

# Tourism, protected areas, and the well-being of local residents near Bwindi, Uganda



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**Background:** Protected areas (PAs) increasingly aim to balance biodiversity conservation with community well-being. Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (BINP), a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, a sanctuary for mountain gorillas, exemplifies this tension, having displaced indigenous Batwa communities while promoting tourism-driven growth.

**Aim:** This study examines how tourism influences residents' well-being and identifies systemic barriers to equitable benefit-sharing in BINP peripheral areas.

**Setting:** Focused on Mukono – one of the 27 parishes bordering BINP – the research highlights a region marked by subsistence farming, tourism-driven infrastructure and soaring land prices, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups like the Batwa.

**Methods:** The qualitative case study integrated semi-structured interviews ( $n = 70$ ) and Likert-scale surveys with long-term residents, complemented by gender-responsive follow-ups. Thematic analysis applied biocultural, capabilities and multidimensional well-being frameworks.

**Results:** Tourism bolstered livelihoods through jobs, infrastructure and global visibility but intensified inequalities via land displacement, rising costs and exclusion from high-skilled jobs. Residents prioritised well-being as basic needs, economic stability, social respect and spiritual health, yet structural barriers – limited education, landlessness and gender categorisation – constrained access to opportunities.

**Conclusion:** While tourism fosters growth, equitable outcomes require policies to address systemic inequities.

**Contribution:** The study advances inclusive tourism and conservation scholarship by centring local voices, advocating for gender-responsive programmes, land rights reform and participatory governance to align tourism with community values and justice.

**Keywords:** protected areas; well-being; local residents; tourism development; tourism destinations.

## Introduction

Tourism development in and around protected areas (PAs) is frequently promoted as a dual strategy for biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation (Gidebo 2022). In Uganda, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (BINP) exemplifies this model through its globally acclaimed mountain gorilla tourism. However, the extent to which such tourism fosters equitable and multidimensional well-being among neighbouring communities, particularly the historically marginalised Batwa indigenous people and the majority of the local residents, remains contested (Ampumuza, Duineveld & Van Der Duim 2020). These communities continue to navigate the long-term socio-ecological consequences of conservation interventions, including displacement, restricted access to natural resources and evolving livelihood systems (Twinamatsiko et al. 2019).

This study critically examines the role of tourism in shaping community well-being around BINP, with a particular focus on historical injustices, structural inequalities and differentiated impacts across social groups. While revenue-sharing schemes and community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives are intended to promote inclusive development, the lived realities of park-adjacent residents, especially indigenous and landless households, reveal enduring disparities in access to tourism benefits, land tenure and local decision-making processes (Spenceley, Snyman & Rylance 2021).

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To unpack these complexities, we adopt an integrated analytical framework that synthesises three complementary theoretical lenses. Firstly, Sen's capability approach (Sen 1985, 1994) anchors our understanding of well-being in individuals' substantive freedoms – their ability to pursue lives they value, rather than mere access to resources. Secondly, this perspective is complemented by the biocultural paradigm (Bridgewater & Rotherham 2019), which underscores the interdependence of ecological and cultural systems, recognising that disruptions to landscapes (e.g., conservation-led displacement) reverberate through social practices, identities and intergenerational knowledge. Thirdly, we integrate a multidimensional well-being lens (Coulthard, McGregor & White 2018; White & Jha 2023) to capture the interplay of material conditions, relational dynamics and subjective experiences.

The multidimensional well-being approach provides a holistic framework for understanding human flourishing by integrating material, relational and subjective dimensions of life (Joseph et al. 2020). It moves beyond economic indicators to consider how people experience well-being through access to resources, social relationships and personal perceptions (McGregor 2018). Grounded in the work of scholars such as White and Jha (2023) and Coulthard et al. (2018), the approach emphasises the role of context, values and power dynamics in shaping well-being. In development settings such as tourism on the peripheral of BINP, it highlights how material benefits may coexist with social or cultural harms, offering a more equitable and context-sensitive lens for evaluating development outcomes. Together, these frameworks reveal how tourism in PAs transcends economic metrics, shaping cultural continuity, social equity and the different ways communities envision and enact the good life.

This study draws on concurrent mixed methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, Likert-scale household surveys and secondary data analysis, conducted in Mukono Parish, adjacent to BINP. In addition, an embedded case study design (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018; Yin 2014) was employed to investigate the complex and multidimensional influence of tourism development on the well-being of communities living adjacent to BINP. The findings illuminate the paradoxes of tourism-driven development: while economic opportunities have expanded, structural inequities persist; while cultural performances offer visibility and income, they may also reproduce stigma and while infrastructure has improved, it has not addressed the root causes of intergenerational landlessness. These dynamics underscore the need to reassess tourism's capacity to deliver just and sustainable development in conservation landscapes.

