

Tourism and the sustainable development goals: Stakeholders' perspectives from Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to end poverty, protect the planet, and achieve prosperity for all by bringing together policymakers, academia, practitioners, and all other relevant tourism stakeholders and providing policy and strategic engagement guidelines. As tourism is the fastest-growing sector of the global economy, examining the connections between tourism and the SDGs is relevant to both developing and developed countries. This study explores the Nepalese tourism industry's role in addressing the SDGs from the perspective of various tourism stakeholders (academia, the government, the private tourism industry, and public-private organizations). To present a comprehensive picture, this study employed a case study approach. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism industry stakeholders. The findings suggest that, to varying degrees, the SDGs are applicable as well as achievable for Nepal. However, several issues may impede the full implementation of these goals. The implications of these findings are discussed in the paper.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a major component of the Nepalese economy. In 2019, tourism accounted for 6.7% of Nepal's GDP and 6.9% of the nation's total employment, with \$833.8 million being generated through international tourism alone (WTTC, 2020). Nepal has embraced tourism since the 1950s. The number of international tourist arrivals rose from 9526 in 1964 to a historic record of over 1.1 million in 2018 (MoCTCA, 2019). However, the growth of the tourism industry in Nepal has been punctuated by several challenges in recent decades, including socio-political issues (e.g., the Maoist revolution) followed by a lengthy period of political transition and natural disasters (e.g., the earthquake of 2015), among others, which negatively affected international tourist arrivals to Nepal. Nevertheless, Nepal has continuously worked to increase its share of the international tourism market. To that end, several marketing campaigns were launched, including Visit Nepal 1998, Nepal Tourism Year 2011, and Visit Nepal 2020. The goal of the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign was to attract two million international tourists. However, it was canceled in March 2020 due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2015, the United Nations proposed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aim to alleviate poverty, protect the planet, and

achieve prosperity for all by bringing together policymakers, academia, practitioners, and all other relevant tourism stakeholders and providing policy and strategic engagement guidelines (WTO and UNDP, 2017). Scheyvens (2018) suggested utilizing the linkages between tourism and sustainable development in a wide range of contexts. With proper policy and planning mechanisms in place, local, regional, and national destinations are highly likely to enjoy the positive impacts of tourism while working toward achieving the SDGs. The SDGs can be universally applied to all member states, including Nepal, creating a path for global sustainable development through 2030 (Scheyvens, 2018). Poverty alleviation has been a major goal since the 2000s with the creation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). With the subsequent SDGs, the tourism industry can continue to contribute to poverty alleviation and other goals (Rasoolimanesh, Ramakrishna, Hall, Esfandiari, & Seyfi, 2020).

The development of micro-enterprises has increased globally. Within the tourism sector, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have the potential to generate positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes (KC, Morais, Peterson, Seekamp, & Smith, 2019). SMEs are particularly important in developing nations to foster socio-economic wellbeing. Tourism microentrepreneurship is known to promote socio-economic growth and conservation goals in nature-based tourism

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destinations (Morais, Bunn, Hoogendoorn, & KC, 2018; Morais, KC, Mao, & Mosimane, 2015). Christie and Sharma (2008) also highlighted the role of entrepreneurship in fostering the long-term growth of tourism, as small-scale niche tourism significantly contributes to the growth of SMEs. The private sector should work to achieve several SDGs, including poverty reduction (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and climate action (SDG 13) (WTO and UNDP, 2017). However, tourism is linked to all 17 goals (Trupp & Dolezal, 2020).

As a developing country, Nepal has great potential to achieve the SDGs through tourism. However, the country is struggling to harness the full potential of tourism. Achieving the SDGs is a complex process that will require ongoing discussion and improvement in the way the tourism industry functions. This study was conducted to understand the roles and contributions of tourism in achieving the SDGs in Nepal at the macro-level. Specifically, by interviewing four groups of tourism stakeholders (i.e., academia, government, private tourism industry, and public-private tourism organizations), this study examined the contributions, challenges, and approaches to the development of the tourism industry in light of the SDGs in Nepal, and possible ways to meet the SDGs in the future. Achieving the SDGs via tourism necessitates an understanding of the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders. An understanding of the roles and contributions of tourism in achieving the SDGs in Nepal is needed to assess the current scenario and predict future directions. This study tries to address this gap and contributes to the body of knowledge that links the Nepalese tourism industry and the SDGs. A brief overview of the history of tourism development in Nepal serves as a logical starting point to describe these links.

