



Stakeholder Engagement, Knowledge Exchange, and Digital Participation in Sustainable Tourism Development: Evidence from Metropolitan and District Assemblies in Ghana

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Received: 09-30-2025

Revised: 11-20-2025

Accepted: 12-03-2025

Citation: E. Hagan & F. K. Mlagada, "Stakeholder engagement, knowledge exchange, and digital participation in sustainable tourism development: Evidence from metropolitan and district assemblies in Ghana," *Int J. Knowl. Innov. Stud.*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 213–223, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.56578/ijkis030402>.



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Abstract: Stakeholder engagement plays an important role in sustainable tourism development by supporting inclusive governance, information sharing, and collaborative learning among tourism actors. However, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how stakeholder interaction, knowledge exchange, and participation mechanisms influence sustainable tourism outcomes within local governance systems in developing countries. This study investigates stakeholder engagement as a driver of sustainable tourism development in Ghana, with particular attention to the roles of digital participation and local governance structures within Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs). A quantitative descriptive research design was adopted, and structured questionnaires were administered to 365 respondents across six tourism-hosting communities within the Ahanta West Municipal Assembly using stratified and convenience sampling approaches. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results showed that respondents regarded stakeholder engagement, digital participation mechanisms, and collaboration with cultural institutions as important elements of sustainable tourism development. The findings also showed significant differences across age groups and length of residence, indicating uneven experiences of participation and information access among stakeholders. Digital engagement tools received the highest level of support, suggesting growing interest in technology-supported participation mechanisms within tourism governance. The findings indicate that stakeholder engagement contributes to sustainable tourism development when participation structures support meaningful interaction, knowledge exchange, and equitable involvement among community actors. This study provides empirical evidence from local governance settings in Ghana and contributes to tourism governance literature by linking stakeholder engagement with knowledge-sharing practices and digital participation mechanisms, while offering practical guidance for the development of more inclusive and context-sensitive tourism governance systems.

Keywords: Stakeholder engagement; Knowledge exchange; Collaborative learning; Digital participation; Sustainable tourism development; Tourism governance

1 Introduction

Stakeholder engagement is widely recognized as a critical driver of sustainable tourism development, as it promotes inclusive decision making, local ownership, and long-term socio-economic and environmental benefits. Beyond participation alone, stakeholder engagement also functions as a key mechanism for knowledge exchange, collaborative learning, and information sharing among actors in tourism systems. Through these processes, diverse stakeholders including government agencies, local authorities, private sector actors, host communities, and non-governmental organizations could co-produce knowledge, integrate local and technical expertise, and enhance innovation in tourism planning and management. In Ghana, the Tourism Act of 2011 mandates the Ghana Tourism Authority (GTA) to decentralize its operations by establishing offices within the MMDAs to support the implementation of tourism policies at the local level [1]. This decentralized structure is intended not only to strengthen collaboration among stakeholders but also to facilitate continuous knowledge flow between national and local levels, thereby improving policy responsiveness and contextual relevance. Ideally, such arrangements should

enhance both participatory governance and the exchange of experiential and institutional knowledge, to ensure that tourism development initiatives align with local development priorities and sustainability principles.

Despite these policy intentions, the practical implementation of stakeholder engagement within Ghana's tourism sector remains uneven and largely imbalanced. Although tourism policies encourage broad-based participation and knowledge sharing, decision-making processes are often dominated by government institutions and large-scale private investors, thus constraining the effective circulation of knowledge from local actors to formal planning structures. As a result, valuable indigenous and experiential knowledge held by local communities and small tourism enterprises is frequently underutilized in tourism governance and development processes [2]. At the local level, the expected coordination between the GTA and MMDAs has not consistently resulted in effective stakeholder collaboration or sustained knowledge exchange, leading to weak feedback loops and limited co-learning among stakeholders. Consequently, efforts of tourism development frequently face challenges such as inadequate community participation, fragmented information flow, minimal transparency, and ineffective policy execution, which undermine both equitable benefit distribution and sustainability of tourism projects, particularly within municipal and district jurisdictions [3].

