

INFORMAL TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: INSIGHTS FROM A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

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Citation : Makoni, L., & Mearns, K. (2025). Informal Tourism and Sustainable Development in Africa: Insights from a Systematic Literature Review and Content Analysis. *Revista Română de Geografie Politică*, 27(2), 66-83. <https://doi.org/10.30892/rrgp.272101-390>

Abstract : This research explores the dynamics of informal tourism and sustainable development within the African context by combining a systematic literature review (SLR) with content analysis. The SLR was employed to identify and select relevant peer-reviewed literature. Content analysis was then applied to analyze recurring themes, concepts and insights across the selected literature from the SLR approach. The key themes that emerged were around the critical need for the integration of the informal tourism sector into the national sustainable strategies, and policy guidelines that can be able to promote sustainable practices within the informal tourism sector in respective African countries.

Key words: Informal tourism, sustainable development, Africa, Systematic Literature Review (SLR), Content Analysis, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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INTRODUCTION

In the current broader trends of the global tourism dynamics, the informal tourism sector holds a significant influence that has been growing substantially for at least the past three decades. This growth is defined by a myriad of activities that often operate outside of the formalized regulatory framework (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021). In Africa, the informal sector is

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increasingly dominating major towns and cities across the continent-especially in the sub-Saharan (SSA) region, overshadowing the original formal business and administrative operations of these areas (Makoni et al., 2023a; Tawodzera, 2023). This sector, along with various other forms of informality, is flourishing in urban areas and central business districts (CBDs), transforming the social, economic and environmental landscapes (Moyo and Gumbo, 2021, Moagi, Ivanovic and Adinolfi, 2021; Hill et al., 2022). Despite its significance and contribution, the integration of this sector into the sustainable development strategies remains largely omitted within the African context (Bah and Goodwin, 2003; Makoni et al., 2023b). This raise concerns over the unaccounted-for impacts of this sector on the social, economic and environmental attributes of the region (Rogerson, 2014; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2019a).

As the sector continues to grow, it poses both opportunities and challenges for sustainability in destinations. For instance, the sector is responsible for livelihood enhancement- especially for women, youth and marginalized communities, while it simultaneously presents concerning issues such as environmental degradation and social imbalances (Musavengane et al., 2020; Makoni et al., 2023b). A thorough investigation that seeks to establish how the informal tourism sector can be better assimilated into the sustainable development discourse in Africa is required, especially considering the significance to the SDGs (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021). The purpose of this research, therefore, was to evaluate the existing knowledge on the dynamics of informal tourism and sustainability in Africa. This evaluation was essential in order to identify gaps in knowledge and develop practical solutions for effectively incorporating informal tourism into the broader development and policy discourses on sustainable development in Africa.

To achieve this purpose, a systematic literature review (SLR) was used to analyze exiting knowledge on the subject under investigation, focusing on the key themes that emerged on “informal tourism” and “sustainable development” in “Africa” from existing literature on African scholarship. An SLR was used to offer insights into what is currently known and in existence within the body of knowledge on the dynamics of these two concepts. This information was then evaluated with a view to providing recommendations on relevant policy frameworks and strategies to augment the integration of informal tourism into mainstream developmental policies. By conducting this research, the researchers sought to provide insights that could foster a substantial engagement with the informal tourism sector. This sector is known to make a substantial contribution to Africa’s social, economic and environmental sustainability (Wang et al., 2023). This research, therefore, sought to promote accountability in this contribution through the discussions and recommendations it carries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Informal tourism can be defined as tourism activities that operate outside formal structures and regulations, encircling many services provided by local communities (Elgin et al., 2021; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021). In Africa, the informal tourism sector is vast, incorporating many activities from individual local stalls to organized craft markets (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021; Makoni,

2024). These activities are playing a vital contribution to various African communities' wellbeing and cultural conservation (Dada et al., 2022). Some of the businesses and activities that are inclusive of informal tourism are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Activities associated with informal tourism

Source: Makoni (2024)

