

# Cultural Barriers Influencing Tourism Residents' Empowerment

Estefania Basurto<sup>1\*</sup>, Lori Pennington Gray<sup>2</sup> and Mg Xavier Alberto Basurto Cedeno<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Assistant Professor University of South Carolina, Adjunct Professor Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí, Richardson Family Smart State Center of Economic Excellence in Tourism, University of South Carolina, USA

<sup>2</sup>Endowed Professor University of South Carolina, Richardson Family Smart State Center of Economic Excellence in Tourism, University of South Carolina, USA

<sup>3</sup>Associated Professor, Administrative Sciences Department, Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí, Manabí, Ecuador, Ph.D. student Richardson Family Smart State Center of Economic Excellence in Tourism, University of South Carolina, USA

**Submission:** January 23, 2024; **Published:** February 08, 2024

**\*Corresponding author:** Estefania Basurto, Research Assistant Professor University of South Carolina, Adjunct Professor Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí, Richardson Family Smart State Center of Economic Excellence in Tourism, University of South Carolina, USA

## Abstract

This study delves into the evaluation of the Residents Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS), initially developed by Boley and McGehee, within a different cultural context—specifically, in the developing country of Ecuador. Employing surveys and conducting rigorous analyses, the research establishes the scale's reliability in capturing the dimensions of psychological, social, and political empowerment in this distinct cultural landscape. Upon sharing the findings with tourism stakeholders, the results confirm the effectiveness and applicability of the scale, highlighting a key element: the need for an extra dimension focusing on cultural obstacles to empowerment. Stakeholders underline the significant impact of cultural subtleties and barriers on social, psychological, and political aspects. This acknowledgment points out gender inequality and political pressure as major hindrances to empowerment in the destination. Fundamentally, the distinct cultural attributes of each destination call for a tailored approach, leading to the proposal that future research should quantitatively investigate the connections between these cultural obstacles and the different facets of empowerment. Recognizing and tackling these inherent qualities, the study strives to enhance the overall comprehension of empowerment dynamics within tourism settings.

**Keywords:** Barriers; REST; Empowerment; Residents; Ecuador

**Abbreviations:** RETS: Residents Empowerment through Tourism Scale; SET: Social Exchange Theory

## Introduction

Tourism development can have both positive and negative effects on a destination's community, as noted by researchers like Frechtling [1], Koens and colleagues [2], Martins [3], and Milano [4]. To mitigate the potential negative impacts of tourism development, it is essential to adopt a strategy that emphasizes resource sustainability, includes all stakeholders, and empowers the community. This approach, advocated by Andriotis [5] and Kadi and others [6], involves integrating tourism development objectives with the destination's cultural values, aligning with the community's desired developmental path, and promoting equitable participation among all stakeholder groups, especially minorities and underrepresented communities, as discussed by Sotiriadis [7] and Licsandru & Cui [8]. Tapping into local expertise is vital for gaining a deeper understanding of cultural and natural

features, which leads to a more comprehensive evaluation of the strengths and challenges in tourism development. This perspective is supported by the work of various scholars, including Pizam et al. [9], Jamal & Getz [10], Sautter & Leisen [11], Richards [12], Aas et al. [13], Lawton [14], Licsandru & Cui [8], and Kadi et al. [6]. The Residents Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS), introduced by Boley and McGehee in 2014, offers a valuable framework by identifying three primary dimensions—psychological, social, and political—to gauge resident empowerment. However, the applicability of the RETS has not been extensively tested across diverse cultures. This study seeks to address this gap by assessing the reliability of the RETS in the context of Ecuador, a developing country in Latin America. Given this destination's distinctive cultural nuances and power structures, it is crucial to test the scale's effectiveness

and relevance. The goal is to present the findings to tourism stakeholders, thereby evaluating the validity and practicality of the RETS in a setting characterized by a different culture and power dynamic.

Furthermore, this research aims to go beyond the established dimensions of the RETS. The study seeks to identify additional dimensions influencing resident empowerment by engaging with tourism stakeholders. Based on their experiences in the specific context under study, the valuable insights these stakeholders provide will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex factors shaping resident empowerment in tourism planning. This collaborative approach acknowledges the diversity of influences on empowerment and emphasizes the need for a nuanced, context-specific assessment tool in tourism planning. In Latin American destinations, the rich historical and cultural contexts have led to intricate power structures, identity issues, and gender inequalities, which may hinder the realization of inclusive participation and empowerment, as noted by Matute [15] and Alecchi [16]. This research is particularly valuable as it deepens our understanding of fostering empowerment in various cultural environments, focusing on the factors affecting residents' empowerment. The study gains depth by including insights from experts within the relevant context. The lack of a one-size-fits-all approach to empowerment, suitable for all destinations, highlights the essential need to identify and tackle the unique barriers and power relations specific to each location.

This study underscores the importance of empowered communities in sustainable tourism development, emphasizing their active role in decision-making and their understanding of both the positive and negative impacts of tourism projects. By examining and quantifying empowerment, the research provides valuable insights that can shape strategies to promote community participation and empowerment in tourism planning. Additionally, it enriches existing academic discourse by presenting empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the Residents Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS) from the perspective of destination stakeholders. This is especially pertinent in the current context of rising inclusion movements and evolving political landscapes in Latin America. The findings of this study not only advance theoretical understanding but also offer practical guidance for policymakers, destination managers, and other parties engaged in tourism development. Ultimately, the research represents a vital step in formulating targeted and effective methods to boost resident empowerment within the complex and evolving tourism sector.

### Empowerment Under the Lens of Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET), a concept rooted in sociology and psychology, explains social interactions by analyzing their associated rewards and costs. Developed in the early 1960s

and 1970s by George Homans [17], Richard Emerson [18], and Peter Blau [19], SET suggests that people participate in social interactions by rationally evaluating the expected benefits against potential costs. SET posits that individuals are driven by self-interest, aiming to increase rewards and decrease costs. It involves two main elements: the cost of the exchange and its payoff. If the costs outweigh the benefits, future interactions are less likely. In the context of tourism and community empowerment in tourism planning, SET provides insights into how residents perceive the impact of tourism development and the potential community benefits of participating in the planning process. Residents may view their involvement in tourism planning positively or negatively, based on economic, ecological, social, or cultural factors. A key aspect of SET is its focus on equitable power distribution, where positive reciprocity is more likely when both parties in the exchange have considerable social power. SET views power as stemming from the possession, control, or influence over resources that others value. Conversely, negative perceptions are associated with low social power, where little benefit is seen in the exchange. In this model, the community acts as a primary participant in the exchange, engaging in empowerment activities like participating in tourism development, assuming leadership roles, decision-making, heritage preservation, and political representation.