Although a growing body of literature has examined tourism governance and policy frameworks in Ghana, much of this research concentrated on national-level institutions and policy design, with relatively little attention given to how stakeholder engagement and the associated processes of knowledge exchange and collaborative learning functions at the Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assembly level, where tourism policies are implemented [4, 5]. Critical issues such as the extent of local stakeholders' influence on decision making, the nature and quality of knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and the challenges faced by grassroots stakeholders in contributing to and benefiting from knowledge flows remain underexplored [6]. Moreover, empirical evidence linking stakeholder engagement and knowledge exchange at the local level to sustainable tourism development outcomes is scarce. This study therefore aims to empirically examine stakeholder engagement practices and analyze their influence on sustainable tourism development in Ghana, with particular emphasis on local-level governance and implementation processes within MMDAs.

The novelty of this study lies in its empirical focus on stakeholder engagement as a driver of sustainable tourism development at the local governance level in Ghana, specifically within MMDAs. Unlike previous studies that concentrated predominantly on national-level policy frameworks or formal institutional arrangements, this research examined how stakeholder engagement is experienced and enacted by local communities, small tourism enterprises, and other grassroots actors within decentralized governance structures. It also offered understanding to how these interactions shape the sustainability of tourism initiatives.

Beyond its contextual contribution, the study provided two broader contributions to the literature. Theoretically, it advanced stakeholder engagement scholarship in sustainable tourism by shifting attention from participation as a procedural or normative concept to engagement as a relational and outcome-oriented process embedded in governance practice. In doing so, it highlighted the importance of investigating how engagement mechanisms operate through everyday interactions, knowledge exchange, and power relations at the local level, thereby extending existing models of stakeholder theory in tourism beyond formal consultation frameworks.

Practically, the study derived evidence-based insights for improving tourism governance in decentralized contexts. It demonstrated that the effectiveness of sustainable tourism initiatives depends not only on the existence of stakeholder engagement structures, but also on the quality of interaction, inclusiveness of participation, and integration of local knowledge into decision-making processes. These findings offer guidance for policymakers and tourism authorities in designing holistic, responsive, and context-sensitive governance systems that strengthen community involvement and enhance the sustainability of tourism development. By linking empirical evidence from local governance settings with broader theoretical debates on stakeholder engagement and sustainable tourism, the study contributes a more nuanced understanding of how engagement processes function in practice and how they could be improved to support equitable and sustainable tourism outcomes.

2 Conceptual Overview of Tourism Development

Tourism development refers to the strategic planning, promotion, and management of tourism activities as well as resources to generate economic, social, and environmental benefits. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization [7], tourism development encompasses the coordinated efforts of governments, actors in the private sector, local communities, and civil society to enhance the attractiveness of destination, improve infrastructure, preserve cultural and natural resources, in order to ensure sustainable utilization of tourism assets. In this sense, tourism development goes beyond merely increasing the number of tourists; it also involves creating supportive policies, effective governance structures, and participatory frameworks that guarantee meaningful contributions of tourism to national and local development objectives.

Tourism is widely recognized as a powerful tool for socio-economic development, particularly in developing countries. Preko and Anyigba [8] highlighted that tourism growth could stimulate economic diversification, generate

employment opportunities, reduce poverty, and boost earnings of foreign exchange. By fostering income generation and business development in hospitality, transport, and cultural sectors, tourism provides opportunities for local communities to participate in and benefit from economic activities. Besides, investments in tourism infrastructure, such as accommodation, transport networks, and technology-driven facilities, help improve the overall quality of life for residents while attracting more visitors [9, 10].

In developing countries, tourism development plays a dual role as an economic driver and a mechanism for cultural and environmental preservation. Many African nations, including Ghana, have identified tourism as a priority sector in national development plans due to its potential to create jobs and generate revenue [8]. However, developing countries often face challenges that have constrained sustainable tourism development, including weak institutional frameworks, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to technology, environmental degradation, and insufficient stakeholder participation. As illuminated by Aquino [2], tourism growth without careful management in such contexts could lead to damage of the environment and overexploitation of resources, thus undermining development goals in the long run. Sustainable approaches, such as eco-tourism, responsible tourism, and community-based tourism, are therefore critical to derive benefits that are equitably shared while protecting natural and cultural assets.