Informal tourism activity/business	Notes
Street Vendors	Street vendors play a vital role in urban tourism by providing affordable local food and handmade crafts, contributing to the cultural experience of tourists. They enhance the vibrant atmosphere of streets and markets
Guided Tours	Informal local guides offer personalized tours, sharing unique insights and stories about their communities, which enhances the visitor experience beyond conventional tourist paths
Homestays	Homestays allow travelers to immerse themselves in local culture by staying with families, providing an authentic experience of everyday life in the area (Guttentag, 2015)
Cultural Workshops	Cultural Workshops led by local artisans teach tourists traditional skills, such as cooking or crafting, fostering cultural exchange and deeper appreciation of local heritage
Pop-Up Markets	Temporary markets offer a platform for local producers to sell their goods directly to tourists, showcasing regional specialties and supporting local economies
Transportation Services	Informal transportation options, such as shared rides or local taxis, provide convenient and often more affordable ways for tourists to navigate urban areas, enhancing mobility
Cultural Festivals	Community festivals celebrate local traditions, arts, and cuisine, attracting tourists and providing an opportunity for cultural immersion and engagement with local residents. (Getz, 2008)
Local Performances	Street performances and local art shows allow tourists to experience the vibrant creative expressions of the community, enriching their understanding of local culture
Adventure Activities	Informal guides lead adventure activities such as hiking, biking, or wildlife tours, offering tourists unique outdoor experiences that highlight the region's natural beauty
Art and Craft Sales	Local artisans selling their artwork and crafts directly to tourists not only promotes cultural heritage but also supports the local economy and provides visitors with unique souvenirs. (McIntosh & Siggs, 2005)
Beach or Park Rentals	Locals renting out beach or park equipment, like umbrellas or sports gear, provide tourists with essential amenities to enhance their recreational experiences in natural settings
Photography Services	Local photographers offer personalized photo sessions, helping tourists capture memorable moments while providing insights into beautiful local backdrops and cultural sites

As demonstrated in Table 1, the informal tourism sector is comprised of various activities that enhance tourists' experiences and contribute to community livelihoods. For example, the existence of street vendors provides novel experiences for tourists, such as culture, food and crafts (Nyathi et al., 2025). The sector is not a new concept, it has been, for a long time now, a significant aspect of the tourism landscape in many destinations in both Global North and Global South contexts (Sepadi, 2025). In the Global North for example, the tradition of informal tourism can be traced through the engagements in "staycations" by locals who would travel to explore attractions

and activities around their own destinations. This practice has been predominant for decades, especially in the United Kingdom region where travel evolved as a post-world war necessity into a prevalent practice in modern tourism of the region (Miller, 2020). Kenya represents a typical characteristic of informal tourism in the Global South, where the concept is embedded within the initiatives of community-based tourism (CBT) (Mazzuoli, 2025).

For instance, in the Masai communities, the locals are active in providing tourism services to tourists, such as local guided tours and cultural experiences (Holland et al., 2022). This practice is responsible for facilitating economic transformation in Kenya, and it is traced back to the 20th century as it evolved from traditional community practice to a prevalent form of tourism offerings (Ogada et al., 2022). Informal tourism in Africa continues to evolve because of the ever-increasing demand for authentic experiences by tourists, leading them to opt for a direct engagement with the locals who are available to offer them things to do and see in their environments (Saarinen, 2007; Katongole, 2025). This sector [informal tourism] is a significant aspect of livelihood enhancement and plays a vital role in the local economic fabric and fostering cultural exchange (Madichie et al., 2021; Tichaawa, 2021; Tawodzera, 2023).

There are various factors that influence the nature of informal tourism, such as socio-economic situations, cultural aspects, and tourism trends globally (Cukier and Wall, 1994; Damayanti et al., 2018; Lv, 2020). In Africa, resilience in the face of such issues as poverty, lack of employment, inadequate household supply, competition and globalization are some of the key drivers of rising informal tourism (Bensassi et al., 2019; Africa Export-Import Bank, 2020; Makoni et al., 2023a). This sector's characteristic of operating outside the jurisdiction of the formalized frameworks can result in several challenges regarding its assimilation into formal tourism strategies and broader sustainable development agendas (Achaempong and Tichaawa, 2015; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021; Makoni and Rogerson, 2023; Thorn et al., 2025). The key issue regarding this sector is its informal nature, which means its regulation and accountability, as well as its impact on sustainability, is not fully comprehended (Lv, 2020). This renders the need to understand this sector more with a view to gaining insights into its significance to the sustainable development of Africa.