2. Literature review

2.1. Critical stages of the tourism development process in Nepal

After more than 103 years of isolation during the autocratic Rana regime, Nepal first opened its doors to foreigners in 1951 with the dawn of democracy. Therefore, the history of planned development in Nepal, including tourism started in the 1950s with the start of the First Five-Year Plan (1956–1961). A National Planning Commission (NPC) was established in 1955 to institutionalize the process of planned development. To date, the Government of Nepal (GoN) has implemented a combination of fourteen Five-Year and Three-Year Plans. The Fifteenth Five-Year Plan is ongoing (NPC, n.d.).

In almost all the Five-Year and Three-Year Plans, tourism was a top priority due to its potential to create employment, increase foreign exchange earnings, preserve and promote Nepalese culture and heritage, and establish Nepal as one of the world's premier tourist destinations. Throughout the First to the Fifteenth Five-Year Plans, we propose that the history of tourism development in Nepal can be roughly divided into four stages: (1) the early stage, (2) the organized and cautious stage, (3) the open/liberal era mixed with an internal Maoist revolution, and (4) the post-peace era.

2.1.1. The early stage of tourism development (1950–1965)

This period was characterized by a complete lack of tourism businesses and infrastructure. To describe tourism in Nepal during this period, Liechty (2017) wrote, "In 1951 Kathmandu essentially had no hotels or restaurants; no taxis, guides, or maps; no travel agencies or booking offices. There was no commercial air service into the country" (p. 27). Given these conditions, the First Five-Year Plan (1956–1961) included the following tourism development goals:

To disseminate widely in other lands information about the interests and attractions of the country, to build up travel facilities and modern hotel accommodations, to give information and provide guide services when desired, to make available the most appropriate

products of Nepalese arts and crafts, to renovate points of major historic and cultural interest and, perhaps most, of all, to ensure full and satisfying opportunity to see, enjoy, and perhaps visit Nepal's matchless asset, the incomparable Himalayas with their flora, fauna, spas, lakes, and waterfalls. (NPC, First periodic plan, n.d.).

The Second Three-Year Plan (1962–1965) aimed to increase the capacity of the hotel sector to 110 hotel beds, establish a national travel agency to facilitate tourism and increase foreign exchange earnings, and develop Pokhara and Lumbini as tourist destinations outside the Kathmandu valley. A Russian entrepreneur named Boris Lissanevitch, known as the "father of tourism" in Nepal, established the first piece of tourist accommodation, the Royal Hotel, in Kathmandu in 1954 (Moran, 1996). Nepal's backcountry was opened to foreign tourists in 1964 for trekking. Lt. Col. Jimmy Roberts, a retired British Gurkha Officer, and an avid mountaineer, is credited with establishing the first trekking company in 1965, Mountain Travel (Moran, 1996). The growth of the accommodation sector and trekking businesses can be attributed to those early visionaries and the supportive tourism development policies of the GoN.

International publicity of the country began with the successful ascent of all of Nepal's major peaks between 1950 and 1965, including the first successful ascent of Mount Annapurna by a French team led by Maurice Herzog in 1950 (the first-ever climb of any 8000-m peak in the world) and the successful ascent of Mount Everest (the highest on earth) by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa on May 29, 1953. King Mahendra's coronation in March 1955, attended by over four hundred state guests and 160 media correspondents, including "news outlets from the *New York Times* to Radio Iceland" (Liechty, 2017, p. 42), played a major role in publicizing Nepal's myths and mysteries internationally. The West's obsession with the Himalayan yeti led to several expeditions in the Himalayas from 1953 to 1960, which received major coverage in the international media (Liechty, 2017). In the 1960s, countercultural seekers from the West found Nepal a haven for individual ecstasy, and by 1969 Kathmandu had become "the Mecca of hippiedom" and "the Amsterdam of the East" (Liechty, 2017).

2.1.2. The organized and cautious stage of tourism development (1965–1990)

This period encompasses the time from the Third through the Seventh Five-Year Plans. The Third Five-Year Plan (1965–1970) included the construction of Gaucher Runway (now known as Tribhuvan International Airport—TIA); hotel construction in Kathmandu, Biratnagar, and Pokhara; the establishment of a customs and immigration office in Birganj; and the development of promotional films. Major achievements during the Third Plan included the opening of about 800 hotel beds of varying standards in Kathmandu, the establishment of various travel agencies, the expansion and development of TIA, the initiation of foreign airlines' services in Nepal, and an increase in the national air carrier's (then RNAC) international services (NPC, n.d.). The first five-star hotel, the Soaltee, opened for business in 1965, followed by the Annapurna Hotel in Kathmandu (Liechty, 2017).

