

# Religious pilgrimages in South Africa: A Catalyst for Sustainable Tourism and Local Economic Development

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**Abstract:** Sustainable tourism and local economic development as a mechanism for religious pilgrimages in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). This is particularly pertinent for religious pilgrimages in KZN province which boosts historical landmarks and pilgrimage destinations. Pilgrimage tourism and several other forms of tourism related to it have significant affinities to the tenets of sustainable development. The purpose of this paper is to examine the complications that could arise from religious pilgrimages' potential as a form of travel that, once implemented, would be beneficial for sustainable tourism and local economic development (LED). This paper further intends to assess the pilgrimage destinations to be viewed as a mechanism for local economic development. A quantitative research design was employed, as the nature of this research necessitates the use of numerical data and descriptive statistics to draw conclusions. A standardised questionnaire was used to collect data from 410 respondents selected using a convenience sampling technique from different pilgrimage destinations in KZN, South Africa. Descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate analyses were conducted using IBM's SPSS version 28 software. The pilgrims and local communities' perceptions of socio-economic contribution indicate that the availability of tourism facilities might be perceived as a socio-economic contributor to pilgrimage destinations. The findings further reveal that African religious pilgrimages can be sustainable and be a local economic development catalyst in KwaZulu-Natal. The study recommends that the South African National Christian Forum (SANCF), in collaboration with the South African government (national and provincial), develop an operational plan to provide business education, entrepreneurial skills, and relevant support to local communities surrounding religious pilgrimages or religious destinations, to empower them to contribute to the development of the local economy. This will assist to reduce South Africa's high unemployment rate, particularly in less developed regions.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Tourism, Sustainable Development, Religious Pilgrimages, Pilgrimages, Community, Pilgrimage Destinations

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## 1. Introduction

Religious pilgrims frequently take vacations for sightseeing, which is primarily a tourist activity (Terzidou, Scarles & Saunders, 2018). Tourism-driven development should benefit both local communities and the environment in the future. African religious pilgrimages have the potential for tourism growth because these pilgrimage destinations are visited annually by tourists and pilgrims, which could boost the country's gross domestic product (GDP). These pilgrimage destinations have the potential to expand in popularity because of increased business activity and travel demand measured not merely in terms of desire but also in terms of the ability to participate in tourism activities (Chilembwe, 2020; Ron & Timothy, 2018). Tourism appeal as a vehicle for supporting provincial and regional socio-economic development has been obvious since its growth in the global socio-economy (Aslam et al. 2016; Sudarmo, 2005). Local municipalities in proximity of African religious pilgrimages must prepare a tourism development strategy to develop these pilgrimage destinations. The study has to fill in the gaps by investigating and expanding on religious tourism as another type of tourism that could help in the local socio-economic development of the study area.

Depending on whether pilgrimage destinations have a positive or negative influence, sustainable development may be a viable alternative for ensuring that the places are accessible, well-maintained, and beneficial to both communities and tourists/pilgrims. The construction of pilgrimage sites' facilities may be sustainable, and everyone would desire to visit these places of pilgrimage. According to Jamal and Camago (2014) it is critical to develop approaches to enhance the quality of service in tourism. The study depends on the premise that by developing tourism, African religious pilgrimages will be able to contribute to the sustainability of pilgrimage destinations. By doing so, everyone who participates in religious pilgrimages may be urged to handle themselves precisely when visiting pilgrimage destinations. Sustainable facilities in the study area can benefit pilgrimage destinations, pilgrims, stakeholders, and local communities.

