.4. Issues and Challenges of Homestays for Environmental Sustainability in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills***

- **Land degradation:** land degradation is an issue for several homestays located in isolated eco-sensitive fragile, and protected areas in the region. Land degradation has caused various issues of Food & water security, loss of cultivated land, human-wildlife conflicts and loss of Bio-diversity, resulting in low occupancy rates within homestays in the region.
- **Green Certification for Homestays:** There needs to be more conceptual clarity in implementing a green certification scheme for Homestays incentivized for reducing environmental impact and making it a socially responsible business in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills. The challenge for state tourism boards in collaboration with recognized certification agencies is to address the components of green certification in the scheme for homestays, such as green building design, reduction in the use of plastics, and energy efficiency mechanisms.
- **Improper sustainable waste management of Homestays:** Solid waste generation in homestays is a critical issue evident across the region. However, there are rules and regulations imposed by the Sikkim government in convergence with the Swachh Bharat mission of the Central Government, such as the Solid waste management rule and the plastic waste management rule, 2016. There needs to be proper signage, a shortage of water refilling points in some Homestays and improper vigilance with strict penalties imposed on polluters in several rural village areas of Sikkim. Homestays in rural villages of Darjeeling hills lack adequate infrastructure support such as dustbins, resource recovery centres, collection vehicles, waste collectors etc. and burning of solid waste in their landfills.

## 7. Conclusion

Homestays are micro-scale enterprises predominantly owned by community members belonging to rural areas. Homestays lack initial capital for investment with delays in incentives and subsidies from Government homestay programs. The funding agencies should acknowledge the adversities faced by homestay owners to review provisions in the policy and schemes. Homestay programs in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills lack extensive community participation, especially among women and unemployed youth, for community decision-making. There are issues regarding deprived community structure, incompetent community leadership, and poor planning in various stages of community-based homestay tourism. Community-oriented programs using bottom to top approach in tourism planning and development involving all rural community members with inclusivity to women and youth are recommended as an effective mechanism for poverty alleviation and community empowerment. Responsible marketing is required with accurate homestay information from state tourism boards and third-party agencies. The classification of homestays (e.g., Gold, Silver) based on the category prescribed by governing agencies on the products and services offered remains a challenge for several rural homestays needing more proper infrastructure facilities for their sustainability.

However, the Ministry of Tourism and State Tourism Boards hold capacity-building programs for Homestay owners (e.g., housekeeping, Food, and beverage training). There is a need for concrete and continuous training programs with the establishment of institutes (e.g., vocational colleges, universities, and capacity-building institutes) imparting knowledge on sustainable management of homestays (e.g., sustainable solid waste management, zero-waste policy in operations, homestay entrepreneurship, etc.), especially to women and youth in rural areas. Education and awareness programs to community members on the importance of tourism linkages and economic multipliers connected to homestays are imperative for local economic development in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills. The state tourism boards have imposed protocols and standard operating procedure (SOP) guidelines on homestays for the safety and security of tourists.

The sustainability of homestay tourism in Sikkim and Darjeeling hill remains the responsibility of all stakeholders to manage tourism growth through continuous strategy implementation for homestays that promote a safe destination image. The study finds issues with training and capacity programs for service providers. There is scope for future research in this area to know the gaps in existing training modules concerning women and youth and to develop a tourism training framework to consider the sustainable development program due to its importance in correlation with visitor satisfaction. The study also finds a gap concerning implementing green certification programs for homestays. There is a scope for future research to study the components of the green certificate scheme for homestays, such as green building design, reduction in the use of plastics, energy efficiency mechanism in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills, and how well it can be implemented in line with the sustainable development for the region.

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