The goals of the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1970–1975) included developing a tourism master plan, expanding TIA's runway facilities to allow larger jet aircraft to land, and increasing tourists' length of stay from the average of 3–5 days (NPC, n.d.). The 10-year Nepal Tourism Master Plan, 1972 (published during the Fourth Plan), was prepared by the GoN with the technical assistance of the Government of Germany. The Master Plan described and categorized the cultural and natural attractions of Nepal (Department of Tourism, 1972). The development of touristic places such as Nagarkot and Kakani, the increased availability of sightseeing services and trained guides, and the growing international publicity for Nepal through the Department of Tourism were other major achievements made during the Third and Fourth Plans (NPC, n.d.).

The Fifth Five-Year Plan (1975–1980) and the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–1985) sought the preservation of the historical, cultural, and

geographical attractions in the country, as recommended in the 1972 Tourism Master Plan; the generation of additional foreign exchange through tourism; and the diversification of employment and earning channels. Significant growth in the number of hotel beds, from 1663 in 1974/75 to approximately 6838 in 1979/1980, was one of the major achievements of the Fifth Plan. During the Fifth Plan, 1095 persons were trained with various travel-trade skills, while international private charter flights were granted permission to operate during the Sixth Plan (NPC, n.d.).

In 1979, seven heritage sites in Kathmandu Valley were inscribed as UNESCO Cultural Heritage Sites, which was followed by Sagarmatha National Park (in 1979) and Chitwan National Park (in 1984) becoming Natural Heritage Sites (UNESCO, n.d.). This contributed to greater international recognition and publicity for Nepal. The Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985–1990) emphasized the improvement of the balance of payments by attracting higher-income tourists, generating new employment opportunities, increasing tourists' lengths of stay and encouraging a wider distribution of tourist incomes, and making efforts to produce goods consumed by the tourism sector domestically (NPC, n.d.), thereby endeavoring to connect tourism to sustainable development.

2.1.3. *The open/liberal era mixed with the internal Maoist revolution (1992–2007)*

This period encompasses the time during the Eighth through Tenth Five-Year Plans. The restoration of multi-party democracy in the country in 1990 led to the adoption of open, liberal, and market-oriented economic policies (including tourism), starting with the Eighth Plan (NPC, n.d.). The Eighth Five-Year Plan (1992–1997) aimed at expanding tourism activities to other parts of the country; improving living standards and reducing poverty through tourism employment; and developing efficient, safe, and standardized air services, among other things. Tourism activities such as trekking, mountaineering, and national park visits outside the Kathmandu Valley contributed to tourism diversification during the Eighth Plan. Furthermore, during the Eighth Plan, new trekking routes in the Mustang and Manang regions were opened for guided trekking (in 1990/91 and 1991/92, respectively), with due concern for carrying capacity in culturally and environmentally sensitive regions of Nepal. Permission was granted to three private companies to operate air services and to one to operate a helicopter service. The Tourism Infrastructure Development Project (funded by the Asian Development Bank) completed some major works, including the Ghalegaon–Sikles ecotourism development, Pokhara airport runway improvements, and construction of tourism service center buildings in Kathmandu and Pokhara.

The Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997–2002) sought to create backward and forward linkages between the tourism sector and the national economy, and to establish Nepal as a premier global tourism destination through effective promotion. The successful launch of Visit Nepal Year 1998 during the Ninth Plan played an important role in creating awareness of the country and promoting Nepal internationally (NPC, n.d.). The Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002–2007) stressed the need for the sustainable development and promotion of quality in the tourism sector; promoted the conservation and preservation of historical and cultural heritage; and made air transportation services easily accessible, secure, and reliable (NPC, n.d.). The major achievements of the Tenth Plan include the successful conclusion of the Destination Nepal Campaign (2002–2003) that targeted regional tourism promotion in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Mount Everest in 2003 attended by world-renowned mountaineers and international media. Nepal's first professionally designed marketing slogan, "*Naturally Nepal: Once is not enough*," was launched in 2006. The Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management (NATHM) started bachelor's courses in hotel and tourism management during the Tenth Plan (NPC, n.d.). However, the decade-long Maoist revolution in the country (1996–2006) severely affected the flow of international tourists to Nepal during the Ninth and Tenth Plans amidst growing internal security

concerns and negative media publicity.

2.1.4. *Tourism development in the post-peace era (2007–present)*

This encompasses the time from the Eleventh Three-Year Plan through to the current Fifteenth Five-Year Plan. The decade-long Maoist conflict in Nepal ended with the peaceful settlement between the GoN and Maoists in November 2006, giving new hope for socio-economic development, including tourism. The Eleventh Three-Year Plan (2007/08–2009/10) sought to develop Nepal as a major international tourist destination and launch competitive domestic and international air services by involving the private sector. The Twelfth Three-Year Plan (2010/11–2012/13) emphasized employing tourism as a means of economic development, employment generation, balanced regional development, and poverty alleviation in an inclusive and equitable manner (NPC, n.d.). These goals (as well as the goals set forth in subsequent plans) seem compatible with the SDGs. The country launched Nepal Tourism Year 2011 to host one million tourists but failed to meet the target.