## 2. Literature Review

Surveys such as that conducted by Olya (2020) have shown that the sustainability of tourism development depends on the support of local communities and their residents. Pilgrimage tourism, as advocated in this study,

requires the assistance of local communities to contribute to the development of sustainable tourism. Despite substantial studies, addressing the complexities of local communities' attitudes toward tourism necessitates more imaginative approach in the application of theories and approaches (Olya, 2020; Hudaefi & Heryani, 2019; Khambule, 2018). Studies show that visitors to religious sites or events are not solely concerned about religious issues; they also consider cultural, traditional, spiritual, and landscape variables whenever selecting whether or not to travel (Amaro, Antunes & Henriques, 2018; Kaewumpai, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2018; Terzidou et al., 2018; Wang, Chen & Huang, 2016; Drule et al., 2015; Abbate & Nuovo, 2013; Hughes, Bond & Ballantyne, 2013; Olsen, 2013). By implementing severe environmental initiatives in social, economic, and cultural settings, tourism development can help enhance sustainability (Pan et al. 2018; Larson & Poudyal, 2012). Pilgrims and local communities could increase hospitality in the study area, which could have a multiplier effect on the economy and infrastructure (Dayoub et al. 2020; Jaelani, 2017; Kapoor & Chauhan, 2017).

The religious pilgrimages and structures visited have grown sacred throughout time and are now recognised as key heritage sites and destinations (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). Religious tourism has a negative impact on culture, the environment, and the economy (Terzidou et al., 2008; Olsen & Timothy, 2006). There are numerous challenges in the developing world that complicate sustainable development and tourism management. This involves the local communities' engagement in decision-making, sharing the advantages of tourism development, empowerment, ownership of historical sites and artifacts, a lack of monetary resources and skills, and forced displacement to accommodate growth (Hampton, 2005; Mattsson, 2005). Religious tourism has an influence on the economic and cultural development of destinations possessing a religious component (UNWTO, 2017). Pilgrimages can contribute to local socio-economic development if district municipalities promote religious pilgrimages and tourism development (Wiltshier & Griffiths, 2016; Rogerson, 2015; Saayman, Saayman & Rossouw, 2013). Pilgrimage destinations and other nodes along the pilgrimage route require effective management in order to benefit from tourism and foster sustainable tourism (Trono & Olsen, 2018).

Religious travellers, among others, influenced the development of commercial hotels in the past, and hotels are even included in contemporary hymns (O'Gorman, 2009). According to Melian, Prats and Coromina (2016), restorative shrines are at the intersection of accessible and religious tourism. The purpose of this paper is to examine the complications that could arise from religious pilgrimages' potential as a form of travel that, once implemented, would be beneficial for sustainable tourism and local economic development (LED). This paper further highlights the significance of local communities and stakeholders being aware of tourism opportunities related to religious pilgrimages in their areas. It could also develop an approach to integrate pilgrimage tourism with sustainable livelihoods in pilgrimage destinations' local communities. If pilgrimage destinations are created in a sustainable manner that can provide tourists with security, communities to grow awareness of these sites (Nicolaidis, 2016; 2015). The pilgrimage destinations should be kept in good condition so that they can provide authenticity and spiritual growth to everyone who utilises them. Religious pilgrimages, spiritual places and pilgrimage destinations are frequently transformed into visitor attractions for the purpose of providing the pilgrims with a spiritual journey that has socio-economic benefits for local communities while simultaneously generating funds for the preservation and restoration of cultural heritage (Trono, 2016; Raj & Griffin, 2015). Religious pilgrimages can be promoted, resulting in an increase in demand for an array of tourism-related commodities (Henderson, 2011).

Pilgrimage tourism ought to be prioritised for the purpose to develop sustainable opportunities for a greater segment of society while also increasing interest (Meyer, 2004). Tourism provides major socio-economic advantages to the natural resources and pilgrimage destinations for the study area (Mammadov, 2013). This necessitates the development of innovative, highly effective, and measurable marketing plans to increase tourism numbers for the purpose of keeping local communities active, retaining local assets, benefiting from the natural environment, and pilgrimage destinations (Risteskia, Kocevskia & Arnaudov, 2012).