## Literature review

### Tourism, conservation and multidimensional well-being in Uganda

Tourism is frequently promoted as an integrated strategy for biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation,

particularly within PAs in developing countries (Mbaiwa 2021; Scheyvens & Hughes 2021; Stone & Stone 2022; Stone, Stone & Nyaupane 2021; Stone et al. 2022). Uganda's BINP represents a prominent case where mountain gorilla tourism contributes considerable revenue and is positioned as a key intervention for supporting community development (Sandbrook 2015; Tumusime, Bitariho & Sandbrook 2018; Twinamatsiko & Kagoro 2024). Since its establishment in 1991 and subsequent designation as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site (UNESCO 2023), BINP has attracted substantial international investment, positioning tourism as a 'win-win' strategy to promote both conservation and community development (Uganda Wildlife Authority [UWA] 2024).

Despite these optimistic narratives, a growing body of empirical research questions the extent to which tourism in BINP translates into meaningful and equitable improvements in well-being of local residents, notably the indigenous Batwa community, whose systemic marginalisation remains unresolved (Ampumuza et al. 2020; Twinamatsiko et al. 2019). While government and donor reports (e.g., Franks & Twinamatsiko 2017; Global Environment Facility (GEF) 2007; UWA 2024) emphasise gains such as improved infrastructure, employment and revenue-sharing schemes, local studies highlight persistent socio-economic disparities and entrenched power imbalances. Tumusime et al. (2018), for example, found that although community infrastructure benefited from revenue sharing, direct cash transfers to households were limited and often diverted to elite-led or externally driven projects. Similarly, Sandbrook, Cavanagh and Tumusiime (eds. 2018) observed that CBT ventures, such as the Buhoma Community Rest Camp, created seasonal and low-paid employment opportunities that remained largely inaccessible to the most vulnerable populations.

The Batwa community, who were forcibly displaced from their ancestral forest lands during the establishment of BINP, remains largely excluded from the benefits of tourism. Research conducted by Ampumuza et al. (2020) and Satyal, Byskov and Hyams (2021) documents the Batwa's continued land dispossession and structural exclusion. Although some Batwa engage in cultural performances for tourists, these initiatives are typically orchestrated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or tour operators, which reinforces external control and limits the Batwa's autonomy and self-determination. Furthermore, despite policy commitments to participatory governance, Batwa leaders frequently report exclusion from key decision-making processes (Woodhouse et al. 2022).

At a broader scale, research highlights the pivotal role of NGOs in global conservation and tourism development. However, many of these organisations operate within neoliberal frameworks that prioritise market-based solutions, often at the expense of local equity and genuine community

participation (Clausen 2019). Within the Bwindi context, a diverse array of local and international NGOs engage in biodiversity conservation and community development initiatives spanning agriculture, education, health and tourism enterprises (Tolbert et al. 2019). For instance, the Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust (BMCT), funded by the World Bank – GEF, has disbursed substantial grants supporting agriculture, education, Batwa resettlement and conservation-linked livelihoods. Major international conservation organisations – including the International Gorilla Conservation Programme, African Wildlife Foundation, Fauna and Flora International and Mountain Gorilla Conservation Fund – concentrate their efforts on gorilla protection and broader biodiversity conservation. Development partners such as Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, the United Nations Development Programme and GEF partnership have contributed to livelihoods enhancement and conservation education. In addition, individual tourists, philanthropists and missionaries have played crucial roles in founding institutions such as Bwindi Community Hospital, which provides subsidised healthcare services to the Batwa and wider local population.

Despite these collective efforts contributing to improved human well-being and the promotion of sustainable tourism, marginalised groups, particularly the Batwa, remain largely excluded from the benefits of tourism development. This enduring exclusion underscores the complex socio-political challenges related to power imbalances, accountability deficits and inequitable access to resources. Collectively, this body of literature highlights the imperative to critically interrogate not only the tangible outcomes of tourism and conservation initiatives but also the institutional and political-economic dynamics that shape local agency and inclusion in governance processes.