The dynamics of the informal tourism sector and sustainable development is characterized by both opportunities and challenges (Achaempong and Tichaawa, 2015). This sector plays a substantial role in affecting the SDGs, especially those associated with poverty alleviation, the economy and gender relations (Sultana et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). For example, this sector provides direct employment which results in income generation (Snyman, 2017; International Labor Organization [ILO], 2018; 2020). Also, this sector promotes the growth of local economies including those in marginalized areas (Mugambi, 2018; Makoni and Tichaawa, 2021; Nyathi et al., 2025). Conversely, the sector also results in dire environmental impacts such as the depletion of resources and ungoverned waste disposal (Potts, 2008). These impacts are crucial to address for the promotion of sustainability (Dayamanti et al., 2018). Some of the key SDGs affected by this sector include SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (Amuda, 2024), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (Masango et al., 2020), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (Davidescu et al., 2024).

The sector's job creation opportunity, supplementing of household income, and local economy enhancement characteristics strongly align with the sustainable development goals (SDGs), though there is limited regulation of the sector, which leads to perilous operational conditions and inadequate environmental regulations (Dada et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Nyathi et al., 2025). What makes the subject of informal tourism relevant in current issues of Africa's sustainable development is that in many countries in the continent, the sector serves as a lifeline for the bigger portion of the population (Rogerson, 2014; 2017; De Jager and Musuva, 2016; UNCTAD, 2019a, 2019b; 2019c; Makoni et al., 2023a; 2023b). It is largely a means for survival for many individuals while it offers a big portion of employment and household income (Brenton et al., 2014; Musavengane et al., 2020; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2025).

Nonetheless, a limited, or lack of, integration of this sector into the formal structures of regulations, policy and strategy for sustainable development can worsen the negative impacts associated with this sector, which triggers the need for a balanced approach to this sector's development (Makoni et al., 2023a; Wilson-Youlden and Farrell, 2025). The informal tourism sector can foster conservation initiatives for communities, which helps in the contribution to sustainable practices (Dada et al., 2022). Therefore, by engaging locals into the formal structures of the tourism sector, they can be able to utilize their resources to encourage sustainable development. This participatory approach can enhance the resilience of both local communities and ecosystems, ensuring that informal tourism contributes positively to the broader sustainability agenda (Sepadi, 2025). Incorporating informal tourism into the developmental initiatives of destinations is crucial as it promotes its potential while simultaneously minimizing the associated negative impacts (Makoni et al., 2024; Nyathi et al., 2025). Through the formalization of this sector, stakeholders can augment the environmental preservation and promote an equitable distribution of tourism benefits, thereby contributing to the overall sustainability on Africa. Current scholarship on sustainable development of Africa, however, underplays the substantial dynamics of the informal tourism sector (Makoni, 2024). Such a gap that requires a more systematic approach to address if sustainability through informality in Africa is to be achieved.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed for this study is presented in Figure 1.

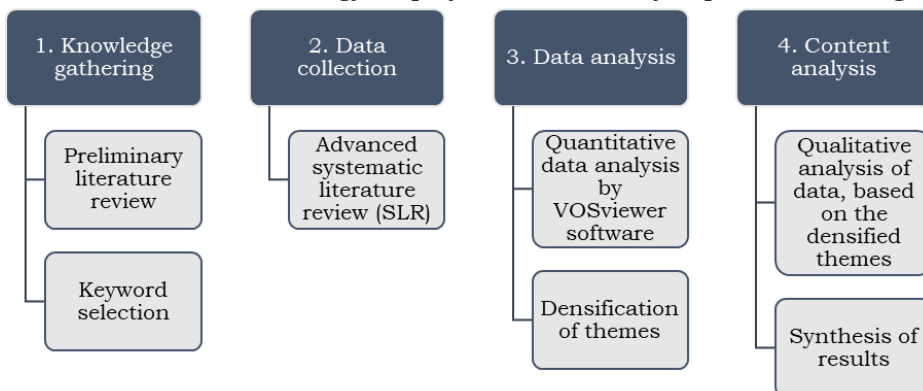


Figure 1. Block diagram illustrating the summative steps of the research methodology
Source: Authors

Knowledge gathering through a preliminary review of global literature

The research study commenced by the gathering of knowledge on informal tourism and sustainable development, which in turn was essential for grounding the research methodology. This knowledge gathering was done via a broad-based preliminary review of global literature, using a generic keyword search string: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("informal tourism" AND "sustainable development" OR "sustainability"), to query citation index databases such as ScienceDirect and Scopus for peer-reviewed publications. This was done to understand and augment the research gap. These citation index databases are advantageous for hosting comprehensive research output on tourism and sustainable development. Scopus and ScienceDirect were selected as the sole databases for this SLR because of their extensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed literature relevant to tourism and sustainability. Scopus offers a broad, multidisciplinary scope with strong search and citation tools, while ScienceDirect provides full-text access to leading journals in environmental and tourism research. Together, they ensure both depth and breadth of scholarly sources, making them well-suited for a focused and rigorous review. Upon reviewing the publications obtained from knowledge gathering, there was a need to select keywords which were essential for data collection, via an in-depth systematic literature review in the next step. Accordingly, through reviewing the publications, keywords with the highest keyword frequency of occurrence, were identified and collated.