The theory also suggests that residents' evaluations of empowerment in tourism are influenced by factors like rationality, satisfactory benefits, reciprocity, and justice principles. Rationality means that actions are guided by reward-seeking. In tourism, residents are more likely to engage positively if they perceive rewards like increased GDP, job creation, conservation of natural and cultural resources, and strengthened community identity. Satisfactory benefits indicate that residents might acknowledge tourism's drawbacks but still support it if they believe the benefits surpass the costs. Reciprocity means that if empowering behaviors lead to tangible community benefits, the outcomes are viewed positively by all involved. The principle of justice demands equitable rewards for residents' support or participation in tourism. This study employs Ap's [20] model to examine the relationship between these factors. According to this model, the exchange process starts with a motivation to engage. During the exchange, rationality, benefit perception, reciprocity, and justice are considered. Post-exchange, an internal evaluation assesses whether the relationship is balanced. A negative outcome discourages future exchanges, while a positive outcome encourages them (Figure 1).

### Literature Review

#### Residents Empowerment in Tourism Planning

Empowerment fundamentally represents a state where individuals and communities have the power to advocate for specific issues [21]. It acts as a measure of the level of participation and influence that individuals and communities exert in decision-

making processes and how this involvement translates into tangible actions. The use of terms like “empowerment” or “being empowered” often highlights the power that communities and stakeholders possess in directing the development of a destination, typically seen through a political lens [22]. Beyond political involvement, empowerment in the context of tourism [21,23] encompasses active engagement in various forms, such as

attending meetings, voting, participating in training sessions, and other interactive activities. In tourism planning, empowerment should extend beyond political decisions to include activities that explore community identity, initiatives to strengthen community cohesion, and active participation in shaping tourism development [22,23].

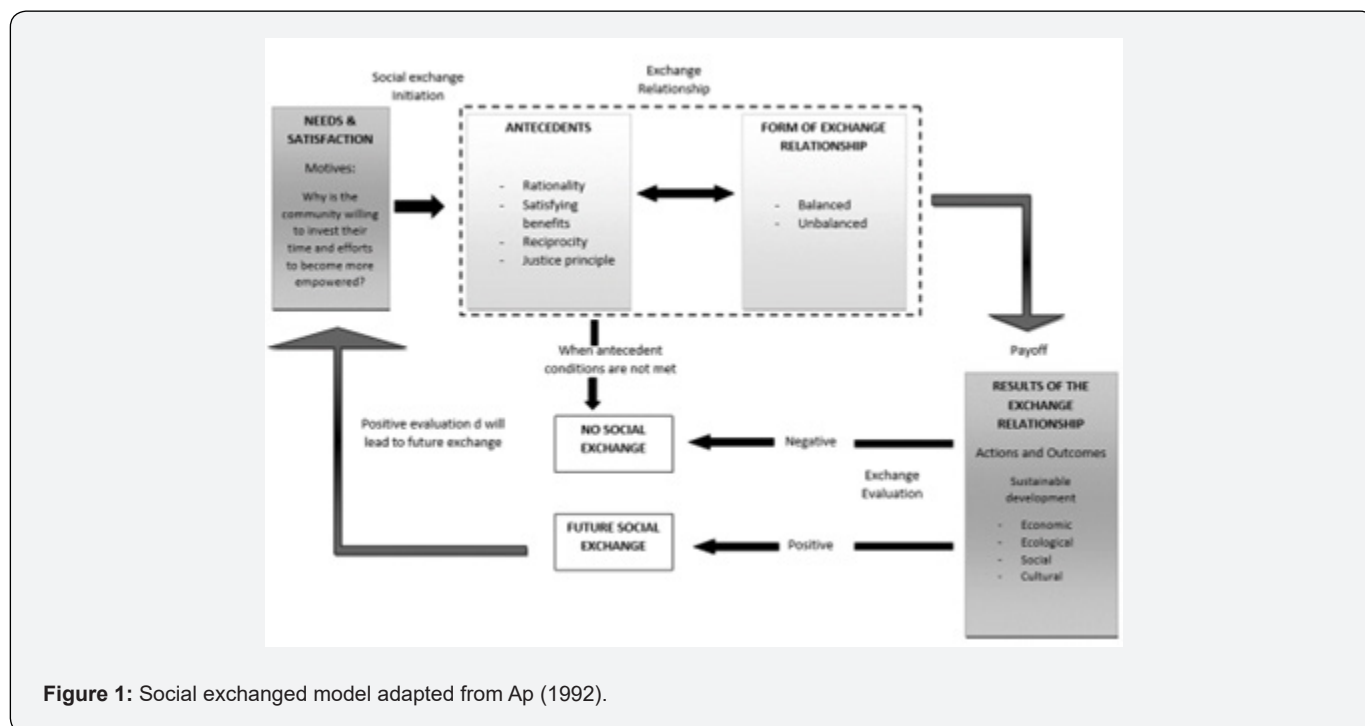


Figure 1: Social exchanged model adapted from Ap (1992).

Joo, Woosnam, Strzelecka, and Boley [24] point out that empowerment is vital for sustainable tourism development, moving from individual to collective empowerment [25,26]. Empowerment enables individuals and groups to take control of their futures, enhance their competitiveness, and impact their environments. This shift transforms community members into proactive participants who can identify solutions that align with community values. Recognizing its importance, empowerment has become a key focus for sustainable tourism development [24,27]. Cole [28] proposes a framework with four dimensions of empowerment: economic (awareness of the economic impact of participation), psychological (community members’ self-esteem), social (community ties and collaboration), and political (active involvement in planning). Boley, McGehee, Perdue, and Long [29] introduce the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS), which evaluates empowerment across psychological, social, and political dimensions. This multidimensional approach helps to understand power dynamics and how tourism affects community self-esteem, pride, and cohesion [30]. Strzelecka et al. [23] further expand on these dimensions, adding an economic component to assess perceived economic benefits alongside psychological, social, and political factors. Each dimension

addresses different aspects: psychological (tourism’s impact on identity and pride), social (tourism as a factor in social relationships and community cohesion), political (community participation in tourism planning and decision-making), and economic (perceived economic benefits from tourism).

### Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale

Defining and measuring resident empowerment, a key element in sustainable tourism development, presents a complex challenge [21]. This concept, integrating perspectives from education, planning, development, and psychology, is essential in maximizing community participation in tourism. Recognized as a significant non-economic benefit, empowerment is critical for effective tourism planning. It involves more than just participation; it requires residents to actively lead and control the process, thereby gaining autonomy over their community affairs [21]. Boley and McGehee [21] stress the importance of empirically measuring empowerment to validate community involvement. Their approach underscores the need to quantify, monitor changes, and evaluate residents’ perceptions of empowerment within their community. Moving past theoretical discussions, they propose viewing empowerment as a multifaceted concept.

This perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the power dynamics at play and examines the connection between tourism and aspects like community self-esteem, pride, and cohesion (Boley et al., 2016). The Residents Empowerment

through Tourism Scale (RETS), proposed by Boley and McGehee in 2014, introduces three dimensions for measuring empowerment: (Figure 2).