### **Theoretical framing: Multidimensional, capability and biocultural perspectives**

Well-being in tourism and conservation literature has often been narrowly defined through economic metrics such as income generation, job creation or infrastructure growth (Dwyer 2023). While these indicators are valuable, they often obscure the lived experiences of marginalisation and fail to capture relational or subjective aspects of human flourishing (Cohen Kaminitz 2020; Diener & Seligman 2018). In response, scholars have advanced more holistic frameworks that better reflect the complex and situated nature of well-being (Coulthard et al. 2018; Joseph & McGregor 2020; McGregor 2018).

The multidimensional well-being approach is particularly relevant. It recognises well-being as comprising material (economic security, access to services), relational (social connectedness, power relations) and subjective (life satisfaction, aspirations) dimensions (Joseph & McGregor 2020; McGregor 2018). This tripartite model allows for a more comprehensive assessment of how tourism interventions

reshape livelihoods and life experiences in both positive and negative ways (Coulthard et al. 2018).

Complementing this is Sen's capability approach, which conceptualises well-being in terms of individuals' substantive freedoms to live lives they value (Sen 1985). This lens highlights the importance of agency, opportunity and structural constraints, particularly pertinent for populations like the Batwa, whose ability to pursue valued ways of life has been curtailed by historical displacement, landlessness and exclusion from governance.

A biocultural perspective adds further depth by foregrounding the interdependence between ecological systems and cultural identity. In conservation contexts, it emphasises that nature is not merely a resource but integral to identity, heritage and survival – especially for indigenous communities (Bridgewater & Rotherham 2019). For the Batwa, who maintain deep spiritual and cultural ties to the forest, conservation efforts that exclude them from ancestral lands constitute not only economic loss but also cultural erasure (Ampumuza et al. 2020).

Despite Uganda's policy commitment to CBT and revenue sharing, local evidence continues to point to persistent exclusions and contradictions. Mechanisms often fail to address deep-rooted structural inequalities or to redistribute benefits in transformative ways (Twinamatsiko et al. 2019). The Batwa continue to experience landlessness and social stigma, even as elements of their culture are commercialised and showcased for tourism purposes (Satyal et al. 2021). Meanwhile, Bakiga households experience uneven tourism gains based on geography, social capital and tenure status (Muresherwa et al. 2020).

Recent research has begun to apply multidimensional and biocultural frameworks to tourism settings, revealing how interventions can produce contradictory outcomes (Cavaliere & Branstrator 2024; Lindell, Sattari & Höckert 2022; Lindholm & Ekblom 2019). Tourism may bring jobs but also dependency; it may enhance pride in cultural identity while also provoking feelings of exploitation or dilution (Jamal & Camargo 2023). These dynamics point to the need for analytical approaches that centre local voices, interrogate power relations and disaggregate impacts by ethnicity, gender and class.

### **Contribution of this study**

This article addresses gaps in the literature by applying an integrated framework – combining multidimensional well-being, Sen's capability approach and biocultural perspectives – to the lived experiences of Batwa and Bakiga residents in Mukono Parish, adjacent to BINP. By focusing on how these groups perceive and experience tourism's impacts across material, relational and subjective dimensions, the study provides a contextually nuanced and equity-focused analysis of tourism-induced community development arising from protected area establishment. It aims to move beyond

surface-level metrics of success to interrogate whose well-being is being enhanced, whose is neglected and how structural barriers shape these outcomes.

### The geographic context of the study

This study is based on a case study conducted in Bwindi – a remote area located in South-Western of Uganda, 500 km from the capital (Figure 1). The area borders BINP, a sanctuary for the endemic and endangered mountain gorillas. Several studies (Buntaine, Daniels & Devlin 2018; Franks & Twinamatsiko 2017; Tumusime et al. 2018) have intimated that tourism development in Bwindi has generated immense economic and social benefits, hence providing an ideal context to explore the impact of tourism development on the well-being of the area residents.