Systematic literature review (SLR)

A systematic literature review (SLR) uses explicit systematic methods to critically appraise research, by locating peer-reviewed research publications; qualitatively analysing the publications' contributions; and synthesising findings (Jafri et al., 2024). In an SLR, common keywords are essential as part of data collection, to obtain a relevant sample size of publications, via the querying of research citation index databases (Tamala et al., 2022). Accordingly, the keywords which were filtered and collated in the knowledge gathering step were used to generate a keyword search string, which in turn was utilised to query the citation index databases for research publications, in the execution of the systematic literature review. The search criteria were limited to 2014 – 2025, English publications; and Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol is [Click or tap here to enter text](#) used to screen articles for relevance (Jäger-Roschko and Petersen, 2022). The publications were then downloaded in RIS format, which is compatible with VOSviewer software, for data analysis in the form of bibliometric analysis, in the next step.

Bibliometric analysis

Upon downloading the research publications from citation index databases [Scopus and ScienceDirect] in RIS format, the publications were then imported into VOSviewer software for bibliometric analysis, to gain insight on the important themes surrounding the research area. Bibliometric analysis is herein defined as a quantitative research analysis technique which leverages statistics to map the structure, characteristics, and patterns of research areas from published research data, in the form of citation analysis (Zhang et al., 2024). The election of bibliometric analysis for this study was premised on the

present deficit of studies that extensively map the relationship(s) between informal tourism and sustainable development accordingly (Makoni et al., 2024). VOSviewer software was chosen for bibliometric analysis, since it enables the analysis and visualisation of relationships between research data, premised on citation relationships, particularly mutual interdependencies of citations between keywords, and co-citation clustering of keywords (Li et al., 2024). From these graphical visualisations, insight on the important themes is obtained based on the densification of keywords into nodes, based on their visibility, or relative importance (Telukdarie et al., 2024). This then informs the key themes to review during the critical content analysis step, and thus synthesise the research contributions.

Critical content analysis

Upon execution of the bibliometric analysis to obtain the important themes surrounding the research area, critical content analysis was executed through reviewing the publications, and qualitatively making deductions as informed by the important themes extracted via bibliometric analysis, accordingly.

RESULTS

SLR Results

Informed by the preliminary literature review, the most frequently occurring keywords were collated, and tabulated in Table 2. These keywords were then utilised to conduct an in-depth SLR.

Table 2. Collated keywords premised on the preliminary literature review
Source: Authors

Item	Keyword
1	Tourism
2	Informal tourism (enterprise)
3	Sustainability
4	Africa
5	Developing countries
6	Integrated strategic planning
7	ESG
8	Policy
9	Sustainable tourism
10	Sustainable Development Goals

Based on the 10 keywords presented in Table 1, the following keyword search string was generated for advanced SLR: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("informal tourism" AND "sustainable development" OR "sustainability" OR "developing countr*" OR "ESG" OR "policy" OR "integrated planning"). The keyword "africa" was embedded in "developing countries" and "sustainability" and "sustainable development goals" embedded under sustainable development. Upon querying the research databases, 18000 papers were downloaded in total from Scopus, and 6000 papers in total were downloaded from ScienceDirect, based on the search criteria, to make them 24000 in total. Upon importing a total of 24000 papers into Zotero for deduplication 15500 papers remained. The authors then screened the publications based on title and abstract relevance, thus leaving a total 12000 publications for quantitative analysis in the form of bibliometric analysis via VOSviewer software. Bibliometric analysis via VOSviewer software resulted in a network of densely connected keywords which are clustered around

4 color-coded cluster as illustrated in Figure 2 below, with the first 89 keywords deemed as necessary for visualisation, within this densely connected network.