The Thirteenth Three-Year Plan (2013/14–2015/16) aimed to increase both the number and quality of tourists visiting Nepal through national and international tourism promotion and ensuring the equitable distribution of income from tourism. The Fourteenth Three-Year Plan (2016/17–2018/19) sought to increase the income levels of people with increased tourist arrivals by developing and promoting the country as an attractive and safe travel destination and to increase and diversify domestic tourist destinations. Tourism in the post-peace era was revived (see Fig. 1) only to be disrupted by a period of political transitioning and the devastating earthquake of April 2015. The current Fifteenth Five-Year Plan (2019/20–2023/24) seeks to develop Nepal as a safe, high quality, and tourist-friendly travel destination; increase the contribution of tourism to the national economy through the diversification of tourist areas, products, and services; and distribute tourism's benefits in an equitable manner (NPC, n.d.). The Fifteenth Plan has begun with the creation of a favorable environment to encourage employment in tourism and the timely reconstruction of cultural sites that were damaged in the 2015 earthquake (NPC, Fifteenth periodic plan, n.d.).

2.2. *Opportunities for tourism development in Nepal*

Several challenges exist in each stage of the tourism development process. However, despite these challenges, it is also important to note that many opportunities exist for the growth of sustainable tourism in Nepal. Given the country's topography and biodiversity, Nepal offers untapped potential to attract travelers of various interests, such as nature-orientated experience seekers and cultural enthusiasts. As the country is located between the two most populous nations in the world, China and India, Nepal can attract many tourists from these neighboring countries by developing quality tourism products and services. Furthermore, with the formation of a three-tier federal system of government, local and regional governments now have more of a role to play in tourism development, which will perhaps lead to further diversification of Nepal's tourism industry. Construction of two regional-international airports, Gautam Buddha in Bhairahawa and another in Pokhara, are nearing completion (now targeted for 2021), which will help disperse the flow of international tourists into Nepal and minimize capacity constraints at the sole international airport—TIA. To increase the supply of accommodation, "the private hotel sector has planned to add 4,000 new rooms in the four and five-star category in Kathmandu, Chitwan, and Pokhara" (Badal & Kharel, 2019, p. 72) by 2020 by partnering with international hotel chains such as Hilton, Doubletree, and Marriott. Of late, the growing consumption of travel services such as trekking, rafting, jungle safaris, and sightseeing by the middle-class and high-income Nepalese has created many new opportunities within the domestic tourism market. Finally, one of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is a pent-up global demand for iconic, specialized, and