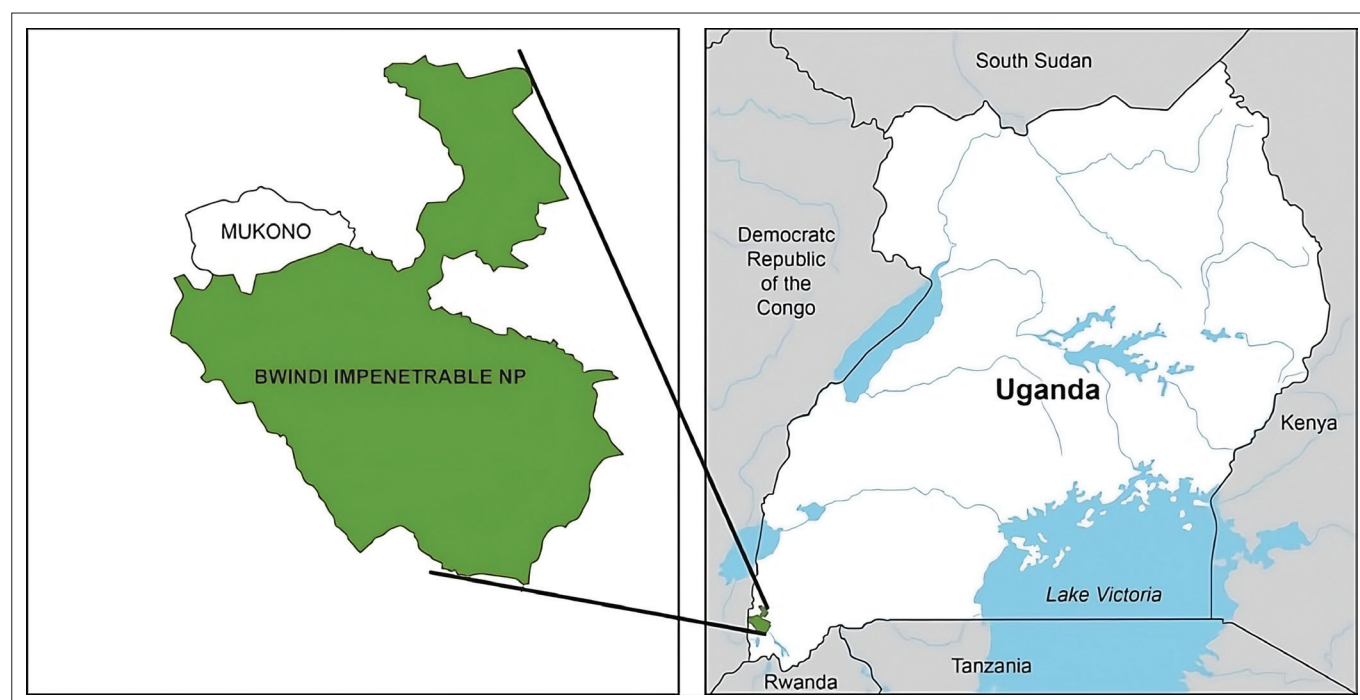
Bwindi Impenetrable National Park was established in 1991 to protect the wildlife, especially the mountain gorillas (Plumptre et al. 2019). However, the process involved forcefully evicting the residents from the forest and part of the land bordering the park. Some of the evicted residents – the Batwa – were formally living inside the forest (Ampumuza 2022).

Tourism activities in the area include gorilla trekking, the Batwa cultural experience, village tours, traditional dances, cultural walks and birding. There are 27 parishes that directly share a boundary with BINP. A Parish is made up of a number of villages. Among the parishes, Mukono (Figure 1) was purposely selected as the focal site for this study because of several compelling factors. Firstly, its socio-ethnic diversity – including both Batwa and Bakiga

populations (Tumusime et al. 2018) – offers a unique opportunity to explore how ethnicity, historical dispossession, land tenure and social positioning influence interactions with tourism and conservation regimes. Secondly, Mukono's geographical proximity to key tourism hubs around BINP (Twinamatsiko et al. 2024) enhances its relevance, as residents are more likely to engage directly or indirectly with tourism-related activities. Thirdly, the parish exhibits marked variation in access to park-related benefits (Twinamatsiko & Kagoro 2024), making it a valuable context for examining issues of equity and exclusion. In addition, Mukono's combination of community-driven tourism projects, NGO-managed programmes, and UWA revenue-sharing systems (Sandbrook et al. 2018) exemplify the intricate interplay between tourism and conservation seen on a regional scale, making it a localised reflection of these broader dynamics.

### Research methods and design

As mentioned earlier, this study employed an embedded case study design (Cohen et al. 2018; Yin 2014) to investigate the complex and multidimensional influence of tourism development on the well-being of communities living adjacent to BINP. The embedded case study approach was selected because of its ability to capture interactions across multiple units of analysis – such as households, ethnic groups (e.g., Batwa and Bakiga) and tourism-related institutions – within a real-world context (Budiyanto, Prananto & Tan 2019). This design was particularly appropriate for examining how structural, socio-cultural and ecological factors interact to shape livelihood outcomes in a rural, historically marginalised region.



