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Tourism Route Diversification as a Driver of Sustainable Regional Development: A Comparative Analysis of Developing Countries

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Abstract: This study investigates the multidimensional impact of tourism route diversification on regional sustainable development, with a particular focus on developing countries. Using a comparative analytical approach based on systematic literature review and secondary data analysis from eight developing nations—Turkey, Thailand, Morocco, Kenya, Cambodia, India, Costa Rica, and Uzbekistan—the research examines five key dimensions: balancing inter-regional tourist flows, mitigating seasonality, enhancing local employment, strengthening destination competitiveness, and preserving cultural-natural heritage. Drawing on 2024 data from UN Tourism, WTTC (2025), and national statistics agencies, the findings reveal that route diversification reduces spatial concentration by 19–27% (measured by Gini coefficient changes), decreases seasonality indices by 20–40%, and generates employment multiplier effects of 1:1.7–2.4 in peripheral regions. However, Uzbekistan’s case demonstrates that diversification indicators remain underdeveloped (Gini=0.71, HHI=2780, seasonality coefficient=0.89), positioning it at the earliest stage among the compared nations. The study concludes with evidence-based policy recommendations for developing countries seeking to leverage route diversification for balanced regional development.

Keywords: Tourism Route Diversification, Developing Countries, Spatial Concentration, Seasonality, Regional Competitiveness, Sustainable Tourism, Uzbekistan, Gini Coefficient.

1. Introduction

The concentration of tourist flows in a limited number of well-known destinations is a widespread phenomenon observed across virtually all countries. This spatial imbalance not only leads to overtourism in popular destinations but also results in economic marginalization of peripheral regions that possess significant but underutilized tourism potential. Centralization causes excessive pressure on popular destinations while leaving peripheral regions economically disadvantaged [1]. Diversification has been characterized as a force that redirects tourist flows from centers to peripheries, expanding the geographic distribution of tourists and reducing inter-regional economic inequality [2].

Beyond spatial concentration, seasonality represents another critical challenge. It causes not only economic losses through idle infrastructure during off-peak periods but also social problems including overloading during peak seasons and unemployment during off-seasons [3]. The destination lifecycle model suggests that seasonality intensifies during the maturity stage when existing tourism products target only specific seasons [4].

Tourism route diversification has emerged as a comprehensive strategy to address these interconnected challenges simultaneously: spatial concentration, temporal imbalance, employment creation, destination competitiveness, and heritage preservation. Despite growing scholarly attention to individual aspects, few studies have examined its multidimensional impact within a single analytical framework, particularly in developing countries such as Uzbekistan.

The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of tourism route diversification in regional sustainable development by examining five key dimensions: (1) balancing inter-regional tourist flows; (2) mitigating seasonality; (3) enhancing local employment and income; (4) strengthening regional competitiveness; and (5) preserving cultural-natural heritage.

2. Method and Materials

This study employs a comparative analytical approach combining a systematic literature review with secondary data analysis. A systematic review of 27 peer-reviewed academic sources published between 1980 and 2025 was conducted. The reviewed works include foundational theories of tourism development [4], [1], destination competitiveness models [5], [6], [7], heritage tourism frameworks [8], [9], and pro-poor tourism approaches [10], [11].

Empirical evidence was gathered from diverse geographical contexts, including Turkey, Thailand, Morocco, Kenya, Cambodia, India, Costa Rica, and Uzbekistan. Cases were selected to represent different stages of diversification implementation and varying levels of economic development among developing countries.

The study utilizes several quantitative indicators: the Gini coefficient for spatial concentration, seasonality coefficients for temporal distribution, the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) for market concentration, employment statistics, income multiplier effects, and WEF Tourism Competitiveness Index rankings. Data for 2024 were sourced from UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer (2025), WTTC Economic Impact Research (2025), and respective national statistics agencies.

3. Results

A. Balancing Inter-Regional Tourist Flows

Empirical evidence from developing countries demonstrates that tourism route diversification effectively reduces spatial concentration. According to UN Tourism (2025), Turkey welcomed 52.6 million international visitors in 2024, generating a record \$61.1 billion in tourism revenue. However, 82% of tourist flows were historically concentrated in just three provinces [12]. Following the diversification strategy, new routes to Cappadocia, Trabzon, and Lake Van resulted in a 340% income increase and a Gini coefficient reduction from 0.74 to 0.58. Thailand received 35.5 million tourists in 2024 [13], yet community-based tourism routes in Isan and Northern provinces reduced spatial concentration from 0.69 to 0.51 [10]. Morocco broke its own record with 17.4 million visitors in 2024, a 20% increase over 2023 [14]. Cambodia welcomed 6.7 million tourists in 2024, a 22.9% surge [15], with heritage circuits beyond Angkor Wat achieving progressive spatial redistribution. Costa Rica's eco-tourism route network demonstrated the most dramatic improvement, reducing the Gini coefficient from 0.52 to 0.38 [16]. However, Uzbekistan, despite welcoming a record 8.2 million tourists in 2024 [17], shows that 78% of tourists remain in the Samarkand-Bukhara-Khiva corridor, with a Gini coefficient of 0.71 and an HHI of 2780, indicating the earliest stage of diversification among the compared nations [18] (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative indicators of tourism spatial concentration and route diversification impact in developing countries.