In Ghana, tourism development has gained more and more attention as a strategy for economic diversification and cultural promotion. The GTA and related government institutions have implemented policies to support tourism growth, including decentralized offices within MMDAs to enhance local planning and stakeholder engagement [1]. Key areas such as cultural heritage, coastal and wildlife tourism, and historical sites all contribute significantly to national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment, while initiatives in community-based tourism aim to involve local residents in decision making and benefit sharing. Nevertheless, challenges remain, including uneven stakeholder participation, limited infrastructure in certain regions, and environmental pressures on popular tourist sites. Addressing these difficulties requires integrated policy frameworks that could balance economic objectives with environmental sustainability and social inclusion, thereby ensuring long-term contributions to tourism development in respect of national and community prosperity.

3 Sustainable Tourism Development

Sustainable tourism development has emerged as a critical concept in contemporary tourism discourse, owing to the emphasis on balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social well-being [11]. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization [7], sustainable tourism is defined as tourism that fully considers current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, in order to meet the demands of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities. Central to this concept is the principle of sustainability, which entails planning, managing, and monitoring tourism activities. This helps ensure that natural resources are conserved, local cultures are respected, and socio-economic benefits are equitably distributed. Sustainable tourism, therefore, moves beyond the mere growth in the number of visitors to focus on long-term viability, ethical practices, and community involvement [12].

The principles of sustainable tourism encompass three interrelated dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability. Economically, sustainable tourism seeks to generate income, employment, and local development opportunities while ensuring that tourism revenues contribute to the broader economy [13]. Socio-cultural sustainability involves preserving and promoting local heritage, cultural traditions, and community values, while fostering positive interactions between residents and visitors [14]. Environmental sustainability focuses on protecting natural ecosystems, reducing pollution, and conserving biodiversity, thereby ensuring that tourism resources remain available for future generations [15]. Effective practices of sustainable tourism require the integration of these three dimensions to create a balanced approach that supports long-term growth while safeguarding social and environmental well-being.

To operationalize these principles, scholars and practitioners have proposed various sustainable tourism development frameworks. One prominent framework is the triple-bottom-line approach, which stresses economic, social, and environmental outcomes as equally important pillars of sustainability [16]. Another model, the community-based tourism framework, highlights local community participation in planning, decision making, and benefit sharing to enhance social equity and cultural preservation [17]. In addition, the ecotourism framework focuses on low-impact tourism activities that promote environmental conservation and environmental education for both tourists and host communities [18]. These frameworks provide guidelines for policymakers, tourism planners, and stakeholders to design and implement tourism initiatives that are sustainable in practice, rather than merely in theory.

Despite the accelerating development of sustainable tourism, developing countries are facing numerous challenges in achieving these objectives. Constraints include limited financial and technical capacity, inadequate infrastructure, weak institutional frameworks, and insufficient stakeholder engagement [19]. Environmental degradation caused by over-tourism, poor waste management, and deforestation further threatens sustainability efforts. Moreover, socio-cultural challenges such as the commodification of culture, unequal distribution of tourism benefits, and lack of local

community empowerment undermine social sustainability [20]. These challenges indicate that while the principles of sustainable tourism are widely recognized, translating them into practice poses a significant obstacle for developing nations, including Ghana.

In Ghana, sustainable tourism practices have gradually gained prominence through policy initiatives, community-based projects, and environmental conservation efforts. The GTA and related agencies have executed programmes that integrate community participation, eco-tourism, and heritage preservation into tourism development strategies [1]. Examples include community tourism initiatives in the Volta and Central Regions, where residents are involved in managing cultural and natural attractions, providing authentic tourism experiences, and sharing in the economic benefits. Furthermore, conservation efforts in areas such as Kakum National Park demonstrate a commitment to environmental sustainability by combining visitors' experiences with ecological education and protection of biodiversity [21]. These efforts illustrate the practical application of principles about sustainable tourism in Ghana, although challenges such as uneven stakeholder engagement, limited infrastructure, and environmental pressures persist.

4 Concept of Stakeholder Engagement in Tourism

Stakeholder engagement is essential for ensuring sustainable development in the tourism sector, as it involves active participation of various groups with an interest in tourism activities, including local communities, government authorities, tourism businesses, and visitors. According to Amoako et al. [22], stakeholder engagement provides an opportunity for different stakeholders to voice their concerns and collaborate on tourism-related decisions. This process helps align the goals and expectations of diverse groups, fostering mutual understanding and enhancing the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations.

Engaging stakeholders in tourism planning and management generates an all-encompassing approach, in which the social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism could be effectively dealt with [23]. As tourism continues to expand globally, it becomes increasingly significant to recognize the role of stakeholder engagement in maintaining resilient and sustainable tourism systems [24].