Source: Ahebwa, W.M., Van der Duim, V.R. & Sandbrook, C.G., 2012, 'Private-community partnerships: Investigating a new approach to conservation and development in Uganda', *Conservation and Society* 10(4). [https://journals.iwmm.com/coas/fulltext/2012/10040/private\\_community\\_partnerships\\_\\_investigating\\_a.1.aspx](https://journals.iwmm.com/coas/fulltext/2012/10040/private_community_partnerships__investigating_a.1.aspx)

**FIGURE 1:** Location of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Mukono Parish.

To deepen the analysis and foreground the subjective experiences of community members, the study integrated a hermeneutic phenomenological framework (Dibley et al. 2020). This approach enabled the exploration of participants' lived realities and the meanings they attach to tourism, conservation and well-being. It was especially valuable for amplifying the voices of groups often excluded from formal tourism and governance processes, such as the Batwa, and for understanding how identity, memory and place-based knowledge influence well-being perceptions. Hermeneutic phenomenology complemented the case study approach by ensuring that participants' narratives were not merely illustrative but central to the analysis.

The methodological approach was anchored in an integrated theoretical framework combining Sen's capability approach, the biocultural approach and the multidimensional well-being approach. The capability approach provided a lens through which to assess the freedoms and opportunities available to individuals to achieve valued outcomes. The biocultural approach emphasised the interconnectedness of cultural identity, ecological relations and social well-being, making it particularly relevant in a conservation setting where land and heritage are tightly interwoven. Meanwhile, the multidimensional well-being approach offered a structure to assess well-being across material (e.g., income, health), relational (e.g., social connections, governance) and subjective (e.g., aspirations, satisfaction) domains. The integration of these frameworks ensured that the study addressed both structural and experiential dimensions of development and inequality.

The embedded case study and hermeneutic phenomenological approach worked synergistically with the integrated framework. The case study provided contextual and structural insights that aligned with the capability approach's focus on institutional and social barriers to agency and opportunity. The phenomenological perspective enhanced the biocultural approach by capturing local meanings, practices and spiritual ties to land, particularly among Indigenous and marginalised populations. It also enriched the multidimensional well-being lens by providing thick descriptions of subjective and relational well-being that are not easily quantifiable.

Data collection took place between June and July 2020, using purposive and snowball sampling. Participants were selected based on their residence in the area since at least 1991 (the year of BINP's official gazette), with attention to diversity in age, gender, livelihood and ethnicity. Special efforts were made to include the Batwa, who have experienced historical displacement and marginalisation, by working with local leaders, NGOs and using snowball techniques to reach those outside formal tourism or governance networks.

The fieldwork began with a 3-month immersive engagement phase, allowing the researcher to participate in local events, build trust and gain contextual insight into daily life and tourism-conservation dynamics. Semi-structured interviews

were conducted in Rukiga, the local language, and were facilitated by three experienced local research assistants to ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness. The interview protocol was informed by existing literature on tourism and well-being (e.g., Buzinde 2020; Dłużewska 2019; Jiricka-Pürrier et al. 2019; Morea 2021; Naidoo et al. 2019; Pope 2018; Smith & Diekmann 2017) and included a mix of open-ended and Likert-style questions. These probes explored themes such as access to land and services, changes in social relations, tourism benefits and burdens and perceptions of well-being over time.

For data analysis, the study adopted an iterative coding approach inspired by Corbin and Strauss (2015). This began with open coding to identify initial themes emerging from the data – such as 'land displacement', 'benefit inequity' and 'cultural erosion'. These codes were then grouped through axial coding into broader categories like 'marginalisation', 'resilience' and 'adaptive strategies'. Finally, selective coding and theoretical synthesis were used to construct core themes that directly linked empirical data to the study's conceptual framework. Throughout, the researcher used memo-writing and field notes (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña 2014) to capture reflexive insights and contextual nuances.

The theoretical frameworks were explicitly operationalised in the analysis. Sen's capability approach was used to identify structural constraints to agency and to examine the kinds of choices people valued. The biocultural approach helped interpret narratives about identity, belonging and human-nature relations, while the multidimensional well-being approach was used to categorise data into relevant well-being domains. This triangulated methodological and theoretical strategy ensured that the research was both analytically rigorous and grounded in the lived experiences of people affected by tourism and conservation at BINP's periphery.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) Research Ethics Committee. Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research. Participants gave informed consent and were assigned anonymised identifiers. Interviews were conducted in private, and voluntary participation was emphasised, in accordance with ethical research standards.