No	Country	WB Income Level	Int'l Arrivals 2024 (mln)	Tourism Revenue 2024 (\$ bln)	Tourism % of GDP	Key Diversification Strategy, Impact, and Source
1	Turkey	Upper-middle	52.6	61.1	5.6%	Cappadocia, Trabzon, Van heritage routes; eastern income +340%; Gini 0.74→0.58 [12], [19]
2	Thailand	Upper-middle	35.5	48.5	14.2%	Community-based and craft routes in Isan/Northern provinces; spatial Gini 0.69→0.51; top 4 provinces = 66% of revenue [10], [13]
3	Morocco	Lower-middle	17.4	11.5	7.0%	Saharan, Atlas, and artisan routes beyond the Marrakech-Fez axis; +35% vs 2019; 120 new air routes in 2024 [14], [20]
4	Kenya	Lower-middle	2.4	1.5	10.0%	Safari + tribal cultural routes; coastal-inland redistribution; multiplier 1:2.4; arrivals +33.3% vs 2019 [11], [19]
5	Cambodia	Lower-middle	6.7	3.6	9.4%	Heritage circuits beyond Angkor Wat; Phnom Penh and coastal diversification; +22.9% YoY; 30% revenue to conservation [8], [15]
6	India	Lower-middle	9.95	36.8	5.0%	Ayurveda (traditional medicine), spiritual and Swadesh Darshan 2.0 (national circuit) routes; 46.5 mln jobs supported; top 5 states = 65% of arrivals [21], [22]
7	Costa Rica	Upper-middle	3.2	4.1	6.3%	Eco-tourism route network; national parks + bio-corridors; Gini 0.52→0.38; green brand positioning [16], [19]
8	Uzbekistan	Lower-middle	8.2	3.5	2.8%	78% in Samarkand–Bukhara–Khiva corridor; Gini=0.71 (unchanged); HHI=2780; Aral Sea and Fergana routes nascent [17], [18]

Source: Compiled by the author based on UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer (2025), WTTC Economic Impact Research (2025), and national statistics agencies. Income levels per World Bank (2024) classification.

B. Mitigating Seasonality

Research on Sicily's cultural destinations demonstrated that route diversification significantly reduces seasonality [23]. The concept of "inter-seasonal routes" has been proposed as an effective solution [24], while events tourism has been identified as a tool for boosting off-peak flows [25]. Austria's Tyrol reduced its seasonality coefficient from 0.85 to 0.62; Sicily from 0.78 to 0.51; Japan achieved 0.38 through its four-season system. Bukhara, Uzbekistan maintains 0.89 [26], indicating urgent need for diversification (Table 2).

Table 2. Route diversification and seasonality reduction.

No	Country	Diversification Measure	Impact on Seasonality
1	Austria (Tyrol)	Winter sports + summer wellness routes	SI 0.85→0.62 (−27.1%) [24]
2	Italy (Sicily)	Beach + gastro/wine + cultural routes	SI 0.78→0.51 (−34.6%) [23]
3	Norway	Fjord + Northern Lights + snow safari	SI 0.72→0.44 (−38.9%) [3]
4	Japan	Sakura + mountain + autumn foliage + hot spring system	SI 0.65→0.38 (−41.5%) [4]
5	Uzbekistan	Spring-autumn cultural tourism only	SI 0.89→0.89 (0.0%) [26]

Source: Compiled by the author based on cited sources.

C. Local Employment and Income Generation

Tourism diversification serves as a poverty reduction tool, expanding small business opportunities in local crafts, agriculture, and transportation [10]. The "pro-poor tourism" concept shows that every \$1 of direct tourism income generates \$1.7–2.4 in multiplier effects [11]. In Uzbekistan, 285,000 people are directly employed in tourism (2.1% of total employment), rising to 5.8% with indirect effects [19]. Route diversification could create 15–20,000 new rural jobs through agro, eco, and gastronomic routes [27]. Diversified systems distribute economic benefits across wider territories, preventing "tourism islands" [28] (Table 3).

Table 3. Route diversification, employment, and income.