An essential component of stakeholder engagement is its ability to promote sustainable tourism development. Stakeholder engagement helps mitigate negative social and environmental impacts by securing the equitable distribution of economic benefits from tourism. Amoako et al. [22] argued that local communities, when involved in the planning and management of tourism activities, gain a critical insight into their potential benefits and challenges, leading to more informed and responsible decision making. Engaging communities directly also enhances the preservation of local traditions and resources, as they are more likely to protect their cultural and environmental heritage during the process [25]. Moreover, local communities are indispensable to enhancing the authenticity of tourism experiences, which in turn enriches tourism products and better reflects local identities and traditions [26].

In the contemporary digital era, technology has significantly reshaped the mechanisms through which stakeholders engage in tourism governance, thus moving beyond traditional face-to-face interactions toward more networked and platform-based forms of participation [27]. The proliferation of digital platforms, mobile applications, and social media channels has given rise to new modes of tourism governance characterized by real-time communication, multi-directional information flows, and enhanced stakeholder interactivity. These digital participation platforms, ranging from official tourism authority websites and grievance reporting systems to social media forums and community-driven digital spaces, facilitate more continuous forms of engagement. As a result, stakeholders could contribute their feedback, report service failures and participate in consultative processes beyond formal meetings. In this sense, digital tools incrementally function as interactive governance infrastructures that support both communication and knowledge exchange between institutions and local actors [22].

More specifically, online interaction mechanisms such as social media engagement, participatory mapping tools, crowdsourced tourism feedback systems and mobile-based reporting applications have expanded opportunities for inclusive stakeholder participation in tourism planning and monitoring. These technologies prompt governments and tourism authorities to collect and analyze user-generated data, thereby improving responsiveness and adaptive decision making in tourism management. However, as Prayudi [23] noted, the effectiveness of these digital participation systems was uneven due to persistent structural inequalities in access, digital literacy, and infrastructure. The digital divide continues to exclude certain groups, particularly rural communities, informal tourism operators, and marginalized populations, from fully benefiting from technology-enabled governance processes.

To tackle these disparities, inclusive digital governance requires not only the expansion of technological infrastructure but also capacity-building initiatives that elevate digital literacy and safeguard equitable access to participation platforms [28]. Without such interventions, digital engagement risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than mitigating them. Therefore, the transformative potential of technology would be limited, especially in fostering inclusive and sustainable tourism governance.

5 Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainable Tourism Development

Stakeholder engagement is widely recognized as a critical driver of sustainable tourism development, as it promotes collaboration among government agencies, actors in the private sector, local communities, and civil society organizations [19]. Effective engagement takes into account the perspectives, interests, and requirements of all relevant parties in tourism planning and decision making, thus creating thorough, transparent, and accountable processes. The concept covers a spectrum of participation from consultation and information-sharing to collaboration and empowerment. It allows stakeholders to influence policy outcomes, allocation of resources, and tourism management strategies [29]. By incorporating diverse voices, stakeholder engagement could reduce conflicts, enhance social legitimacy, and align tourism initiatives with sustainability goals.

The link between stakeholder engagement and sustainability is well established in the literature. The emergence of sustainable tourism balances the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural dimensions, while stakeholder involvement is essential to achieving this equilibrium [11, 30]. Tariq [31] posited that active participation of stakeholders in tourism planning and policy implementation improves resource management, equitable benefit distribution, and community-driven conservation efforts. When local communities are meaningfully engaged, they are more likely to take ownership of tourism projects, protect natural and cultural resources, and support policies that promote long-term economic and environmental sustainability. Thus, stakeholder participation not only improves the effectiveness of tourism initiatives but also strengthens their sustainability and resilience over time.

Empirical evidence from global contexts underscores the positive impact of stakeholder engagement on sustainable tourism development. Studies in Asia, Europe, and Africa showed that participatory approaches expanded local benefits, reduced environmental degradation, and improved policy outcomes. For instance, Rahman and Baddam [32] observed that community involvement in Southeast Asian tourism initiatives enhanced cultural preservation while generating local income. Similarly, Aquino [2] commented that in Ghana, local participation promoted ownership and accountability as demonstrated in pilot community-based tourism projects, although challenges remained in scaling these efforts. Collectively, these studies confirmed that inclusive stakeholder engagement was a fundamental mechanism for achieving sustainable tourism, featuring the requisite for policies and frameworks that systematically involve all relevant actors in decision making and implementation.