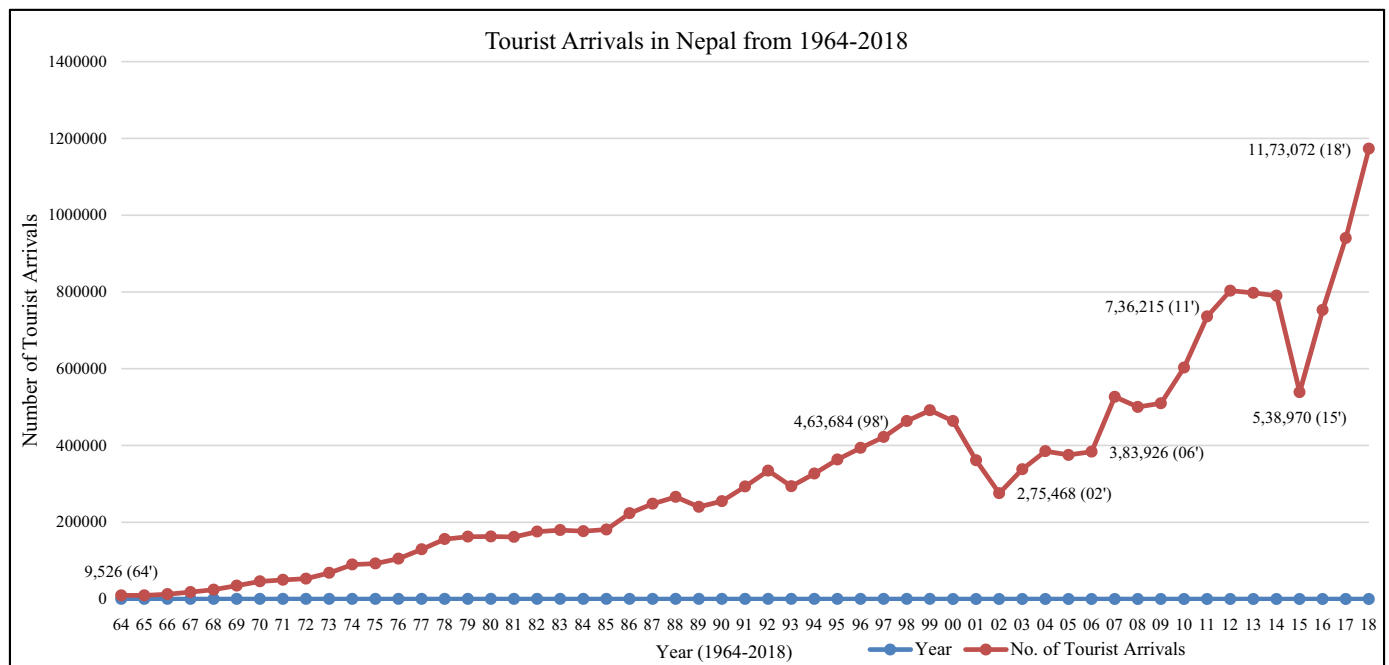


Fig. 1. International Tourists Arrivals to Nepal from 1964 to 2018 (source: Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), 2019).

*Visit Nepal Year 1998 came close to achieving the goal of 500,000 tourists.

**Tourist arrivals slumped in 2002 because of the Maoist revolution.

***After the signing of the Peace Accord between the GoN and Maoists in 2006, tourist arrivals increased from 2007 onward.

comparatively less-crowded and therefore safer travel destinations, such as Nepal.

2.3. Tourism and the SDGs

The SDG agenda highlights tourism’s role in meeting these interconnected goals, as tourism accounts for one-tenth of the global GDP. If managed properly, tourism can foster economic and social development and can accelerate the attainment of the SDGs (WTO and UNDP, 2017). Tourism has a specific role to play in achieving decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and life below water (SDG 14) (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020; WTO and UNDP, 2017). Moreover, tourism can also contribute to the achievement of other goals, including poverty eradication, advancing gender equality, and protecting the environment (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020; Scheyvens, 2018; WTO and UNDP, 2017).

The ability of tourism to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs is discussed in several tourism studies. For instance, Trupp and Dolezal (2020) stressed the importance of tourism to economic development in Southeast Asia and described its potential to contribute toward the achievement of SDGs such as poverty reduction. However, Scheyvens and Hughes (2019) contend that the eradication of poverty is challenging if the multidimensional nature of poverty is considered, as structural inequalities may continue to impede people’s development. These authors suggested that tourism players should “Enhance people’s access to resources and build their resilience; empower poorer people and help them to secure their rights; and provide more opportunities for the poor and vulnerable to participate in decision-making about tourism development” (p. 1075). Several studies also highlight the negative impacts of tourism on the lives of the poor. For example, Manyara and Jones’ (2007) case study from Kenya showed that areas with a lot of tourist activity also had higher levels of poverty. Scheyvens and Hughes (2019) argued that even pro-poor tourism is not able to reach the poorest of the poor.

Tourism is also linked to gender equality. However, to promote gender equality through tourism, the first step should be to reframe the

ongoing tourism development policy (Ferguson, 2011). According to Trupp and Dolezal (2020), “How tourism links with and contributes to other SDGs is more difficult to grasp, given that the role of tourism in the past has not necessarily been of a humanitarian nature, with health, educational, or gender empowerment often seen as mere ‘byproducts’ of tourism interventions” (p. 5). In a pedagogical context, Slocum, Dimitrov, and Webb (2019) stated, “Sustainable tourism is deeply connected with the SDGs of global awareness and transformation, and integration of the SDGs within higher education implies a responsibility to contribute to the long-term success of these goals” (p. 34). Achieving the interconnected 17 SDGs is a complex process. A better understanding of this complexity is needed, and a sense of shared responsibility must be instilled in all relevant stakeholders.

Movono and Hughes (2020) stressed the importance of fostering connections between stakeholders and developing strong partnerships in achieving the SDGs. Hall (2019) also emphasized the importance of fostering collaboration to maximize tourism’s potential to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. In the Nepalese context, the planning process has historically made use of a top-down approach without collaboration from major tourism stakeholders (NPC, 2017). Stakeholder involvement in the tourism development process, including planning and policymaking, is an important component of achieving the SDGs. Therefore, every stakeholder group must be involved and mobilized to positively influence the outcome. To address the challenges of greenhouse gas emissions, economic leakages, issues of resource management, and the negative impact tourism may have on local communities and cultural assets, the WTO and UNDP (2017) state that the “harnessing of tourism’s positive contribution to sustainable development and the mitigation of the sector’s adverse effects calls for strong partnerships and decisive action by all tourism stakeholders” (p. 10). In conclusion, the SDGs in tourism may be impossible to achieve without collaboration from all relevant stakeholders, including the poorest of the poor.