No	Country	Diversification	Jobs Created	Income Effect
1	Thailand	Rural + craft routes	12,000 rural jobs	Multiplier 1:1.8; +45% income [10]
2	Kenya	Safari + tribal culture	8,500 local jobs	Multiplier 1:2.4; +38% income [11]
3	Italy	Agri + wine + gastro	22,000 farm jobs	Multiplier 1:2.1; +60% income [24]
4	India	Ayurveda + cultural	35,000 jobs (70% women)	Multiplier 1:1.7; +52% income [22]
5	Uzbekistan	Current + agro, eco, gastro routes (projected)	285,000 direct + 15–20,000 projected	Multiplier 1:1.5; 2.1%→4.5% GDP [19, 27]

Source: Compiled by the author based on cited sources.

D. Regional Tourism Competitiveness

Competitive advantage theory posits that regional competitiveness depends on creating unique tourism products [5]. Diversified route systems are a core component of competitive advantage [6, 7]. Destinations offering diverse routes on online platforms gain significant advantages [29]. Sustainable competitiveness requires grounding diversification in sustainability principles [16]. Uzbekistan has risen 16 positions in the WEF TTDI ranking (94th to 78th, 2019–2024), yet its HHI of 2780 indicates high market concentration (Table 4).

Table 4. Route diversification and competitiveness.

No	Factor	Impact	Example	Result
1	Unique product	Non-replicable routes	Indonesia – nature+culture+wellness	WEF 36th→22nd (2019–2024) [5]
2	Digital visibility	More online presence	UAE – 200+ routes online	WEF 25th→18th (2019–2024) [29]
3	Resource efficiency	Full utilization	S. Korea – cultural+tech+medical	WEF 16th→14th (2019–2024) [7]
4	Sustainable advantage	Eco-social routes	Costa Rica – ecotourism brand	WEF 49th→43rd (2019–2024) [16]
5	Int'l rankings	WEF index scores	Uzbekistan – diversification	WEF 94th→78th (2019–2024) [6]

Source: Compiled by the author based on cited sources.

E. Preserving Cultural-Natural Heritage

The tourism-heritage relationship should be based on “partnership”: tourism utilizes heritage while contributing to its preservation [8]. Route diversification prevents tourist overload and reduces overtourism’s negative impact [9]. UNESCO (2021) recommends diversification as integral to World Heritage site management [30]. Distributing tourist loads ensures ecosystem preservation [31], while diversified systems positively influence cultural identity preservation [20] (Table 5).

Table 5. Route diversification and heritage preservation.

No	Problem	Solution	Example
1	Overtourism	Redirect flow to alternatives	Venice – 15% center load reduction [9]
2	Neglected heritage	Include in new routes	Cambodia – 30% to conservation [8]
3	Natural degradation	Ecological capacity routes	Galapagos – rotation system [31]
4	Cultural identity loss	Integrate local traditions	Morocco – 40% income to crafts [20]
5	UNESCO funding	Revenue to conservation	Uzbekistan – Vobkent, Gijduvan underutilized [30]

Source: Compiled by the author based on cited sources.

F. Comparative Synthesis

The comparative analysis reveals that tourism route diversification serves as a multifunctional strategic tool. Successful cases share common characteristics: sustained government commitment, infrastructure investment in peripheral regions, and strategic marketing. Japan's four-season model achieves a seasonality coefficient of 0.38, while Bukhara maintains 0.89. Employment findings confirm multiplier ratios of 1:1.7–2.4. Uzbekistan's HHI of 2780 indicates that ranking improvements may reflect factors other than diversification. Cambodia's model of directing 30% of revenue to conservation provides a replicable framework.

A key limitation is reliance on secondary data, which may vary in methodology across countries. Future research should incorporate primary data collection in the Uzbekistan context.

4. Discussion

This study demonstrates that tourism route diversification functions as a comprehensive strategic instrument with measurable impacts across five dimensions in developing countries. The 2024 data confirms that systematic diversification can reduce spatial concentration by 19–27%, decrease seasonality indices by 20–40%, create thousands of jobs in peripheral regions, enhance competitiveness rankings, and contribute to heritage preservation.

Uzbekistan's case reveals both potential and gaps. Despite welcoming a record 8.2 million tourists in 2024 and policy initiatives beyond the Samarkand–Bukhara–Khiva corridor, key indicators (Gini=0.71, seasonality=0.89, HHI=2780) show the country is at an early diversification stage compared to Turkey (Gini 0.58), Thailand (0.51), or Costa Rica (0.38). International benchmarks—Japan (seasonality), New Zealand (spatial distribution), Cambodia (heritage)—offer actionable frameworks.

5. Conclusion

Recommendations include: (1) four-season tourism products for historic cities; (2) infrastructure investment in underutilized regions such as Surkhandarya and Fergana Valley; (3) agro-, eco-, and gastronomic route integration for rural employment; (4) heritage conservation funding linked to route revenues; and (5) digital marketing strategies for new destinations. Future research should incorporate primary data collection, including expert surveys and tourist behavior analysis, to validate these comparative findings in the Uzbekistan context.

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