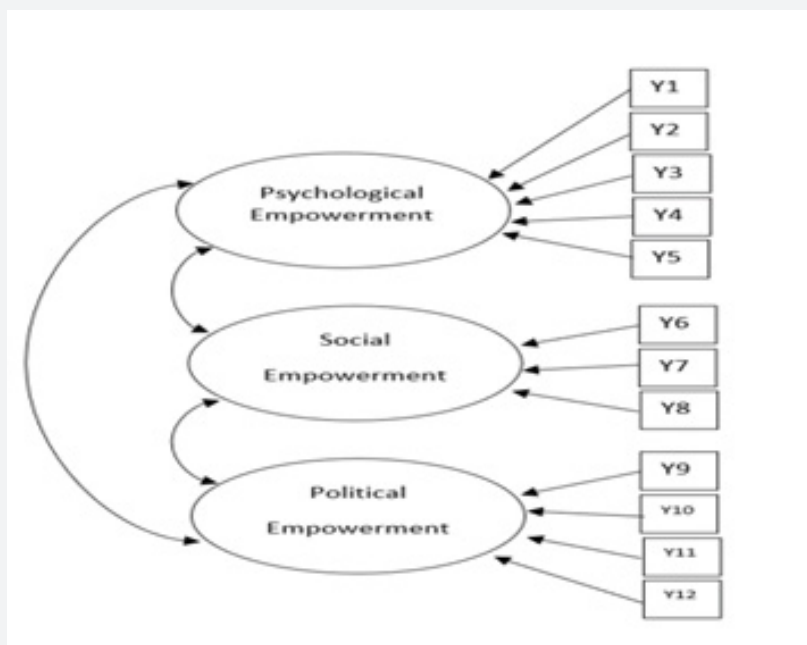


Figure 2: RETS scale dimensions and items.

**i. Social Empowerment:** Defined as the perception of being a unique community due to tourism, encompassing how tourism influences the relationships between community members and community cohesion [21], (Dodds et al., 2016). The three indicators for measuring social empowerment include (1) connectedness, (2) a sense of community, and (3) ways of getting involved with the community.

**ii. Psychological Empowerment:** Characterized as the capacity of tourism development to enhance a community’s pride and self-esteem, manifested in residents’ willingness to share information and preserve community resources [25,29] (Dodds et al., 2016). This dimension is measured through five indicators: (1) perceived pride of being part of the destination, (2) perceived specialness of the destination as a whole, (3) predisposition to share information with others, (4) perception of being a unique culture, and (5) motivation to preserve the uniqueness of the community.

**iii. Political Empowerment:** Widely acknowledged in the literature, political empowerment in the RETS is defined as access to participate in tourism planning, coupled with perceptions that residents’ opinions matter and make a difference (Boley et al., 2016). The four variables included in the model are (1) Perception

of having a voice, (2) access to the decision-making process, (3) Perception that their vote makes a difference, and (4) having an outlet to share concerns.

### Barriers and Facilitators of Community Empowerment

Understanding community empowerment in tourism reveals a complex interplay of obstacles and enabling factors that influence the level of community involvement in planning and decision-making. However, as noted by Khalid et al. [27], barriers often prevent diverse groups from participating in these essential processes. Structural inequalities, driven by gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disabilities, and poverty, result in the exclusion of many from development initiatives. Influential entities, dominant neoliberal ideologies, and the sidelining of poor communities further perpetuate this exclusion [31-33]. Adding to these challenges is the tourism industry’s historical neglect of host communities, leading to mistrust and a lack of collaborative approaches. In Latin America, for instance, community involvement in planning has often been overlooked, leading to marginalization and missed opportunities to leverage diverse values, knowledge, and skills [34]. The concentration of resources, which centralizes power in the hands of a few, exacerbates these issues, particularly in the supply chains essential for tourism development [35]. A



lack of transparency in destination management and planning further complicates matters, as it's often unclear who is included in these processes and under what terms [32,36].

To overcome these barriers, stakeholder roles in tourism planning must go beyond conventional methods and adopt a more development-oriented philosophy. Vuignier [37] stresses the need to understand the complexities of tourism, including access to power and resources. Timothy [22] and Dodds et al. [38] point out the essential link between empowerment and community well-being. Tourism has been criticized for exclusivity and being dominated by multinational corporations, leading to dependency and significant inequalities [32,39]. Nevertheless, there's an increasing recognition of tourism's potential as a tool for social integration and addressing social and environmental disparities. Inclusive strategies in tourism planning are crucial

for achieving the United Nations' sustainable development goals [31,32]. For genuine inclusivity and poverty reduction, tourism planning must consider all community members, especially minority and underrepresented groups [32,39]. Planning should aim to deliver shared benefits for marginalized groups, aligning with the community's ethical principles and values. This approach can lead to positive and sustainable transformations in destinations [36]. Overcoming access barriers involves including historically marginalized and oppressed groups in meaningful planning processes, allowing them to contribute their experiences and culture [32]. Other strategies include challenging power monopolies and fostering beneficial relationships for all stakeholders [39]. In Latin America, transparent planning processes that involve public and private entities and diverse community members are key to building trust [34].



Figure 3: Map of Ecuador, destination under study.

### The Case of Ecuador

Ecuador, an Andean nation, is distinguished by its remarkable diversity and rich multi-ethnic composition. This country spans four unique regions: the Coast, the Andes, the Amazon,

and the globally celebrated Galapagos Islands. Its economy is characterized by a complex interplay of various commodities, prominently featuring petroleum and agricultural products, as Rivera [40] notes. Covering an area of 283,561 square kilometers

and home to a population of 17,483,326, Ecuador has emerged as a significant travel destination in South America, acclaimed for its exceptional natural diversity. Recognized globally as one of the ecologically richest areas, Ecuador has, since 2009, endeavored to prioritize tourism development. This strategic shift aims to diversify its economic portfolio and reduce reliance on oil exports. However, the country faces the challenging task of balancing tourism growth by empowering its local population. Despite the laudable efforts to enhance tourism, the country experiences a persistent and intricate challenge, as outlined by its tourism planners. The prevailing situation is characterized by a lack of broad representation of residents and various sector stakeholders in decision-making processes. This is predominantly due to the disproportionate influence wielded by a limited group of tourism stakeholders. Such an imbalance hinders the incorporation of community needs into tourism planning, presenting a significant obstacle in achieving a sustainable balance between tourism development and the well-being and empowerment of local communities (Figure 3).

### Study Purpose

Prior studies have underscored the critical importance of advancing community empowerment in tourism planning [27,41]. Nonetheless, the recognition of this need often remains theoretical, with the actual realization of empowerment proving elusive and more aspirational than practical [42]. The primary objective of this research is to develop a comprehensive understanding of resident empowerment, with a particular focus on evaluating the reliability and validity of the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS). In pursuit of this goal, the study involved assessing the levels of resident empowerment in Ecuador using RETS as an instrument. Subsequently, the findings were shared with local stakeholders to enhance the understanding of the results' validity and to identify any potentially overlooked aspects crucial for understanding the complexities of developing destinations. The involvement of local stakeholders in interpreting and validating the findings aims not only to contribute to scholarly discussions on resident empowerment but also to offer practical insights for more effective and culturally attuned tourism planning in developing nations. The study is structured to achieve several aims:

- i. To rigorously test the applicability of the dimensions and items in the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS), as proposed by Boley and McGehee, within a different cultural context.
- ii. To specifically measure the levels of tourism empowerment in the Ecuadorian context.
- iii. To evaluate the utility and relevance of RETS from the viewpoint of local tourism stakeholders.