2.4. The SDGs as guidelines to fuel the sustainable tourism development movement in Nepal

As a member-state of the UN and UNWTO, Nepal was party to the UN's MDGs. Later, the UN adopted the SDGs in 2015 with a commitment "to end extreme poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and fix climate change, laying the foundation for the betterment of people, the planet, prosperity and peace through partnerships by 2030" (WTO and UNDP, 2017, p. 6). The underlying emphasis of the SDGs is to guide and champion the type of development that balances social, economic, and environmental sustainability. As a tourist destination, Nepal has practiced various forms of sustainable tourism development, including community-based tourism, pro-poor tourism, mountain tourism, ecotourism, and so forth.

The Tourism Policy of Nepal 2065 (2008 CE) seeks to create employment for common people through the diversification and expansion of tourism using ecotourism and rural tourism; and to support conservation and the sustainable use of the natural environment while developing tourism-related infrastructure (MoCTCA, 2008). The GoN seems committed to the achievement of the SDGs via policies and program implementation. For example, for mountaineering teams in Nepal, one provision states that, "The team shall not damage or destroy any tree, shrub, other forest, heritage or environment existing in the adjoining area or on the route of its mountaineering expedition", and "The team shall not indulge in any activity that may be contrary to the customs and religious, social, or cultural traditions of the local people of that area" (MoCTCA, 2018, p. 342). Moreover, regulations require that all types of destroyable, recyclable, and re-exportable wastes be properly managed by the expedition teams to prevent damage to the mountain environment. The Mountaineering Royalty Disbursement and Operation Manual (GoN, 2014) states that the GoN will share 30% of its mountaineering royalties with local bodies for the development and maintenance of tourism-related products and facilities in certain areas.

To support rural economies, the GoN provides detailed guidelines to establish, manage, and promote homestay tourism through the Homestay Operation Directive (MoCTCA, 2010). The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) also promotes homestay programs in protected areas (PAs). Community-based homestays and other ecotourism ventures are promoted in PA settings, often with the help of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). These programs fulfill the dual goals of conservation and supporting sustainable livelihoods. Moreover, these initiatives generate income to cover rural families' daily expenses and children's educational costs, promote gender equality, and support the conservation of cultural and natural resources (KC, 2020). A few PAs have been successful in attracting an overwhelming number of visitors, whereas other PAs are still struggling to promote tourism. The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), Chitwan National Park, and Sagarmatha National Park are the most visited PA units, with the ACAP often being cited as one of the best ecotourism models in the world. Buffer zone communities living in the periphery of PAs enjoy revenue shared by the PAs. Buffer zone management guidelines stipulate that investments should be made in five different areas: conservation programs (30%), community development programs (30%), income-generating and skill development programs (20%), conservation education programs (10%), and administrative expenses (10%) (Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, 1999).

In a move to achieve the MDGs, the GoN, with financial support from international agencies such as the Department of International Development (DFID) of the UK, the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), implemented the five-year (2001–2006) Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP). The program launched pilot projects in six districts of Nepal, including Taplejung, Solukhumbu, Rasuwa, Chitwan, Rupandehi, and Dolpa, covering a total of 48 Village Development Committees, 715 settlements, over 28,000 households, and around 160,000 expected beneficiaries (UNDP, 2007). The TRPAP made

significant achievements in alternative livelihood capacity building, skill development training, agricultural productivity, local employment opportunities, empowerment, and the ability to combat poverty (UNDP, 2007). These achievements may support future efforts to achieve the SDGs.

3. Methods

This is an exploratory study. The implementation of the SDGs is still in its infancy in Nepal. The government, academia, private sector, and public-private entities each have a role to play in the achievement of these goals. Accordingly, these four tourism stakeholder groups were included in the study. These stakeholder groups have the knowledge to assess the Nepalese tourism industry's potential, its progress, and its roles in achieving the SDGs. The importance of collaboration among relevant stakeholders is well recognized in the literature (Hall, 2019; Movono & Hughes, 2020; WTO and UNDP, 2017). This collaborative approach is also highly prioritized by the Nepalese government (NPC, 2017). As work toward the achievement of the SDGs continues, allowing the relevant tourism stakeholders to voice their concerns over the implementation of tourism development plans remains critical.