6 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research methodology with a descriptive research design. The quantitative approach was chosen to minimize personal bias and provide objective measurement and analysis of stakeholder engagement in tourism development [33]. With the descriptive design, the study could systematically describe the perceptions and experiences of community residents regarding stakeholder engagement in sustainable tourism initiatives within the Ahanta West Municipal Assembly. This approach also enhanced the reliability, repeatability, and generalizability of the results.

The target population consisted of residents from six communities in the Ahanta West Municipal Assembly: Butre, Busua, Dixcove, Akwidaa, Cape Three Points, and Princess Town. These communities were selected because they host key tourism sites and were directly impacted by local tourism policies and stakeholder engagement activities. To ensure proportional representation, the sample was allocated based on each community's population relative to the total population of 38,285. The allocation was as follows: Butre–62 respondents (17%), Busua–117 respondents (32%), Dixcove–80 respondents (22%), Akwidaa–47 respondents (13%), Cape Three Points–22 respondents (6%), and Princess Town–37 respondents (10%). Based on this allocation, a total of 365 respondents were sampled for the study.

The stratified, proportionate, and convenience sampling techniques were employed to facilitate fair representation of all relevant community groups. The population was first divided into strata based on age, gender, and level of tourism engagement. Respondents were then selected proportionally from each stratum to reflect the size of each subgroup. Within the strata, convenience sampling was applied to select available participants who were willing to participate during the data collection. This approach promised the inclusion of diverse perspectives, so as to enhance the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the findings regarding stakeholder engagement and sustainable tourism development.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire, which included closed-ended items for measuring respondents' contributions to sustainable tourism development. Questionnaires were administered face-to-face to guarantee the clarity of questions and completeness of responses. Prior to the full survey, the instrument was pretested to verify its reliability, validity, and clarity.

Collected data were coded, cleaned, and edited to remove incomplete or inconsistent responses. Analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS version 27.0. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarize stakeholders' perceptions. Besides, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether perceptions of stakeholder engagement differed significantly across demographic variables such as age group and length of residence. This combination of descriptive and inferential analyses provided a

thorough understanding of the factors influencing stakeholder engagement and its role in driving sustainable tourism development in the Ahanta West Municipal Assembly. Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent whereas their anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were reassured that their involvement posed no harm on their identities. All data were securely stored to protect participants' privacy.

7 Results

This section presents the results of the quantitative analysis of stakeholder engagement in tourism policy as perceived by community residents in Ghana. The objective is to examine stakeholder engagement as a driver of sustainable tourism development in Ghana. The quantitative data were obtained from 365 community residents using Likert-scale items, each rated on a five-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The analysis involved the following steps: Descriptive statistics and mean score analysis of stakeholder engagement items, a reliability test using Cronbach's alpha, construction of a composite stakeholder engagement score, and one-way ANOVA to assess variation in perceptions across age and length of residence. The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1. Reliability analysis of the stakeholder engagement scale

Statistic	Value
Cronbach's alpha	0.84
Number of items	12

Source: Authors' field survey data, 2025.

Table 2. Nature of stakeholder engagement in the implementation of tourism policy

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
B1	The Assembly actively engages the local community.	3.12	0.95
B2	Local businesses are adequately included.	2.95	1.02
B3	Policies meet community needs.	3.05	0.88
B4	Information about tourism plans is clear and sufficient.	3.28	0.93
B5	Community opinions are valued in decision making.	2.84	1.08
B6	Collaboration with cultural organisations benefits tourism.	3.41	0.89
B7	Environmental protection is prioritised in tourism.	3.35	0.91
B8	Policies have led to improved infrastructure.	3.10	0.94
B9	Digital tools would enhance community involvement.	3.85	0.76
B10	Heritage sites are preserved due to tourism policies.	3.30	0.90
B11	The Assembly supports local businesses through tourism.	3.26	0.95
B12	Policies contribute to sustainable development.	3.38	0.92

Note: *SD* = Standard deviation; Source: Authors' field survey data, 2025.