- iv. Finally, to identify critical dimensions of empowerment that are essential in this distinct cultural setting. Through addressing these comprehensive objectives, the research endeavors to provide valuable contributions to the understanding of resident empowerment in tourism and to inform and enhance the efficacy of tourism planning approaches in Ecuador.

### Methods

Conducted in December 2022 in the city of Manta, the study adopted a mixed-methods design with two integral components to enhance the validity of its findings through triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, as Creswell and Clark [43] advocated. The initial component involved an in-situ survey employing the Residents' Empowerment in Tourism Scale (RETS) to gauge residents' levels of tourism empowerment and assess the reliability of the scale when used in a different cultural context. The second component, qualitative in nature, comprised a series of face-to-face interviews with stakeholders to achieve three primary objectives: (1) to assess the validity and practicality of the RETS from the perspective of local tourism stakeholders, and (2) to identify key dimensions integral to empowerment in this unique cultural context. In the quantitative component, 1979 surveys were collected over seven days from December 9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022, targeting community members aged 18 and older residing permanently in Ecuador. Surveys were conducted in various high-traffic locations, including markets, malls, streets, and parks, with participants randomly selected (one in five passersby). A response rate of 73.64% was achieved, surpassing the minimum requirement. Participants for the qualitative component (interviews) were recruited through nominations from the Ministry of Tourism. Invitations were extended to 60 tourism stakeholders, with 35 agreeing to participate in interviews, yielding a 58.33% response rate. These participants represented various sectors, including hospitality (9), recreation (3), travel agencies (4), food and beverage (8), transportation (4), academia (3), and governance (4). Qualitative sessions were held in the Central Museum of Manta Conference room and were audio-recorded for subsequent content analysis (Figure 5).

Demographics and the RETS scale were both measured on a 7-point Likert scale. For the interviews, a five-question qualitative semi-structured open-ended questionnaire was used; the questionnaire included two questions to assess the relevance and practicality of the results of the survey; one question was used to find empowerment dimensions missed in the results based on personal experience; one question regarding the challenges they have encountered to foster resident empowerment in the tourism planning processes for the destination, and the final question was to request suggestions to improve residents' empowerment (Matute, 2020). Data collection and analysis involved 35 face-to-face interviews from December 2022 to January 2023, with sessions transcribed and analyzed using NVIVO software for

content analysis. Surveys were collected via tablets and processed with Qualtrics, and statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS® Statistics version 26. The survey’s reliability was assessed through the Cronbach alpha coefficient test, retaining items with a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of .865 (Table 1).

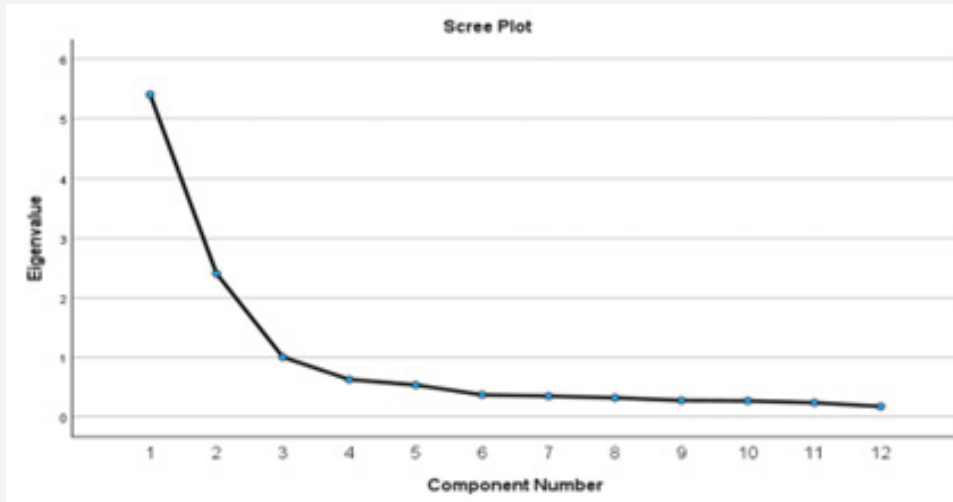


Figure 4: RETS Factor analysis Scree Plot.

Participant Pseudonym	Tourism Sector	Gender	Management role
1	Hospitality	Male	Yes
2	Hospitality	Male	Yes
3	Hospitality	Male	Yes
4	Hospitality	Male	Yes
5	Hospitality	Male	Yes
6	Hospitality	Male	Yes
7	Hospitality	Male	Yes
8	Hospitality	Male	Yes
9	Hospitality	Female	Yes
10	Recreation	Male	Yes
11	Recreation	Male	Yes
12	Recreation	Male	Yes
13	Travel agency	Female	Yes
14	Travel agency	Male	Yes
15	Travel agency	Male	Yes
16	Travel agency	Female	Yes
17	Food and beverage	Female	Yes
18	Food and beverage	Female	Yes
19	Food and beverage	Male	Yes
20	Food and beverage	Male	Yes
21	Food and beverage	Male	Yes
22	Food and beverage	Male	Yes
23	Food and beverage	Male	No
24	Food and beverage	Male	No
25	Transportation	Male	Yes
26	Transportation	Male	Yes
27	Transportation	Male	Yes
28	Transportation	Female	No
29	Academia	Female	No
30	Academia	Male	No
31	Academia	Male	No
32	Governance	Female	Yes
33	Governance	Female	No
34	Governance	Female	No
35	Governance	Male	Yes

Figure 5: Participants in interviews.

**Table 1:** Alfa the Cronbach for the scale.

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.865	0.885	12

**Results**

**Examination of the dimensions and items proposed in the RETS.**

The 12 items of the RETS were subject to factor analysis using SPSS version 2. Prior to the analysis, the data was assessed for suitability. The correlation matrix was deemed factorable after observing that the majority of the coefficients were above .3; the Kaiser-Mayer-Okin value was .884, exceeding the recommended value of .6, and Barlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically

significant [44]. The factor analysis confirmed the presence of three dimensions with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 45.05%, 20.06%, and 8.38% of the variance, respectively. An inspection of the scree plot showed a clear break after the third component (Figure 4). The three-component solution explained 73.49% of the variance. The Oblimin rotation revealed the presence of a 3-component simple structure, with the three components showing several strong loadings and all variables substantially on only one component (Table 2). These results were consistent with the dimensions defined in the RETS.

**Table 2:** Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

	Component		
	1	2	3
PS3	0.87		
PS2	0.868		
PS4	0.862		
PS5	0.838		
PS1	0.767		
PE2		0.916	
PE1		0.874	
PE3		0.821	
PE4		0.712	
SE2			-0.92
SE3			-0.881
SE1			-0.839
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.			
Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.			
a. Rotation converged in 4 iterations.			