### 3. Methodology

The study used a sequential exploratory mixed-method research design. The study used a sequential exploratory mixed-method research design. Phase I, which included qualitative interviews with 30 municipal officials, resulted in a better understanding of the potential of religious pilgrimages, which was then later used to generate a survey instrument. In Phase II, 310 pilgrims and local communities from various municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal participated in surveys as part of a wider population. However, this paper reports. This study employs a quantitative approach to draw a conclusion. The design generates the necessary data pertaining to the following topics: "awareness of local people at the pilgrimage destinations" versus "tourism development", "tourism facilities and products that are packaged for tourists and pilgrims", "perception of local communities towards the

potential of pilgrimages in enhancing socio-economic development", "the district municipalities with pilgrimage destinations", and "theoretical framework for tourism development of pilgrimage". 450 respondents were selected using a convenience sampling method, which is a non-probability sampling approach from different pilgrimage destinations in KZN, South Africa. This sample size is considered large enough to address the research objectives and draw conclusions (Taherdoost, 2017). A structured survey questionnaire was used for data collection. Questions on the instrument were set as categorical variables (responds profile) and the ordinal variables on a 5-point Likert scale questions (ranging from 1 Strongly agree, 2 agree, 3 neutral, 4 strongly disagree, and 5 disagree). IBM's SPSS version 28 was employed for data analysis. Descriptive analysis. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise information on the research sample in this study (Kim, Lee & Kim, 2017). For the purposes of data analysis, Mann-Whitney U tests were performed to check for correlations between variables (Bolboacă *et al.*, 2011). Mann-Whitney U test is a popular test for comparing two independent samples (Salkind, 2012). Variables such as respondents' age and gender were re-coded into two categories.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

This paper presents the analysis and interpretation of data collected from the respondents by means of survey questionnaires. Quantitative data was analysed by means of SPSS which enabled the researcher to generate frequency tables that were used to present statistical analysis. Table 1 shows that more females (54%) than males (46%) responded to the questionnaire. More than half of respondents were between the age of 18-35 (59%), while 36 and above were recorded at (41%). This could be due to the fact that women made up a significant proportion of pilgrims. According to Shuo *et al.*, (2009) and Nugraha and Widyaningsih (2021) women outnumber males when it comes to religious pilgrimage. **Table 1** shows a list of these characteristics.

**Table 1: Respondents' profile (N=410)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	46
	Female	54
Age	18-35	59
	36 and above	41
Level of education	No Western Education	15
	Primary	8
	Secondary	15
	Tertiary education (Diploma)	17
	Tertiary education (Degree)	46
Employment status	Unemployed – Retired	48
	Self-employed – employed	52
Occupation	Unskilled	28
	Semi-skilled	25
	Skilled	19
	Professional	29

According to the findings, youths outnumbered adults in terms of study participation. Gärtner and Hennig (2022) postulate that youths visit religious pilgrimages more frequently than other age groups given that they constitute the majority of the country's population and are actively involved in any local development that happens to be taking place within the study area.

Given that it is widely acknowledged that education creates awareness and understanding between individuals and their environments, the educational backgrounds of the respondents were evaluated as a major variable in this study (Kousar *et al.*, 2022). According to the findings, 17% of respondents had tertiary degrees, 46% had post-secondary education, including degrees, implying people with post-secondary education constitute the majority. 15% of those polled had a secondary education, while 5% had no formal education whatsoever. Only about 8% of the preceding group of respondents had completed elementary school. This could be due to the fact that the majority of respondents were younger people who had finished matriculation but had not yet had the opportunity to continue their studies at a higher educational institution.