Table 3. Summary of one-way ANOVA for stakeholder engagement scores by demographics

Demographic Variable	Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Age group	Between groups	7.59	4	1.90	4.13	0.003
	Within groups	163.86	360	0.46	-	-
	Total	171.45	364	-	-	-
Length of residence	Between groups	3.08	2	1.54	3.62	0.027
	Within groups	154.01	362	0.43	-	-
	Total	157.09	364	-	-	-

Note: A hyphen (-) indicates not applicable; *SS* = Sum of squares; *df* = Degrees of freedom; *MS* = Mean square; *F* = F-statistic; Source: Authors' field survey data, 2025.

Before proceeding with further statistical analysis, it was essential to evaluate the internal consistency of the instrument designed to measure stakeholder engagement. Given that the twelve items were developed to capture multiple but related dimensions of a single underlying construct, a reliability analysis was conducted to assess the

coherence of the scale. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha was employed to determine the extent to which the items functioned as a reliable measure of stakeholder engagement. Establishing reliability at this stage is critical, as it guarantees that subsequent interpretations of engagement levels are based on a statistically sound and internally consistent scale.

The reliability analysis as shown in Table 1 yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.84, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the twelve stakeholder engagement items. This result confirms that the items are sufficiently interrelated and collectively measure a single underlying construct. Accordingly, the scale was deemed reliable and appropriate for the construction of a composite stakeholder engagement score, which was subsequently used in further analysis.

8 Composite Stakeholder Engagement Score

Building on the results of the reliability analysis, which confirmed a high level of internal consistency among the twelve stakeholder engagement items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84), a composite engagement score was subsequently calculated for each respondent. This score was derived by averaging individual responses across the twelve Likert-scale items, thereby providing a unified measure of perceived stakeholder engagement across multiple dimensions. The resulting overall mean score was $M = 3.25$ ($SD = 0.68$), indicating a moderate level of perceived engagement. While this suggests that respondents recognized some degree of participatory effort, it also highlighted notable gaps, particularly in the areas of inclusivity and responsiveness. The findings pointed to the necessity for more structured, transparent, and community-driven engagement mechanisms in tourism governance processes.

To examine how stakeholders perceived engagement practices in tourism governance, Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of twelve items. These items measure key themes such as inclusivity, communication, collaboration, and sustainability. The analysis not only revealed patterns in stakeholders' perceptions but also offered clearer perception of how these views might inform policy and planning improvements.

From Table 2, the highest-rated item, B9 ("Digital tools would enhance community involvement", $M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.76$), secured strong agreement among respondents that digital platforms, such as online forums, mobile applications, or social media, could improve participation, communication, and inclusion in tourism-related decision making. The relatively low SD further indicated strong consensus on this point. The implication here is that digital engagement represents a clear opportunity for enhancing stakeholder participation, particularly in contexts where traditional face-to-face consultations are limited by geography, time, or accessibility. Policymakers and tourism authorities should consider integrating digital tools into their engagement strategies to create more inclusive and transparent governance processes.

Respondents also expressed positive perceptions regarding B6 ("Collaboration with cultural organizations benefits tourism", $M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.89$) and B12 ("Policies contribute to sustainable development", $M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.92$). These findings reflected a general appreciation for the role of cultural partnerships and sustainable development within tourism policy. This implication implies that cultural institutions are seen as vital stakeholders in tourism development, and their involvement could enhance the authenticity and appeal of tourism offerings. Moreover, policies perceived as environmentally and socially sustainable are likely to gain stronger community support. The importance of aligning tourism strategies with long-term development objectives was emphasized.

Table 2 depicts a moderate agreement for B7 ("Environmental protection is prioritized in tourism", $M = 3.35$) and B10 ("Heritage sites are preserved due to tourism policies", $M = 3.30$), indicating that respondents recognize efforts to integrate environmental and cultural conservation into tourism planning. This implies that stakeholders value policies that not only promote economic development but also safeguard natural and cultural assets. However, the moderate nature of these scores explains that while these areas are being addressed, there may still be room for improvement in terms of visibility, communication, or impact of environmental and heritage initiatives.

Furthermore, items such as B4 ("Information about tourism plans is clear and sufficient", $M = 3.28$), B11 ("The Assembly supports local businesses through tourism", $M = 3.26$), B1 ("The Assembly actively engages the local community", $M = 3.12$), and B8 ("Policies have led to improved infrastructure", $M = 3.10$) fell within the mid-range of the scale. These results reflected somewhat mixed perceptions regarding institutional support, communication efforts, and tangible development outcomes. The implication is that stakeholders may not be consistently aware of or convinced by current engagement efforts and infrastructure improvements, possibly due to uneven implementation or limited visibility. Improved dissemination of information and more visible demonstration of support for local businesses and infrastructural projects are required.