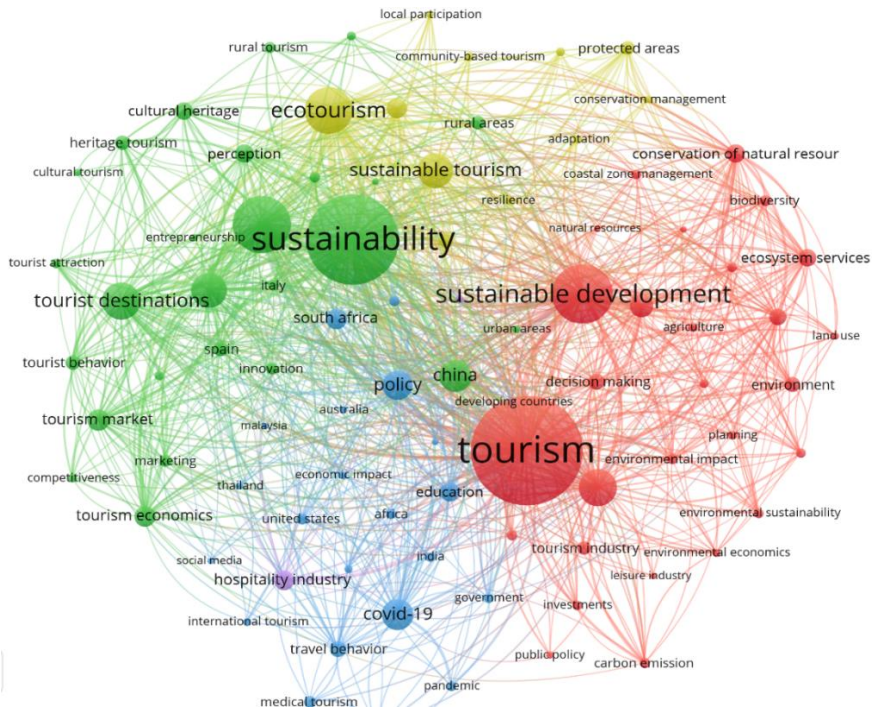


Figure 1. Graphical presentation of the top 89 keywords
Source. Bibliometric analysis, via VOSviewer software

Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis and Thematic Clustering

To identify dominant research themes and interconnections in the literature on informal tourism and sustainable development in Africa, a co-occurrence analysis of keywords was conducted using VOSviewer (See Figure 2). Out of the 89 keywords that were deemed necessary for visualization, a total of 20 high-frequency keywords were analyzed and grouped into four thematic clusters, each representing a different dimension of the research landscape. The list of the first 20 keywords and their order of relevance and importance based on the quantitative parameter total nodal link strength is presented in Table 3, while the four thematic clusters are shown in Table 4.

Table 3. Keywords and total nodal link strength

1	tourism	1	16270
2	sustainability	2	14414
3	tourism development	2	10464
4	sustainable development	1	10323
5	ecotourism	4	8936
6	tourist destinations	2	6743

7	economic development	1	6314
8	tourism management	2	5946
9	china	2	4848
10	policy	3	4625
11	sustainable tourism	4	4212
12	tourism market	2	3517
13	environmental protection	1	3414
14	covid-19	3	3375
15	tourism economics	2	3204
16	stakeholders	4	3088
17	conservation of natural resources	1	3083
18	climate change	1	3005
19	perception	2	2750
20	education	3	2724

Table 4. Dense network of keywords in different clusters based on the Vosviewer result

Cluster	Color	Keywords
1	Red	Tourism, sustainable development, and environmental implications
2	Green	Sustainability, entrepreneurship, tourist destinations, tourism markets, tourism economics
3	Yellow	Sustainable tourism and ecotourism
4	Blue	Policy

This parameter enables the visualisation of the keywords, which are ordered in hierarchal order based on their relative importance. The denser the visualisation of the keyword (Figure 2), the stronger the total nodal link strength of that keyword. It can therefore be deduced that “tourism” is the strongest theme on the research area (Figure 2), with a total nodal link strength of 16270 followed by sustainability, and the rest of the keywords in that particular order as presented in Table 3.

Cluster 1(Red) – Tourism, Sustainable Development, and Environmental Implications

This was the dominant cluster as shown on the Vosviewer result (Figure 2) and included keywords such as tourism, sustainable development, economic development, environmental protection and climate change. These keywords underscore literature’s strong concentration on the interplay of tourism activities and sustainable development, especially regarding environmental sustainability and conservation of resources. For instance, ‘tourism’ and ‘sustainable development’ showed the highest total nodal link strengths- 16 270 and 10 323 respectively which highlights their central position in this discourse. However, literature under this cluster is largely focused on formal tourism systems and governed eco-development frameworks, while there is limited explicit reference to the informal sector. In the context of Africa, such an omission is critical given that the informal tourism activities often take place within ecological sensitive

areas. While the informal tourism players are economically significant and deeply rooted in local livelihoods, their integration into formal ecological conservation frameworks is largely limited. This highlights gaps in policy inclusion, impact assessment and regulatory engagement of the informal sector. Therefore, there is a critical need to investigate how informal actors interact with, or bypass, sustainability efforts, and how they might be better included in conservation-oriented tourism strategies.