The employment level of the respondents was crucial because the purpose of the survey was to gain insight into how respondents reflected on the potential of pilgrimages to influence the socio-economic growth of the study area. According to the findings, 48% of the unemployed were retired people. It's worth noting that the majority of respondents (about 52%) had jobs and a consistent source of income. This is an encouraging result for the study because it implies that some of the employed respondents worked for the pilgrimage destinations in the study area. The findings revealed that, whereas 29% of all respondents were professionals, 28% of employed respondents lacked technical skills. The sample was made up of 25% semi-skilled respondents and 19% skilled

respondents. Despite the fact that there were less skilled respondents (19%) than unskilled respondents, this is still a favourable finding for the study. This means that the more qualified and/or professional responses possess a better probability of being hired at pilgrimage destinations.

There are numerous questions to ascertain the need for and comprehension of socio-economic development within the communities surrounding pilgrimage destinations. The study sought to ascertain respondents' perceptions on the potential of pilgrimage destinations to enhance economic development in the study area. The respondents were presented with statements in which they could convey their level of agreement and/or disagreement with the potential of pilgrimage destinations for enhancing socio-economic development in the study area.

**Table 2: Enhancement of socio-economic development (N=410)**

Statements	SA	A	N	SD	D
There is need for developing pilgrimage destinations in the study area.	29%	62%	7%	0%	2%
The development of pilgrimage destinations might enhance the socio-economic status of the study area.	25%	64%	7%	3%	0%
Pilgrimage destinations have a potential for enhancing the socio-economy of the study area.	26%	65%	7%	1%	1%
Tourism facilities in the study area could enhance the socio-economic development.	15%	72%	7%	2%	4%
Religious pilgrimages can be seen as socio-economic enhancement.	17%	22%	14%	18%	29%
Involvement of local people might enhance socio-economy of the study area.	22%	66%	7%	4%	1%
Availability of infrastructure could increase the socio-economy enhancement of the study area.	24%	61%	8%	2%	5%

According to the above table (Table 2) almost 91% of respondents agreed that building pilgrimage destinations in the study area is essential, whereas 2% opposed while approximately 7% were neutral. Those who agreed that the development of pilgrimage destinations could enhance the socioeconomic condition of the study area accounted for 89%, while those who disagreed accounted for 4%, and roughly 7% claimed they were neutral. A significant percentage (87%) agreed that tourism amenities in the study area could enhance socio-economic development, with only roughly 6% opposing. Those who were neutral accounted for 7% of the total respondents. The percentage of respondents who agreed that religious pilgrimages could improve socio-economic status was approximately 39%, with roughly 47 percent opposing. Only 14% of those respondents were neutral. Around 88% agreed with the assertion that including local people may improve the socio-economic condition of the study area, while 5% disagreed and 7% were neutral. This distribution could be explained by respondents' perceptions of the potential for pilgrimage destinations. A substantial number of respondents (about 85%) agreed that the existence of infrastructure could enhance the study area's socio-economic profile. Only 4% of the total respondents disagreed with the statement, whereas 11% were neutral. Based on these responses, the study deems that pilgrimage destinations have the potential to strengthen the study area socio-economic status. As a result, the data support Sotjan and Liro (2022) assertion that tourism activities, including religious pilgrimages, are widely seen as techniques to improve the socio-economic profiles of diverse places.

#### 4.1 Enhancement of Socio-Economic Development

The Mann-Whitney U bivariate test was employed in this study to compare differences between independent variables (respondents' profile), which were recoded to be nominal (2 groups), and dependent variables (enhancement and contribution of socio-economic development statements), which were ordinal (Likert-scale). The results in Table 3 reveal that some respondents' profiles differ in terms of the enhancement and contribution of socio-economic development assertions.