**Level of Residents' Empowerment in Ecuador using the RETS**

A total of 1979 responses were included in the analysis; 47.7% of the participants reported their gender as female, 51.7% as male, and 0.6% as other. The gender distribution of the sample was reasonably like the population of interest (INEC, 50.3% are male and 49.7% female). The average age of the participants was 31.53 years, with a standard deviation of 15.45. Regarding the highest level of education completed, 1.1% responded that they have a graduate degree, 14.2% have an undergraduate degree, 5.6% have technical studies, 66.4% have a high school diploma, and 12.7% refrained from answering. Concerning their marital status,

66.2% reported being single, 9.9% living with a significant other but not married, 16% married, 3.5% divorced, 2% widowed, and 2.5% restrained from answering. In general, the sample showed a slight overrepresentation of the population under 30 years of age, with fewer studies and primarily single, which is slightly different from the characteristics of the population of interest according to the INEC data. However, these differences never exceed 5% variation across the variables, so the sample is representative of the population of interest (Figure 6). The model comprised of 12 items for empowerment, which were further divided into three constructs: 5 items in psychological empowerment, 3 items in social empowerment, and 4 in political empowerment. All



questions from the Residents Empowerment Tourism Scale were retained after the analysis (Table 3). Composite variables were created for each empowerment dimension, as detailed in Table 2, to facilitate a more accessible interpretation of the results for stakeholders. Regarding the reported values for psychological empowerment, social empowerment, and political empowerment on a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 7 represented the highest value, psychological empowerment exhibited a mean of 6.08 with

a standard deviation of 1.04. Social empowerment displayed a mean of 5.66 with a standard deviation of 1.24, while political empowerment had a mean of 4.20 with a standard deviation of 1.82. The antecedent variables yielded the following mean scores: 5.66 for benefits, 6.11 for rationality, 5.82 for the positive impact of tourism, 4.56 for reciprocity, and 6.04 for justice. Conversely, results for support for tourism indicated a mean score of 5.88 with a standard deviation of 1.04 (Table 4).

<b>Gender</b>	<b>47.7% female 51.7% male 0.6% other</b>
<b>Education</b>	<b>Graduate degree 1.1 % Undergraduate degree 14.2% Technical studies 5.6% High school diploma 66.4% Refrained from answering 12.7%</b>
<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Single 66.2% Living with significant other but not married 9.9% Married 16% Divorced 2% Refrained from answering 2.5%</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>M = 31.53 ; Sd = 15.45</b>
<b>Empowerment</b>	<b>Tourism M = 6.18; Sd = 1.39 Social M = 5.41 ; Sd = 1.78 Political M = 3.84; Sd = 2.36</b>

Figure 6: Demographic statistics for the survey.

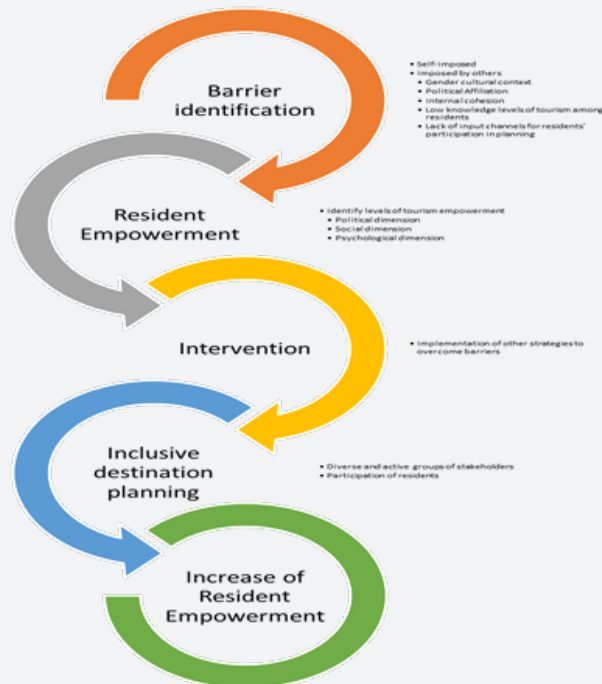


Figure 7: The resident empowerment flows.

Table 3: RETS descriptive.

Scale and Item Description	N	MEAN	R
<b>Psychological Empowerment</b>			
Tourism in Manta.			
Makes me proud to be a Manta Resident	1979	6.18	1.162
Makes me feel special because people travel to see my city's unique	1979	6.05	1.262
Makes me want to tell others about what we have to offer at Manta	1979	6.04	1.263
Reminds me that I have a unique culture to share with visitors	1979	6.04	1.272
Makes me want to work to keep Manta special	1979	6.12	1.198
<b>Social Empowerment</b>			
Tourism in Manta.			
Makes me feel more connected to my community	1978	5.71	1.376
Fosters a sense of 'community spirit' within me	1978	5.65	1.395
Provides ways for me to get involved in my community	1978	5.63	1.435
<b>Political Empowerment</b>			
I feel like ...			
I have a voice in Manta tourism development decisions	1978	4.07	2.175
I have access to the decision-making process when it comes to tourism in Manta	1978	3.76	2.185
My vote makes a difference in how tourism is developed in Manta	1978	4.55	2.173
I have an outlet to share my concerns about tourism development in Manta	1978	4.07	2.175

**Validity And Practicality of the RETS From the Perspective of Local Tourism Stakeholders**

The descriptive data from the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS) indicates that the studied population's psychological and social empowerment levels are notably high. The mean scores surpass 5.66 for Social Empowerment and 6.08 for Psychological Empowerment (Tables 3 & 4). This suggests that tourism activity in Ecuador instills a profound sense of pride and uniqueness in the community, positioning its culture as distinctive and worthy of sharing. There is a slight decrease in the score for social empowerment, indicating that tourism fosters community cohesion but not to the same extent as the psychological component. Regarding political empowerment, the mean score of 4.02 signifies that the population feels less empowered, particularly in participating in the decision-making process. The findings of this study were shared with tourism stakeholders to solicit their evaluation of the validity and practicability of the results, drawing on their extensive experience within the specific context under study. Upon presentation, the stakeholders conveyed that the findings resonated with and aligned well with their personal experiences, where minimal participation from individuals from the community and outside the tourism sector is reported in political empowerment: "We are always the same participants in planning, there is very minimal representation of other sectors of the community, for me that does not make sense since tourism is connected and affected by so many other

sectors" (participant 16). Upon presenting the results to the tourism stakeholders, unanimous agreement emerged regarding the validity and practicality of the findings Stakeholders affirmed that the chosen variables and items resonated as valid, accurately representing the community based on their extensive interactions. I believe we can trust the study results because they reflect our city's reality (Participant 31)

Furthermore, they agreed that the information derived from the study holds relevance, as it contributes to building a compelling argument advocating for heightened levels of political and social empowerment within the community: "I would say this reaffirms what we have been talking about in the past, but it is better to have the data so we can have a better argument with the authorities in charge; they need to start listening to the people in this matter" (participant 2). "Having the data to make a convincing argument for more inclusion is important" (participant 35). Stakeholders recognized the significance of these insights in shaping discussions and strategies geared towards augmenting empowerment in both political and social spheres. The alignment of the results with stakeholders' perceptions underscores the robustness of the study's methodology and reinforces the applicability of its outcomes to inform meaningful interventions and initiatives in the realm of tourism planning and community empowerment. "We can make better arguments with the authorities in charge; they need to start listening to the people in this matter (participant 7)". "Tourism is about people; it should

serve the people from the community; how can we serve if we do not know what they want? For me, tourism is everything, but I am a tourism stakeholder, so it makes sense that it is important to me, and since is important I want to be part of the planning and the decision process, and to be honest, I will advocate for my interests,

it sounds selfish but is the truth. They will not be heard if people are not part of the process. The study results show that whereas tourism is important on an abstract level, it does not translate to be part of the process” (participant 4).