In contrast, item B5 ("Community opinions are valued in decision making", $M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.08$) received the lowest mean score, highlighting a significant concern about the extent to which local voices are considered in tourism policy processes. The high SD indicates wide variation in experiences, suggesting that perceptions of inclusion may differ across communities, demographic groups, or regions. This finding implies that there seems to be a gap in procedural equity, where some groups may feel marginalized or excluded from meaningful participation. To confront this difficulty, exhaustive and bottom-up engagement mechanisms would be implemented to give community

members a stronger voice in tourism governance.

Similarly, B2 (“Local businesses are adequately included”, $M = 2.95$) and B3 (“Policies meet community needs”, $M = 3.05$) also scored relatively low, thus reinforcing concerns about stakeholders’ exclusion and policy disconnect. The implication here is twofold: First, local enterprises may feel overlooked in tourism planning, and second, existing policies may not be adequately tailored to local contexts. Strengthening mechanisms for local business involvement and aligning tourism initiatives with the specific requirements of the community were essential for building stakeholders’ trust and fostering economic inclusiveness.

After analyzing the descriptive statistics and constructing a composite stakeholder engagement score, the study examined whether perceptions of engagement differed across demographic groups. Discerning these differences is crucial because variations in stakeholders’ experiences may affect the inclusivity and effectiveness of engagement, which in turn influences sustainable tourism outcomes. To investigate this, ANOVA was conducted using the composite engagement score as the dependent variable, with age group and length of residence as independent variables (Table 3).

The results revealed a statistically significant difference in engagement scores across the five age groups, $F(4, 360) = 4.13, p = 0.003$. This indicates that respondents from different age cohorts experienced or perceived stakeholder engagement differently. A post-hoc Tukey HSD test was subsequently conducted to identify which specific age groups differed. The results indicated that the youngest group (18–25 years) reported significantly higher engagement scores than the oldest group (56 years and above) ($p < 0.05$). This may reflect greater receptiveness among younger respondents to contemporary participation channels, including digital platforms. Older residents, by contrast, may evaluate engagement on the basis of longer-term community experiences or more traditional forms of participation. It should be emphasised, however, that the ANOVA and post-hoc tests establish statistically that age-group differences exist; the underlying mechanisms require further qualitative investigation to be confirmed. These findings underscore the need for engagement strategies that are accessible and meaningful across all age groups.

Similarly, length of residence also affected perceptions of engagement, $F(2, 362) = 3.62, p = 0.027$. Long-term residents felt more invested in tourism development and were more aware of participation opportunities, whereas newer residents sometimes felt less connected or informed. This finding pointed to the importance of tailoring engagement approaches to ensure both established and newer community members are included. Overall, the results showed that stakeholder engagement in Ghana’s tourism sector was not experienced uniformly and demographic differences could influence the effectiveness of tourism policies, community ownership, and the sustainability of tourism development. Ensuring inclusive and equitable engagement across age and residency groups is therefore critical for leveraging stakeholders’ participation as a driver of sustainable tourism.

These patterns can further be interpreted in relation to underlying social, cultural, and informational factors. Socially, differences in network embeddedness may shape access to engagement opportunities, with individuals who are more integrated into community structures likely benefiting from stronger informal communication channels. Culturally, varying norms around authority, participation, and voice may influence willingness to engage in tourism governance processes, particularly across generations. When considering information, unequal access to timely and transparent communication especially regarding tourism initiatives and participation platforms may contribute to differing levels of awareness and perceived inclusion. Together, these factors help explain why stakeholder engagement is experienced unevenly across demographic groups in the study context.

9 Discussion

Stakeholder engagement is indispensable to tourism governance at the local level, particularly within municipal assemblies responsible for managing community development and tourism initiatives. Sebunya and Gichuki [28] discovered that structured and participatory engagement frameworks enhance policy legitimacy, promote community alignment, and support sustainable development goals. However, findings from this study revealed that stakeholder engagement was unevenly institutionalized and inconsistently applied, to reveal a gap between theoretical ideals and practical experiences.