## Results

### Overview of respondents

A total of 70 households were surveyed, with 50% of respondents identifying as male – reflecting balanced gender participation. The average age was 53 years for men and 51 years for women. All respondents had resided in the area since before BINP was gazetted in 1991. The majority were married, and education levels were generally low, with only 10% having never attended school and very few reaching secondary or post-secondary education. Livelihoods were

predominantly agricultural, followed by casual labour, small-scale business, formal employment and livestock rearing.

## Perceived positive impacts of tourism development

### Infrastructure and public services

Tourism's presence in communities surrounding BINP has been widely associated with noticeable improvements in infrastructure and public service delivery. Respondents frequently pointed to tangible developments such as road construction and maintenance, electrification, access to clean and safe water, new school facilities and enhanced healthcare services. These infrastructure gains were seen not only as indicators of modernisation but also as critical enablers of well-being and socio-economic mobility. The survey findings reflect this sentiment, with 81% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that tourism had significantly contributed to better infrastructure in their communities.

### Economic opportunities and livelihoods

Tourism is normally lauded as a key driver of economic activity in communities adjacent to national parks. In communities next to BINP, it was found to have generated new income-generating avenues through employment, entrepreneurship and expanded market access, reshaping local livelihoods in notable ways. Approximately 68% of respondents reported increased household income through tourism-related jobs such as guiding, porter services and hospitality work. The improved road network also expanded market access for agricultural products and locally made crafts. Batwa respondents noted increased visibility of their handicrafts, though this was not always accompanied by long-term economic security.

### Social recognition and community pride

Living adjacent to renowned national parks has been known to evoke a strong sense of social recognition and community pride (Sarr, Sène-Harper & Gonzalez-Hernandez 2021), as communities often associate their identity with the global importance of these PAs and the visibility they gain through tourism and conservation efforts. In the case of Bwindi, all respondents expressed pride in living near an internationally celebrated destination. The 'celebrity' status of the park fostered a sense of communal prestige, while interactions with international tourists were perceived as culturally enriching and affirming. In addition, participation in community-based organisations and local tourism associations provided residents with opportunities for exposure and engagement in global conservation narratives, further reinforcing a shared sense of pride and belonging.

### Education and health services

Tourism has been known to play a vital role in improving access to education and healthcare in communities surrounding PAs. In Bwindi's periphery, tourism-linked philanthropy and

NGO partnerships have significantly enhanced these services. Respondents revealed that they now have a fully-fledged community hospital, supported by subsidised health insurance schemes made possible as a result of tourism development in the area. In addition, most respondents cited contributions from tourists and tourism-related businesses as supporting school construction and tuition sponsorships, further strengthening educational opportunities for local children.

### Non-material dimensions of well-being

The broader well-being perspective, which encompasses both objective and subjective dimensions, recognises that tourism can contribute to strengthening non-material aspects of life (Croes, Park & Bonilla 2024; Garcia Rodrigues, Villasante & Sousa Pinto 2022). Respondents from Bwindi revealed that tourism has enhanced social cohesion, safety and a sense of community. They associated tourism with improvements in political stability and increased respect within the community, as well as greater intergroup cooperation in some areas. These social and relational elements are key components of holistic well-being frameworks, which emphasise that well-being extends beyond material wealth to include social capital, political stability and cultural identity.

## Perceived negative impacts of tourism development

### Rising costs and land insecurity

Tourism growth around BINP has intensified land competition, making land increasingly unaffordable for local residents. Indeed, tourism-driven land commodification was a major concern, with over 63% of the respondents revealing that land had become unaffordable because of increased demand from tourism investors. Several expressed fear of eventual displacement and generational loss of land access. As one farmer remarked, 'My children will have no land ... tourism eats our future'.

### Inequitable access to opportunities

Despite the economic potential of tourism in park-adjacent areas, access to its benefits remains unevenly distributed. Many of the respondents, particularly the Batwa and poorer Bakiga, felt excluded from meaningful participation. Barriers cited included lack of education, technical training, capital and social networks. Likert data revealed that 72% of the respondents acknowledged income benefits, but many expressed frustrations with elite capture. One of the respondents stated: 'Lodge managers hire their relatives ... we get only casual work'.

### Cultural commodification and identity loss

Tourism expansion on the peripheral of BINP has raised concerns among many respondents about cultural commodification, with local traditions being reshaped to satisfy tourist expectations. This trend is seen as threatening the authenticity of cultural identities, especially among the Batwa, who fear the erosion of their traditional practices and heritage. While 56% of Batwa respondents agreed tourism

promoted cultural expression, 74% felt their roles lacked autonomy. As one Batwa woman stated, 'We dance for money, but our land is still gone'. These findings reflect tensions between cultural visibility and control over representation.