**Table 4:** Descriptives of composite variables.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Psychological Empowerment	1979	6.0829	1.04612
Social Empowerment	1978	5.6673	1.24798
Political Empowerment	1978	4.204	1.81695
Benefits	1978	5.6577	1.3629
Rationality	1979	6.1127	1.10493
Reciprocity	1978	4.5657	1.58505
Justice	1979	6.04	1.263
Support	1978	5.885	1.04537
Positive impact of tourism	1978	5.8291	1.02824
Valid N (listwise)	1978		

Participants underscored the results’ significance in identifying specific dimensions of empowerment that require further attention and improvement. Their insights focused on the nuanced aspects within each dimension, shedding light on individual results that revealed deficiencies or areas requiring enhancement. This collective analysis enabled a targeted approach toward overcoming challenges and addressing shortcomings within the various dimensions of empowerment. The participants’ perspectives served as valuable input in evaluating the RETS. You see how political empowerment is lower than the other dimensions because people know that a selected few are the ones running the show (participant 30).Based on the results of the study, we can also make arguments about the importance of educating people to acknowledge the importance of tourism in their lives; you can see in the information if they do not feel like the benefits from tourism in a direct way. This is important; the results are very useful (participant 29).

**Integral Cultural Dimensions of Empowerment using RETS**

**1.1.1.Barriers to entrance and participation:** During the evaluation of the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS) and the identification of potential gaps, stakeholders emphasized certain factors influencing the observed levels of empowerment, particularly within the political empowerment dimension. In the interviews, 22 stakeholders explicitly pointed out that there must be additional factors, specifically related to the intricate dynamics of the cultural context, contributing to the variations in empowerment levels. Among the 35 participants in the study, 19 individuals highlighted the presence of barriers or obstacles hindering the active engagement of residents and other stakeholders in empowerment initiatives within the tourism sector

and beyond. Participants shared diverse perspectives on these challenges, emphasizing the complexity of involvement in tourism planning. Participant 1 articulated, “Sometimes, community engagement in tourism planning proves challenging due to internal obstacles, such as self-perceived lack of qualifications, but more often than not, external factors contribute to these barriers.” Participant 17 expressed the difficulty of making one’s voice heard, shedding light on the struggles faced by community members. Another participant (Participant 28) provided a business-oriented perspective, stating, “Depending on who is leading the planning, some individuals are not even invited to participate. Despite my investments in tourism, hotel management, and a travel operation business, I have experienced exclusion from planning processes simply due to personal differences with those in charge.” Collectively, these narratives underscore the multifaceted challenges residents and stakeholders encounter, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and accommodating approach to foster genuine community empowerment within the tourism sector.

Additionally, the information analyzed in the interviews made it possible to distinguish two categories of barriers to inclusive participation in destination marketing planning: (1) entrance and (2) participation barriers. Entrance barriers were defined by the participants as obstacles people face to be invited or be considered essential stakeholders in the tourism planning process, and participation barriers are difficulties people experience when their voices are not heard despite being invited to the planning processes. “You can see two types of barriers affecting empowerment in Ecuador: one, how you get into be part of the process, and two, how to be taken into account when you are in” (participant, 11)

In this sense, several participants provided poignant reflections on the intricate relationship between Empowerment, decision-making power, and community engagement within the context of tourism planning. Participant 14 expressed a stark reality: "Empowerment is derived from power, particularly from those who wield the authority to determine how tourism unfolds in the destination. Ideally, it should be the community, but the actuality is quite different. Gaining an invitation to participate is challenging, and even more so is the struggle to have one's voice heard once part of the process." Participant 19 shed light on the challenges those with substantial investments faced, remarking, "While being invited to participate was not difficult for me, considering my significant investment in the destination, I do not feel like I have substantial influence. This raises questions about the experience of an ordinary resident in a similar situation." Participant 25 offered a comprehensive perspective, acknowledging the positive impact of tourism at the social and psychological levels yet highlighting the stark contrast at the political level. They emphasized, "The data and tools at your disposal depict a genuine portrayal of the situation in Ecuador. While individuals may feel empowered socially and psychologically, the political realm presents distinct challenges, with barriers hindering genuine consideration in planning and participation in decision-making processes."

Moreover, all the participants (n=35) stated that the most significant barrier they perceive is that their voices are heard during participation. They openly complained about not being listened to by the DMO and country authorities or taking the planning process seriously. Participant 4 said, "I am very tired of assisting with workshops that are falsely advertised as a way to include stakeholders' opinions in the destination planning process; sometimes I feel they only invite me so they can request a signature and later say that my opinion was included. I have attended six workshops already, and things are just the same; nothing really changes... Nothing really improves. The taxes for hoteliers are outrageous, and they do not invest in promoting the country... The budget for the tourism department is so low and is mostly spent on the few holidays we have. I am starting to think that assisting workshops is useless and does not translate into actions, so I don't want to waste my time anymore... we hold no power". In a similar tone, 15 participants expressed that they feel excluded and don't want to be involved in any other destination or marketing planning workshop: "They ask us to be part of the planning, but in the end, none of our suggestions are taken into consideration (participant 2)". "The main barrier I have experienced is that my voice is not heard; I can be part of the stakeholders, but that means nothing (participant 18)". "I do not want to waste my time in these so-called planning meetings; I do want to contribute, but in the end, nothing happens... we work together and propose good strategies, but it is all on the paper; nothing happens (participant 21)" "I think the DMO authorities are trying to do their best, but they don't have any power either;

the politician on duty handles everything (participant 29)". "Since I am not in line with the authority on duty, my voice does not count (participant 5)".