**Table 3: Reliability test and comparing respondents' perceptions on enhancement of socio-economic development compared with respondents' socio-demographic variables – 'age and gender'**

No.	Statements	Significant Results	
		Actual Results	Explanation
1	There is need to develop pilgrimage destinations in the study area	N.S.	N.S.
2	The development of pilgrimage destinations could enhance the socio-economic status of the study area	N.S.	N.S.
3	Pilgrimage destinations have a potential for enhancing socio-economic status for the study area	N.S.	N.S.
4	Tourism facilities in the study area could enhance the socio-economic development	Z = -2.064 P value = .039	*Age group 18 to 35 significantly agree more than Age group 36 and above.
5	Religious pilgrimages can be seen as socio-economic enhancement	Z = -2.648 P value = .008	**Age group 18 to 35 significantly agree more than Age group 36 and above.
6	Involvement of local people might enhance socio-economy of the study area	N.S.	N.S.
7	Availability of infrastructure could increase the socio-economy enhancement of the study area	Z = -2.513 P value = .012	*Females significantly agree more than males.

**Note:**<sup>a</sup> Questionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, Strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree.

<sup>b</sup> Mann-Whitney U test significance: N.S, no significant results; \*,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ .

No socio-demographic influence regarding 'age' and 'gender'.

Pilgrims and community members were asked about their perceptions of 'the enhancement of socio-economic development' in the study area, and these variables were compared to the respondents' demographics (age and gender). While compared to the respondents' profile, pilgrims' and local communities' perceptions of the enhancement of socio-economic development attributes show no significant relationships with the following statements: 'there is a need to develop pilgrimage destinations in the study area,' 'the development of pilgrimage destinations could enhance the socio-economic status of the study area,' and 'pilgrimage destinations have the potential to enhance socio-economic status for the study area.' However, individuals aged 18 to 35 agree substantially more than those aged 36 and up:  $Z = -2.064$ ,  $P \text{ value} = .039$ , with the following statements: 'tourist facilities in the research area could boost socio-economic development'. Again, individuals aged 18 to 35 significantly agree more than those aged 36 and up:  $Z = -2.648$ ,  $P \text{ value} = .008$ , with the statement religious pilgrimages can be considered as socio-economic betterment'. The findings also show that females substantially agree more than males with the statement 'availability of infrastructure could promote the socio-economic enhancement of the research area':  $Z = -2.513$ ,  $P \text{ value} = .012$ . Surprisingly, this study reveals that pilgrims' and local populations' perspectives of 'the increase of socio-economic growth' is related with the demographics of the responders (age and gender). Sati (2018) study findings corroborated with these conclusions.

## 5. Conclusion

In the context of the study, this development of a strategy would be used to ensure that the services required to satisfy the identified needs of the tourists and/or pilgrims as revealed by the respondents in the findings that are made available within the pilgrimage destinations. A proposed strategy would be an addition to the tourism development strategies that are already in existence with a focus on pilgrimage destinations. In conclusion the new strategy would, therefore, serve as an effective tool by which pilgrimage destinations can promote and

implement tourism development activities. As the proposed strategy will depict, tourism development is central to the realisation and fulfilment of a number of socio-economic development opportunities for the interrelated entities that are the tourism stakeholders and/or local communities. The strategy will be necessary and significant to close the gap that was identified by the researcher that the existing tourism strategies do not include the strategy for tourism development at pilgrimage destinations. In this regard, the contribution of this study may be that these pilgrimage destinations should assist everyone interested in participating in religious pilgrimages. The construction of facilities can be sustainable for pilgrimage destinations and everyone would be eager to undertake these religious pilgrimages.

The local development of pilgrimage destinations for sustainable and responsible social-cultural activities must be approached with caution to avoid the commoditisation of pilgrimage destinations through the over commercialisation of souvenirs and basic hospitality services (Dasgupta *et al.*, 2014). If tourism development occurs in these African religious pilgrimages, the infrastructure and experiences will improve. Everyone who participates in religious trips should be keen to participate responsibly in the pilgrimage destinations in order to sustain the tourism facilities so that whoever visits religious pilgrimages can have a great experience. Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future (Tsaur & Wang, 2007; Liu, 2003). The development of pilgrimage destinations can contribute towards the enhancement of sustainable forms of tourism which include strict environmental activities, and promotion of tourism in order to alleviate the standard of living and employment opportunities (Aslam *et al.*, 2018).

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