### Ambiguous health impacts

Tourism development adjacent to BINP has produced mixed effects on the health and well-being of local communities. Although 45% of the respondents cited improved access to healthcare, only 38% believed their overall health had improved because of tourism. Rising food prices and treatment costs were identified as new barriers. These results highlight that the availability of services does not always translate to effective capability expansion or improved well-being, as outlined by Sen's framework.

### Social disruption and changing norms

The growth of tourism around Bwindi has contributed to significant social changes, some of which have disrupted established community norms and relationships. Likert responses showed that 49% of the participants believed tourism had weakened community values, while 32% saw improvements in intergroup relations. Concerns were raised about alcoholism, changes in youth behaviour and widening income gaps – indicators of shifting social cohesion and emergent inequalities. While some saw these changes as signs of modernisation, others viewed them as contributing to moral decline, weakened social cohesion and increased intergenerational tensions. These transformations reveal how tourism can reshape not only economies but also the social fabric of park-adjacent communities.

## Discussion

The results of this study underscore the complex and uneven ways tourism development influence the well-being of residents in communities surrounding BINP. While respondents acknowledged clear gains – such as improved infrastructure, healthcare access and new economic opportunities – these benefits were distributed unequally across social groups, particularly along lines of ethnicity, education and land ownership. The findings reveal how material, relational and subjective dimensions of well-being intersect, and highlight critical gaps in equity and agency that challenge dominant narratives of tourism as an inherently pro-poor or community-based strategy.

### Capabilities and structural constraints

Sen's capability approach offers a useful lens for interpreting these findings. Respondents described not only outcomes (jobs, income, services) but also the conditions that shape whether and how they could benefit from tourism. For many, especially Batwa and landless residents, these freedoms were constrained by historical dispossession, lack of education and limited political voice. Even where tourism infrastructure was present, respondents often lacked the

capability to convert these resources into valued ways of life, confirming arguments by scholars who critique development models that overlook structural inequalities (Mair 2023; Rogerson & Rogerson 2021; Scheyvens 2024; Sen 1999).

For example, Batwa respondents noted being excluded from high-skilled jobs and lacking representation in decision-making about tourism benefits. These constraints highlight a capability deprivation – not simply a lack of income, but a lack of real opportunities to live a life they value. This aligns with previous studies that show how formal tourism employment and business opportunities often remain inaccessible to marginalised groups without targeted interventions (Ampumuza et al. 2020; Bakker 2019; Thakur et al. 2023).

### Biocultural displacement and identity loss

The biocultural approach deepens our understanding of tourism's non-material impacts. Findings revealed that well-being for many respondents – particularly the Batwa – is inseparable from land, cultural continuity and traditional forest knowledge. While tourism has created some avenues for cultural expression (e.g., performance and crafts), these are often controlled by external actors, commodified and disconnected from traditional cultural meanings. Batwa participants expressed concern about losing not only land but also dignity, identity and spiritual ties to the forest.

These findings reinforce critiques of conservation and tourism models that prioritise ecological and economic objectives at the expense of indigenous rights and biocultural diversity (Bridgewater & Rotherham 2019; Lukawiecki et al. 2022). Moreover, while Batwa communities may be visible in tourism marketing, their actual cultural autonomy and participation in benefit-sharing remain marginal, supporting research that warns of symbolic inclusion masking structural exclusion (Ampumuza et al. 2020).

### Multidimensional experiences of well-being

The multidimensional well-being framework allowed for a holistic exploration of the tourism–well-being nexus. Respondents did not define well-being solely in economic terms. Many highlighted relational and subjective dimensions such as respect, belonging, peace and spiritual fulfilment. Positive experiences – like pride in BINP's international status and the perceived stability it brings – were juxtaposed with growing concerns about rising land prices, limited access to decision-making and social tensions.

These findings affirm the value of multidimensional frameworks in tourism research (Coulthard et al. 2018; Joseph & McGregor 2020; McGregor 2018). They challenge narrow benefit-focused evaluations and call for assessments that consider how people feel about their lives, their relationships and their futures – not just whether they earn more income or gain infrastructure.

## Confirming and extending the literature

This study confirms and extends existing critiques of CBT and conservation-linked development. While CBT in Bwindi has led to increased employment and service delivery in some areas (Sandbrook 2015), the distribution of these benefits is highly uneven. Women, the poor and historically displaced groups remain underrepresented in leadership roles and high-value tourism sectors. This reflects broader patterns in other protected area contexts, where elite capture and institutional barriers limit meaningful local empowerment (Baten 2024; Petriello et al. 2025; Spenceley et al. 2021).