**Gender, economic status, sexual orientation, and political affiliation:** Some participants (total:19) mentioned that it was difficult for them to be part of the decision-making processes due to several barriers like their gender, age, and political affiliation. For example, participant 32 mentioned: "Because I am a woman and a young person, I have had to work twice as much to be taken into account." In the same way, participant 28 said, "Being a woman has been a barrier for me. The situation has improved considerably but was challenging about ten years ago." Furthermore, participants underscored that these factors extend beyond mere demographics, delving into the intricate dynamics of the cultural context itself. For instance, participants emphasized that gender may not singularly predict empowerment; instead, variations are observed based on the social structure and gender roles expected within specific communities. One participant (Participant 29) illustrated this point, stating, "As a woman, your involvement in decision-making may vary based on numerous factors, including regional constraints. Coastal regions, for instance, exhibit different dynamics compared to highland areas, indicating that gender is inherently tied to the culture of a specific geographic region." Similarly, another participant (Participant 35) articulated the nuanced relationship between political affiliation and empowerment, stating, "Tourism is politics; the extent of power and empowerment in the decision-making process is contingent upon one's political party affiliation, whether they are elected officials or not." These insights underscore the multifaceted nature of empowerment, illustrating the intricate interplay between cultural dynamics, gender roles, and political affiliations.

Other difficulties the interviewees mentioned were related to economic status, sexual orientation, and political affiliation: "For me, it was not difficult to be considered as a stakeholder since I manage a luxury hotel in Ecuador, but I realize that there are not many representatives of micro-businesses or members of the community, especially in areas that are considered poor (participant 1)". "Lately, I have thought that there is no greater participation of the LGBT+ community, and I wonder if it is that we are not being inclusive unconsciously (participant 30)". "It is difficult for me to determine if there are entry barriers because I have never felt them, but I realize that there are not many women in management positions in our sector (participant 6)". "I think it all depends on who is in charge of the DMO or who is the politician on duty. Suppose you are aligned with the agenda on duty. In that case, they invite you everywhere (participant 31)". "The political part plays an important role in who is invited to be part of the processes (participant 20)".

**Lack of cohesion among stakeholders:** Regardless of the definite negative opinions expressed, most participants mentioned



that they were proud of the destination (n = 20) and willing to share tourism and cultural information with their pairs (n = 32). Participants perceived Ecuador as a special community (n = 35) but manifested little cohesion among the tourism stakeholders (n = 32). Participant 3 said, "We are trying to improve the destination image and have a more organized tourism development, but we are doing it by ourselves; it is like we were incapable of going beyond our issues, and we are not working as a group, we are not promoting a destination as a whole, and we are not standing on our feet; thus we are not calling the shots in the marketing or destination planning.. we are just not empowered".

**Providing solutions :**The participants who engaged in the interviews actively proposed diverse strategies for fostering empowerment, a recurring theme highlighting the importance of educating the community about the tourism sector's profound influence on the environment and society, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. Participants expressed varied perspectives on this matter. Participant 13 emphasized, "The entire population should understand how tourism impacts their lives, as many feel disconnected, hindering their involvement in marketing plan development processes." Participant 14 suggested, "Educating the community and especially union representatives of minority groups about tourism, its benefits, and destination resources could enhance the participation of these minority groups." Participant 10 stressed, "Education is the key, and initiating it at the school level would be highly beneficial." Participant 7 asserted, "I cannot be empowered by something I do not know."

Additionally, Participant 8 articulated the potential reciprocal relationship between gaining knowledge and becoming involved in decision-making processes, emphasizing that foreign investors within the tourism stakeholders could be motivated to gain knowledge of the destination. While educational campaigns were acknowledged as pivotal for increasing awareness and empowerment across community groups, participants, totaling 29, underscored that these campaigns alone were insufficient for ensuring inclusive participation. Consequently, other complementary strategies were proposed. "Educational campaigns are important and needed, but they are not enough" (participant 28). A notable proposal put forward by participants involves the establishment of a voluntary registration office and a website, providing a platform for community members to express their interest in participating in planning processes, regardless of whether they perceive themselves as stakeholders. "There must be places where people from the community can express their desire to be part of the planning processes, indistinctly whether or not they consider themselves stakeholders, because tourism is going to affect them for better or worse, and their voices must be included (participant 34)". Participant 34 underscored the importance of incorporating voices not directly impacted by tourism, suggesting a recruitment campaign involving diverse organizations not traditionally associated with the tourism

industry, such as fishermen, tuna exporters, and taxi and bus organizations. "We cannot keep working alone; we must get together with other sectors, like the tuna exporters or the taxi drivers. We need their input, and they need to recognize the importance of tourism for the local economy (participant 34)".

Another significant proposal aimed at addressing representation issues suggested implementing an internal regulation mandating a minimum percentage of minority groups in decision-making positions, with a specific focus on gender representation. Participant 33 argued for challenging gender bias, highlighting the current dominance of men in positions of power. "In the tourism bureaus, there should be an internal regulation that stipulates the presence of minority groups among the representatives; it is unheard of that all the representatives be men when there are women who want and can occupy those positions (participant 33)". Another participant proposed that planning activities in tourism should not be led by Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) officials due to potential associations with specific political parties. " I believe it is time we (the private sector) managed our affairs; the DMO is compromised because of their link with political affiliations (participant 25)."

The participant suggested that private organizations, such as the Tourism Bureau, the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, and other private associations, should take the lead. Additionally, Participant 35 proposed the implementation of software to collect opinions and suggestions from residents without revealing their identities. "Software could be implemented to channel opinions and suggestions in the planning processes without them collecting identifiers (participant 35)". This approach and secret votes were suggested to uphold anonymity and minimize biases. Finally, transparency emerged as a unanimous demand from all participants, with Participant 25 articulating its historical absence as a deterrent to inclusive participation. They stressed the continual need to promote transparency within tourism planning.

"Historically, we suffer from a lack of transparency; it is something regional, and with which we always must fight; I think that the lack of transparency discourages participation inclusive, so we should continually promote the need to be transparent."

### Conclusion

Inclusive participation and empowerment of residents are essential components for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of a destination, as well as the community's desires and core values [45]. However, the outcomes of this study bring to light substantial challenges in realizing genuine inclusivity within Ecuador's planning processes. These challenges are multifaceted, encompassing barriers related to gender, age, social status, political affiliation, non-recognition as a significant investor in the private tourism sector, and information gaps. The intersectionality of these factors collectively hinders the achievement of a genuinely inclusive planning environment. The disparities in participation

based on these characteristics underscore the pressing need for targeted interventions that address these barriers systematically. By acknowledging and actively addressing these diverse challenges, policymakers and stakeholders can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive framework for destination planning in Ecuador, ultimately fostering a collaborative and representative approach to decision-making. While the private sector faces minimal obstacles to being invited to participate, their voices encounter hurdles, mainly if they belong to minority groups or are female. The preference for the participation of older men and those with higher economic status persists, with major investors in the tourism sector dominating decision-making, leaving limited space for representatives and leaders from other sectors. This dominance by traditional power groups aligned with political parties raises concerns, as it often sidelines the input of stakeholders not aligned with the ruling political party. Such exclusionary practices lead to frustration, apathy, and decreased empowerment among residents, hindering the long-term well-being of the destination [46].