Cluster 2 (Green) – Sustainability, Entrepreneurship, and Market Dynamics (Green)

This cluster highlights the focus of literature on economic and managerial factors of tourism. These include market behavior, destination competitiveness and entrepreneurship. This cluster indicates that literature on informal economic activity is primarily framed through the lens of entrepreneurship. This reflects the business-oriented and survivalist nature of the informal tourism sector, as seen in studies that describe informal actors as migrant entrepreneurs, survivalists, or informal traders. The inclusion of ‘China’ in this cluster (total nodal link- 4848) highlights the cross-regional contexts, comparisons and influences, which shows the global knowledge flows onto the African tourism context. Literature under this cluster also highlights that informal tourism entrepreneurship is the backbone of Africa’s tourism economy, both in urban and rural settings. The informal actors in this case are reported to demonstrate resilience and adaptability, local knowledge though they are largely sidelined from the formal tourism economics and market analysis conversations. This presents a significant conceptual and empirical gap regarding the dynamics of informal tourism and sustainability in Africa.

Cluster 3 (Yellow) – Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism

Literature under this cluster emphasizes alternative, community-based tourism frameworks that are associated with ecological conservation and social sustainability. Similar to the other clusters, there is limited literature addressing the role of informal tourism and its actors within sustainable tourism contexts — despite the fact that the principles of sustainable tourism and ecotourism are well-suited for the inclusion of local communities and small-scale or informal operators. The inclusion of ‘stakeholders’ under this cluster highlights the growing scholarly interest in participatory initiatives and inclusive government in tourism development. Practically, the informal tourism actors largely serve as de facto stewards of ecotourism resources. Their exclusions from the formal regulatory and planning procedures impacts negatively on both their prospective contribution and access to the benefits of sustainable tourism initiatives. The literature, despite recognizing the significance of stakeholders, centers largely on formal tourism frameworks. Such an omission highlights a gap in inclusive governance, which suggests that informal tourism actors are under-researched and underrepresented in sustainable tourism and ecotourism discourse.

Cluster 4 (Blue) – Policy and External Factors

This cluster presents literature on external factors, policy and governance, critical areas for informal tourism. Policy for example, while it is crucial for the inclusion of informal tourism, is to a great extent focused on a

top-down approach to planning and regulation, with limited focus on how policies are adapted, or fail to adapt, to informal tourism realities. In addition, the inclusion of 'Covid-19' under this sector shows growing scholarly discourses on the vulnerability of informal tourism actors who are overlooked on social protection or access to recovery programs as opposed to formal actors. The Covid-19 (total nodal link- 3 375) underscores how the recent pandemic has caused significance disruptions and triggered a rethinking of adaptability and resilience as well as health and safety within the informal tourism sector (Makoni and Tichaawa, 2021). Meanwhile, policy links the literature to institutional responses and regulatory frameworks needed to integrate informality into sustainable tourism strategies. In addition, the pandemic prompted the urgent need for recognizing the informal sector and adopt target strategies to formalize this sector. However, literature shows that a policy divide still exists between formal and informal tourism. The notion is that while informal tourism is widely part of the African economic fabric, it remains marginalized in policy, planning and development discourse.

Overall, the keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals that while the broader literature on tourism and sustainability is rich and evolving, the informal tourism sector remains largely overlooked within those conversations, particularly in Africa where it plays a vital role in shaping economic, sociocultural and environmental dimensions. Each cluster provides insights on the current gaps in the current literature on the subject matter. Some of the key literature gaps that emanated from this SLR include the following,

- The environmental impact and potential of informal tourism actors is largely ignored in sustainability planning
- Informal tourism entrepreneurship is rarely acknowledged on economic and market analyses
- Current sustainable tourism frameworks do not incorporate informal tourism and its stakeholders
- Policy literature does not reflect the realities of informal tourism operations
- Sustainability of tourism in Africa is centered largely on the formal structures and priorities a top-down approach while limited attention is given to the informal tourism sector.