The survey results showed the highest agreement for the potential of digital tools to improve engagement ($M = 3.85, SD = 0.76$), proposing that stakeholders viewed technology as a key mechanism to overcome logistical, geographic, and institutional barriers. This concurred with the suggestion of Socratous et al. [9]. Nevertheless, concerns about unequal access and limited digital literacy indicate that, without investment in training and infrastructure, digital tools could inadvertently reinforce participation inequalities. Other aspects of engagement received moderate support. Collaboration with cultural organizations ($M = 3.41, SD = 0.89$) and sustainability-focused tourism strategies ($M = 3.38, SD = 0.92$) were appreciated.

Engagement in areas tied to procedural inclusion and tangible outcomes received more critical evaluation as it affirms the assertion of Shekhar [11]. Items such as clarity of tourism plans ($M = 3.28$), support for local enterprises ($M = 3.26$), active community engagement ($M = 3.12$), and infrastructure improvements ($M = 3.10$) revealed

ambivalent perceptions. The lowest rating was for whether community opinions were truly valued in decision making ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.08$), thus highlighting persistent inequities in participation. Smaller businesses and less-connected stakeholders frequently lacked access to Assembly planning processes; this confirmed that institutional framework tends to favour organized or elite groups [22]. The one-way ANOVA analysis further revealed that perceptions of engagement varied by age, ($F(4, 360) = 4.13$, $p = 0.003$) and length of residency, ($F(2, 362) = 3.62$, $p = 0.027$), with younger respondents favouring digital participation and long-term residents assessing engagement based on historical experiences.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that stakeholder engagement propelled sustainable tourism development by promoting collaboration, supporting environmental protection ($M = 3.35$), heritage preservation ($M = 3.30$), and community-centered strategies ($M = 3.38$). However, gaps in inclusion, procedural equity, and access to decision making limit the effectiveness of engagement. Digital tools, when properly implemented, offer promising pathways to enhance participation and empower communities. These results confirm the assertion of Asare [4], that stakeholder engagement, when meaningful and inclusive, acts as a key driver of sustainable tourism outcomes in Ghana, hence shaping both policy implementation and local ownership of tourism initiatives.

10 Conclusion

The study concludes that stakeholder engagement is the key driver of sustainable tourism development in Ghana, specifically within the Ahanta West Municipal Assembly, as it promotes collaboration, environmental protection, heritage preservation, and community-centred tourism strategies. However, the findings revealed that engagement is often uneven, procedural, and sometimes symbolic, with traditional leaders and smaller businesses experiencing limited influence on decision making. Digital tools were identified as a promising avenue to enhance participation and inclusivity, though unequal access and low digital literacy pose potential barriers. What is more, demographic factors such as age and length of residency might be considered key determinants of perceptions of stakeholder engagement. As a result, stakeholders were found to lack uniformity in experiences and expectations. Overall, the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement in driving sustainable tourism depend on meaningful, inclusive, and equitable participation, with proper mechanisms to empower all community members rather than favouring elite or well-connected actors.

To strengthen practical implementation, several targeted interventions are recommended. First, the establishment of structured community tourism consultation forums at the MMDA level should be prioritized, with quarterly meetings scheduled to gather traditional leaders, small tourism enterprises, youth groups, and government representatives to maintain continuous dialogue and shared decision making. Second, the development of formal digital feedback channels, such as a dedicated tourism engagement portal or mobile-based reporting system managed by the GTA, would facilitate real-time stakeholder input and improve responsiveness to community concerns. Third, capacity-building programmes on digital literacy and tourism governance participation should be introduced, particularly for rural stakeholders, traditional authorities, and small-scale operators, to reduce inequalities in access to digital engagement platforms. Fourth, the implementation of stakeholder representation quotas within local tourism planning committees could help ensure that marginalized groups have a defined voice in decision-making processes. Finally, the introduction of periodic stakeholder evaluation and feedback mechanisms, such as annual participatory reviews of tourism projects at the district level, would enhance accountability, transparency, and adaptive governance.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, E.H. and F.K.M.; methodology, E.H.; software, E.H.; validation, E.H. and F.K.M.; formal analysis, F.K.M.; investigation, F.K.M.; resources, E.H. and F.K.M.; data curation, F.K.M.; writing original draft preparation, E.H.; writing review and editing, E.H. and F.K.M.; visualization, E.H.; supervision, E.H.; project administration, E.H. and F.K.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

The data used to support the research findings are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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