Unfortunately, significant barriers persist in achieving the inclusive participation of diverse stakeholders in tourism planning. The results show that an elite group, often comprising significant investors from the private sector and government officials, wields disproportionate control over the formulation of tourism development plans. This unbalanced power dynamic raises concerns, as it prioritizes the interests of a select few, neglecting the community's broader needs and perspectives. While it is acknowledged that investors undertake financial risks, it is equally crucial to recognize that the community, too, faces risks to their ways of life [22]. The concentration of decision-making power within a select group can lead to a disconnect between the proposed tourism initiatives and the genuine needs and aspirations of the local population, potentially exacerbating social and economic inequalities within the community. The dynamics of empowerment in Ecuador reveal a distinct duality in the form of two overarching barriers. Firstly, there exists a challenge in entering into the decision-making process, reflecting obstacles related to participation and invitation. Secondly, once individuals manage to become part of the process, a secondary barrier emerges-pertaining to being effectively considered and recognized. This two-fold perspective highlights the multifaceted nature of the barriers that residents and stakeholders encounter in their pursuit of empowerment within the context of tourism planning. It underscores the importance of addressing both entry-related challenges and the subsequent hurdles faced by those actively engaged in the decision-making process, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach to enhance genuine empowerment in Ecuador.

In terms of community empowerment, the results indicate high levels of tourism and social empowerment, contrasting with lower levels of political empowerment. This disparity highlights the need for increased active participation in the decision-making

process. While high values in tourism and social empowerment suggest a positive community outlook, low political empowerment signals a lack of engagement in political processes. To address this, destination planners must foster environments that encourage open dialogue, regardless of source [42]. Additionally, the perception of favoritism by an elitist stakeholder group can contribute to dissatisfaction and irrelevance, impacting the planning and promotion of the destination [41]. Based on the participant's feedback, we underscored the necessity to incorporate the study barriers or difficulties rooted in the cultural context, recognizing that these elements play a crucial role in shaping the political empowerment dimension. This acknowledgment from the stakeholders highlights the importance of a more nuanced and culturally tailored approach to understanding and measuring empowerment.

On the other hand, the results underscore the significance of awareness and training initiatives to cultivate an understanding among residents about the importance of empowerment and their right to demand active participation in tourism planning processes. This necessitates implementing strategies that facilitate unrestricted entry for residents into the planning sphere, including non-traditional stakeholders, as Pennington-Gray and Basurto [47] suggested. Furthermore, adopting technology-driven strategies can help mitigate biases in the selection process. A notable supported strategy involves circumventing reliance on public organizations for tourism planning, as they are prone to bias stemming from their political affiliations. This recommendation emphasizes the need for impartial and inclusive approaches that ensure the broad representation of voices in the planning and decision-making processes, fostering a more democratic and transparent framework for destination development.

The results reveal that the barriers to empowerment in the destination under study predominantly stem from external impositions, aligning with previous findings on power imbalances in Latin America [15]. This pattern underscores the urgent need for policy interventions to foster greater transparency in the planning and decision-making processes, challenging the existing status quo. By addressing and dismantling these external barriers, policymakers can create an environment conducive to empowerment, ensuring a more equitable distribution of influence and participation among stakeholders [35]. This strategic shift toward transparency mitigates the impediments to empowerment and paves the way for a more inclusive and democratically informed approach to destination planning, promoting the active engagement of various voices in shaping the community's future [47].

### Theoretical Contributions

The results demonstrate that the scale is effective in a different cultural context, with all dimensions and items significantly contributing to the variance in the data. Stakeholders also validate the scale's utility and significance in measuring levels of

psychological, social, and political empowerment, thus supporting ongoing collaborative efforts in planning and acknowledging the critical role of tourism. Additionally, the study thoroughly examines the validity and reliability of the scale within this unique context. The lack of a “one-size-fits-all” empowerment approach, universally applicable across various destinations, highlights the need to understand and address specific barriers and power dynamics unique to each location and culture. These include considerations of gender roles, political structures, and social standings, underscoring the need for context-sensitive strategies to achieve authentic empowerment in each distinct environment. Addressing these complexities is crucial in developing strategies that are relevant to the varied sociocultural settings of Latin American destinations, particularly considering the rising movements for inclusion and changing political scenarios in the studied area.

This study contributes theoretically by evaluating the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS) from the stakeholders’ perspective and identifying “cultural barriers” as potential influences on resident empowerment. These barriers, closely related to the cultural intricacies of the destination, highlight the context-dependent nature of empowerment dynamics. The findings emphasize the importance of recognizing and confronting these barriers to effectively enhance resident empowerment. Moreover, the research uncovers the significant effect of political affiliation, particularly the governing party, as a key factor in shaping both self-imposed and external barriers, especially in the realm of political empowerment. This complex relationship, often neglected in destination studies in developing nations, offers crucial insights to the academic field, especially for Latin American destinations. Recognizing these elements enriches the theoretical understanding of resident empowerment, offering a more comprehensive perspective suitable for a variety of cultural and political contexts (Figure 7).

### Practical Contributions

The study underscores the importance of empowerment as a pivotal element in promoting community-focused and socially responsible tourism development. Recognizing empowerment as a multifaceted concept is key for destination managers to formulate effective strategies and allocate resources efficiently. Empowered communities are actively involved in tourism development, fully understanding its advantages and drawbacks. Practically, stakeholders in Ecuador’s tourism sector have identified significant obstacles to empowerment, proposing enhancements in the interaction among different tourism sector members. They advocate for including community members and stakeholders from other sectors more integrally. The study highlights the necessity to address political oppression, biases favoring certain parties and elites, and emphasizes the need for policies that encourage women’s participation in managerial roles and decision-making in the tourism industry. It points out the paradox where destinations

heavily depend on tourism economically yet control often lies not with the residents but with elites. Confronting these barriers can create an environment where community involvement is seen not as a burden but as a valuable and mutually beneficial activity. The findings reveal that both self-imposed and externally imposed barriers lead to reduced resident empowerment, notably in the political empowerment dimension of the studied destination. Stakeholders link this diminished empowerment to a lack of transparency, biases, political favoritism, and gender imbalances. Targeted interventions to tackle these barriers are critical to surmount current challenges. By diminishing or removing these obstacles, there’s potential for increased community participation and broader stakeholder engagement from various sectors, fostering a more inclusive approach to destination planning. However, the study participants emphasize that mere inclusion in planning does not ensure effective representation. Implementing policies that regulate participation and mechanisms or channels for voicing opinions is essential to achieve true inclusivity.

### Future Research

Subsequent research in this field should aim to employ a quantitative methodology to thoroughly investigate the complex relationships between cultural barriers and resident empowerment in tourism destinations. Utilizing a quantitative approach would enable a more structured examination of these interconnections, offering a detailed insight into the factors that impact empowerment dynamics. Furthermore, broadening the scope of future research to include a variety of destinations is essential. This expansion would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a more complete understanding of how these dynamics play out across different settings.

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DOI: [10.19080/GJTLH.2024.01.555559](https://doi.org/10.19080/GJTLH.2024.01.555559)

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