These thematic insights form the analytical foundation for the content analysis presented in the subsequent section. Through mapping the most frequently occurring themes and the interrelationships, the SLR offered a structured overview of the dominant themes within the literature on the subject matter. The content analysis builds on these themes to examine how they are discussed, contextualized, and applied within the body of literature on informal tourism and sustainable development in Africa.

Content analysis

The findings of the SLR highlight a significant gap in research that particularly unpacks the dynamics of informal tourism and sustainable development of Africa. It was noted in the review that much literature, so far, has been done on the broader concept of the "informal economy" in Africa from at least the early 2000s. Regarding the subject under matter, much of the current scholarship reflects on the areas of ICBT (Nshimbi et al., 2018; Musoni, 2020), migrant entrepreneurs (Rogerson, 2014; 2018), borderlands studies

(Moyo, 2020), and only a small fraction on domestic informal business tourism, an emerging trend that remains largely unaccounted for in current discourse (Makoni et al., 2023a). Despite this, several themes emerge through the SLR, which reveals the role of the informal tourism sector in supporting the local economies and wellbeing. Simultaneously, the review shows that there is a significant gap in literature that, particularly, engages in the dynamics of informal tourism and sustainable development (Mugambi, 2018; Fourie et al., 2024; Makoni, 2024). This underscores the need for targeted research on the interplay of these two phenomena within the parameters of an African development narrative.

One of the most notable findings is the recognition that the informal tourism sector often manifests outside the formal regulatory frameworks, which results in both opportunities and challenges for sustainable development (Nani et al., 2025; Nyathi et al., 2025; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2025). For instance, while the sector [informal tourism] is praised for contributing to some of the key sustainability factors in communities, such as local economic development (LED), employment creation, poverty alleviation and cultural preservation (Dada et al., 2022; Fourie et al., 2024), much of the existing literature does not fully explore how informal tourism can be effectively integrated into broader sustainable development frameworks (Makoni et al., 2024). This omission is, particularly, evident in African literature, where informal tourism is often seen as a marginal and unregulated sector, despite its potential to support sustainable practices (Rogerson, 2014).

The review shows that the sustainability of tourism in Africa is faced with many challenges because of the informal characteristics of much of this industry (UNCTAD, 2019a; Mumbire, 2025). Literature available on this topic indicates that informal tourism has limited essential regulations to minimize associated environmental impacts such as the over usage of resources and environmental degradation (Golub and Kobou, 2020). If well managed, however, informal tourism can provide positive outcomes. Current literature highlights that informal tourism is both complementing the formal tourism industry and contributing to sustainability, yet the overarching gap remains in the integration of this sector into the policies and frameworks that promote sustainability (Makoni et al., 2023a; 2023b; Makoni et al., 2024; Makoni and Rogerson, 2024; Nyathi et al., 2025; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2025). This situation is common in Africa, where informal tourism is playing a crucial role in enhancing tourists' experiences and communities' wellbeing (Njaya, 2015; UNCTAD 2019a; b; c; World Bank, 2020). For instance, regions such as the Maasai Mara in Kenya (Tubey et al., 2019), and South African townships [such as Soweto and Khayelitsha] (Booyens, 2021), informal tourism is a key driver for the formal tourism functionality through boosting cultural experiences and local economies. However, these informal sectors often lack integration into national policies, limiting their full potential to contribute to sustainable tourism frameworks (Ngoasong and Kimbu, 2016). In addition to this, this study shows that there is a lack of research focused on developing guidelines on how informal tourism can be integrated into the formal plans to align with the SDGs, such as the SDG 12- Responsible consumption and production in the African continent. This omission leaves a significant and topical area for further investigation.

In the case of tourism development, existing literature largely focuses on the impact of formal tourism as a driving force of Africa's economic growth and sustainability, with limited focus on the potential of informal tourism. In the Southern African region, literature on informal tourism has predominantly focused on Zimbabwe and South Africa, during this past ten-year period under analysis (Makoni et al., 2023a; Makoni and Rogerson, 2024, Nyathi et al., 2025). These case studies highlight the crucial role of informal tourism businesses and operators in enhancing livelihoods and contributing to local economies. This body of work is largely divided into two key areas of analysis, following Timothy and Teye's (2005) categorization of business tourism in Africa. One area examines informal domestic business tourism, while the other focuses on informal international tourism, which is often referred to as Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT).