This study utilized a case study approach. In-depth, semi-structured phone interviews were used for data collection. The interview questions were designed to elucidate the roles and contributions of tourism in achieving the SDGs in Nepal (Appendix A). Specifically, the interview questions asked about the current state of the Nepalese tourism industry, its contributions toward achieving the SDGs, challenges associated with achieving the SDGs, the approaches adopted to achieve the SDGs, means of achieving the SDGs, and strategic needs to meet the SDGs in the future.

Study participants were selected using purposive snowball sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Tourism experts with whom the authors were acquainted were first contacted, and other participants were then contacted by referral. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided with the interview questionnaire. Phone interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience. Table 1 provides the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants. Interviews were conducted in Nepali, recorded, subsequently transcribed verbatim, and later translated into English for further analysis. A thematic analysis approach that involves six stages was utilized: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, a search for themes, a review of themes, defining and naming themes, and the production of a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sood, Lynch, & Anastasiadou, 2017).

Four criteria of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) ensured reliability and validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Credibility was ensured in accordance with the procedures mentioned in the relevant literature (KC, 2020; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). For instance, the study questionnaire is based on the SDGs proposed by the UN. Data collection took place over a prolonged period from summer 2019 to spring 2020 to allow respondents to participate at their convenience. The researchers involved in the conceptualization, data collection, and data analysis are native to Nepal, with prior research experience in sustainable tourism and sustainable development. The relevant tourism documents were reviewed to triangulate the findings. Transferability was also ensured in various ways (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Sood et al., 2017). For example, detailed descriptions of data were collected using purposive snowball sampling with a mixed sample of stakeholders (3 academicians, 3 government officials, 6 private tourism industry professionals, and 3 public-private tourism organization representatives). Interviews were transcribed, translated, and reviewed simultaneously to ensure data saturation, with a total of 15 interviews.

Dependability and confirmability were ensured through key steps suggested by previous studies (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Sood et al., 2017). The first and second authors initially conducted line-by-line open coding individually. Later, both authors

Table 1
Characteristics of the study participants.

S. N.	Affiliation	SDG-related Training participation	Education level	Position/ Affiliated Body	Years of Experience
1	Academic	No	Masters	Lecturer	2
2	Government	Yes	Masters	Department of Tourism	2
3	Government	No	Masters	Tourism Division Head (MoCTCA)	4
4	Private Tourism Industry	No	Bachelors	Tour Guide and Hotel Owner	16
5	Private Tourism Industry	No	Masters	Tour Guide/ Porter	7
6	Private Tourism Industry	No	Masters	Tour Operator/ Hotel Owner	6
7	Public-Private Organization	Yes	Masters	Nepal Tourism Board (NTB)	2
8	Public-Private Organization	No	Masters	Nepal Tourism Board (NTB)	4
9	Government	No	Masters	Department of Tourism	9
10	Public-Private Organization	No	Masters	Nepal Tourism Board (NTB)	10
11	Private Tourism Industry	Yes	Masters	Travel and Trekking Company Owner (former NTB member)	22
12	Private Tourism Industry	Yes	Masters	Travel Agency Owner	15
13	Academic	No	Bachelors	College Teacher	7
14	Private Tourism Industry	No	Masters	Tourism Consultant	13
15	Academic	No	Masters	Lecturer	10

reviewed the open codes, formed themes, and extracted quotes for relevant themes. The third author audited the themes and relevancy of the quotes. The themes and sub-themes were reviewed and refined for coherence, non-repetition, and consistency. To underscore these themes, the participants' quotes are presented with the authors' assigned numbers along with their affiliations.

4. Findings

4.1. The Nepalese tourism industry and the SDGs

In general, the study participants acknowledged that the industry could play a positive role in achieving the SDGs. Even though the potential of the tourism industry looks promising, the effectiveness of the industry and its functional capacity will determine whether the SDGs will be achieved. Participants' perspectives were examined using a thematic analysis approach, which led to the formation of six major themes and associated sub-themes (Table 2).

4.1.1. Boundless untapped opportunities

Study participants noted that the Nepalese tourism industry has the potential to contribute to socio-economic development by stimulating income generation and the promotion of socio-economic wellbeing. One participant said:

Table 2
Major themes and sub-themes associated with the Nepalese tourism industry and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Major themes	Sub-themes
Boundless untapped opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Socio-economic development ■ Increased foreign investment ■ Increased service industry ■ Increase in sustainable practices
Derailed marketing activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ No brand image due to lack of marketing ■ Under-explored nature- and culture-based tourism ■ Limited destinations promoted ■ Narrow focus of tourism for international tourists
Development process in survival mode	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Infrastructural challenges ■ Accessibility ■ Conflicting priority between development and sustainable development
Lack of expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Capacity building ■ Service quality ■ Awareness and education ■ Data management system
Fragmented governance structural linkages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of coordinated collaborative efforts ■ Centralized administration system
Disoriented government in a state of policy and planning complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of government support ■ Unethical practices ■ Policy and planning difficulties ■ Crisis management ■ Limited resources