In addition, the study challenges assumptions that tourism is inherently inclusive or empowering. While it can open new opportunities, it can also reproduce old inequalities in new forms – through market-based exclusions, cultural commodification and top-down benefit allocation (Fletcher 2020; Fletcher et al. 2019; Wearing et al. 2019).

## Community empowerment and policy implications

A key implication of this study is the need to move beyond benefit-sharing to true community empowerment. Current tourism initiatives and revenue-sharing schemes, while well-intentioned, often lack transparency, accountability and inclusion. Respondents called for more localised control over tourism resources, equitable access to training and finance and protection against speculative land grabs.

For tourism to serve as a tool for equitable development, especially in conservation settings, it must be anchored in community-driven planning, recognition of indigenous rights and structural reforms that enhance local agency. This includes not only redistributing benefits but also transforming governance structures to enable real participation in tourism decision-making.

These findings are relevant beyond Bwindi. Similar dynamics have been observed in other African parks where tourism is promoted as a conservation solution – often without adequate safeguards for equity, justice and cultural resilience (Musavengane & Leonard 2022).

## Conclusion

This study has critically examined the complex and often contradictory impacts of tourism development on the well-being of communities surrounding BINP. Drawing on an integrated analytical framework that combines Sen's capability approach, the biocultural approach and the multidimensional well-being perspective, the research foregrounds the lived experiences of Batwa and Bakiga residents to illuminate how tourism can simultaneously contribute to and undermine local well-being. While tourism has facilitated positive developments – such as improved infrastructure, increased educational access and economic diversification – it has also

deepened existing structural inequalities, particularly among historically marginalised groups.

Tourism in Bwindi thus functions as both a driver and a disruptor of community well-being. The benefits it brings are tangible but unevenly distributed, and are accompanied by new vulnerabilities around land access, employment equity, cultural continuity and local governance. These outcomes are not incidental but are shaped by longstanding social hierarchies, unequal access to power and exclusionary governance structures. The findings demonstrate that well-being is not solely a matter of economic gain but is intimately tied to access to natural resources, cultural recognition, social inclusion and the capacity to influence decisions that affect one's life. Without addressing these deeper structural issues, conservation-linked tourism risks perpetuating the very injustices it purports to address.

To translate these insights into practice, this study calls for policy frameworks that are not only inclusive and adaptive but explicitly designed to dismantle systemic barriers. Strengthening land tenure and access rights is essential, particularly for indigenous groups like the Batwa, whose dispossession continues to constrain their opportunities and autonomy. Equally important is the need to ensure meaningful community representation in tourism planning and protected area governance, so that decision-making processes reflect local priorities and cultural values. Targeted investment in education and local capacity building, especially for youth and women, can help address barriers to employment and foster more equitable participation in the tourism economy. In addition, tourism models that are culturally grounded and community-driven – rather than externally imposed – offer greater potential for promoting social justice and sustainability. Reforming benefit-sharing mechanisms to improve transparency, curb elite capture and ensure broad-based distribution of tourism revenues is another critical step.

Future research should build on this study by using longitudinal and participatory methodologies to better understand how tourism impacts well-being over time and across different social groups. Particular attention should be given to how tourism and conservation intersect with indigenous identity, land claims and intergenerational livelihoods. Exploring the effectiveness of CBT initiatives, and the ways in which they promote local empowerment, resilience and cultural affirmation, is another promising avenue. Moreover, future scholarship should continue to develop and apply decolonising research approaches that elevate community voices and ensure that local people are not merely subjects of research but active agents in defining the future of conservation and development in their regions.

Overall, the case of BINP offers a critical lens through which to reflect on the broader intersections of tourism, conservation and development in developing countries. It points to the urgent need for inclusive development paradigms that

ensure economic returns while safeguarding social cohesion, cultural identity and ecological resilience. For tourism to become a truly transformative force, it must be anchored in equity, grounded in local realities and responsive to the historical and ongoing struggles of those living in conservation landscapes.

### Limitations and future research

This study is limited by its single-parish focus and its reliance on qualitative methods. While it offers in-depth, situated insights, broader generalisations should be made with caution. Future research could expand to include comparative studies across multiple parishes, incorporate longitudinal or mixed methods designs and involve co-research with indigenous and local communities to support participatory knowledge production.

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### Author's contributions

J.S. is the sole author of this research article.

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### Data availability

Data supporting this study are included within the article.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder or agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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