Current literature is largely dominated by studies on ICBT (Adeyinka, 2014; Brenton et al., 2018; Kahiya and Kadirov, 2020), with only a few recent works beginning to explore the domestic aspect (Makoni, 2024). Although these studies have gained prominence in African scholarship, they primarily concentrate on the operational characteristics of the sector. Specifically, they profile the drivers, challenges, and opportunities within informal tourism, as well as its role in supporting marginalized populations, such as women, youth, and the unemployed. However, there is a noticeable gap in research that delves into the strategic aspects of this sector, particularly its relationship with broader tourism, development and sustainability across the continent. This gap highlights the need to support the informal tourism sector through infrastructure, training and policy development.

In addition, it is observed in this review that there is limited literature on the interplay between informal tourism and ecotourism/conservation. Despite the existence of examples of the sector's contribution to the conservation of natural resources, especially in key conservation areas, urban spaces and ecotourism hotspots, the informal tourism operators and businesses normally lack the skills and training on environmental management due to the absence of training and capacitation. Current research, therefore, highlights the need for integrating informal tourism operators into the ecotourism frameworks through training programs and capacity building initiatives (Giampiccoli and Glassom, 2021). This will help in ensuring that the contribution of the sector to ecotourism remains consistent. The absence of such initiatives, together with effective tourism management, are key issues emanating in various studies. Many of the informal tourism operators do so without proper guidance and regulations, which leads to consequences such as environmental damage, congestion as well as unequal competition with formal business. That given, environmental conservation remains one of the biggest issues of concern.

A significant gap identified in this review is the lack of policies specifically designed to integrate informal tourism into formal sustainable development frameworks. Existing literature on policy and informality in Africa highlights that informal operators are often excluded from policy-making processes (Kromidha et al., 2023). Moreover, these operators are frequently treated as obstacles to formal development structures, particularly in urban areas, where they face persecution and harassment by enforcement authorities (Kitole and Sesabo, 2024). This exclusion undermines efforts to create comprehensive, interdisciplinary sustainable tourism planning and practices.

To address this, there is a clear need for policies that promote the inclusion of all stakeholders, both formal and informal, and establish guidelines that recognize the role of informal tourism. Additionally, regulatory frameworks should be developed to ensure a balance between the sociocultural, environmental, and economic dimensions of tourism. The literature suggests that informal tourism remains largely marginalized in policy discussions, creating a gap in understanding how stakeholders can collaborate to foster more sustainable tourism ecosystems.

While informal tourism has a substantial capacity to contribute to Africa's sustainable development, there are significant gaps in literature that need to be addressed. Most importantly, the dynamics of informal tourism in Africa are underexplored, particularly in relation to its integration with frameworks for formal sustainable development. There is a need for more research into how informal tourism can be regulated, supported, and developed to maximize its economic, social, and environmental benefits in the region.

CONCLUSION

The interplay of the informal tourism sector and sustainability, particularly in the African context is an area that is rarely spoken of in literature. As this paper aimed at closing this gap and illuminate on some of the key issues emanating from the existing knowledge on this context, it provides insights into both the opportunities and challenges for sustainability that are presented by the sector. The findings reveal that while the informal tourism sector presents a lot of potential to the sustainable development of Africa and currently playing a vital role in determining the current sociocultural, economic and environmental conditions in the continent, it remains an undervalued, unaccounted for and unregulated sector, with many gaps that require urgent attention.

This research underscores the need for more focused research and policy on the dynamics of informal tourism and sustainable development of Africa. Particularly, the integration of the informal tourism sector into the broader sustainable development agendas and frameworks in the continent is of importance if the positive contribution of the sector is to be maximized. A multi-stakeholder approach is required, in which all affected parties, such as researchers and policymakers, need to collaborate in designing relevant policies and structures that can facilitate the development and growth of the informal sector and promoting its alignment with sustainable development principles in the continent.

Ultimately, the informal tourism sector has the potential to be a key sustainable development driver in Africa if it is rendered with the relevant support and resources needed for it to prosper. In addition, continued research on the topic is crucial to ensure all aspects of accountability necessary for data-driven decision making in strategic growth and sustainability are thoroughly explored. With the continued growth of the tourism industry in Africa, and the substantial credence it is given in African development scholarship, the imperative now significantly lies in engaging with the untapped potential of the continent's informal tourism sector. This will assist in promoting the sector's significant role in driving the sustainable development of Africa.

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Submitted:
June 10, 2025

Revised:
July 15, 2025

Accepted and published online:
September 01, 2025