Tourism plays a huge role in income generation with tourists coming to Nepal. It touches on several social aspects of the community. Taxi drivers earn by driving taxis, tea shops earn by selling tea, travel and trekking agencies take the tourists to their destination, and hotels provide food and rooms. Thus, tourism has a multiplier effect [...] We have adopted the SDGs to increase and contribute toward the economy and GDP of the country. Our aim here is to increase employment and income. Income enhances peoples' living standards and encourages them to participate in the economy. (Participant 2, government).

The foreign investment seems to be gaining momentum, indicating that the industry has the potential to make significant economic contributions. One participant stated:

Tourism is a very important and booming sector. With Marriott coming, hotels are expanding very rapidly. A lot of international tour operators are coming in and Trip Advisor is planning to open an office in Nepal. (Participant 1, academic).

Study participants also noted growth within the service industry, the result of the efforts of the GoN and the tourism industry to realize the industry's full potential (NPC, n.d.). For example,

Fast restoration after the earthquake has been highly emphasized. The focus of the department of tourism is also on increasing the resources, skills, and knowledge and creating efficient manpower, enhancing the hospitality industry, maintenance of our heritage and roads, increasing the facilities, diversifying tourism activities in different parts of Nepal and like this, we have set our priorities. (Participant 2, government).

Conservation is one of the strengths of the Nepalese tourism industry, and may contribute to sustainable tourism development. Moreover, major cities like Kathmandu are promoting sustainable transportation practices. One participant noted the following:

Nepal has been a model for community forests and the conservation of biodiversity. Still, we are one of the countries with the highest

coverage of forest and we also have very high biodiversity. Additionally, this is also one of the reasons tourists also come to Nepal to experience that. We can achieve the SDG in terms of biodiversity conservation. (Participant 1, academic).

Participant 1 added that:

The way we are switching to renewable energy is amazing, 25% of the cars running in Kathmandu are electric. Nepalese love two-wheelers and many people use electric vehicles. Today, I was reading in the newspaper that the consumption of diesel and petrol is declining by 6–7% annually.

4.1.2. Derailed marketing activities

Nepal is known for its incredible natural beauty but is held back by limited marketing efforts. No brand image has been developed for the international market. Only the Himalayan region is utilized to promote tourism, limiting the potential of other areas. One participant stated:

Tourism in Nepal is concentrated in the Himalayan region but cities in the Terai are not developed for tourism purposes. We are only advertising Nepal in the context of the Himalayas. There is a need for more maturity and focus on future development. (Participant 13, academic).

Study participants noted that Nepal provides nature-and-culture-based tourism opportunities, and that China and India are major markets that could be easily tapped to increase the number of international tourists. For example, one participant stated:

The government is looking at bringing in 1 to 1.5 million tourists in a year but for Nepal to bring even 5 million tourists is not a big thing. We have two big neighboring countries whose population is more than 2 billion. We have the major religious places that are associated with the religious beliefs of both India and China. If we can market Lumbini and the Saligram available in the Kali Gandaki River in Nepal, then we can automatically attract a huge number of tourists. (Participant 5, private tourism industry).

Study participants reported that the lack of roads and trekking routes impedes tourism development. Nepal is mostly known for trekking and adventure-based tourism, but the inability to offer alternative trekking routes has led to the underutilization of many potential destinations. One of the participants explained this issue thusly:

In all the 77 districts, there is a place for tourism, in those places the government is not able to work, and a budget has not been allocated. The budgets for local tourism departments need to be separated and the government needs to work on those areas. Only then can we bring tourism programs to such destinations. If we can develop tourism in all the 77 districts there is the possibility for many things, but tourism is mostly concentrated in Kathmandu and Pokhara, and with that scenario, tourism will not last long. (Participant 10, public-private organization).

Nepal continues to promote the tourism industry to capture the international tourist market, which has been a priority since the 1950s. Study participants echoed the sentiment that the destination development process needs to expand throughout the country and focus on growth in both the international and domestic tourism markets. As one participant explained:

In many places of Nepal, only domestic tourists go as foreign tourists only come for volunteering or projects. If we can decentralize tourism throughout the 77 districts of Nepal, only then can we work toward sustainable development, otherwise, we cannot. (Participant 10, public-private organization).

4.1.3. Development process in survival mode

The lack of infrastructure presents a major challenge to achieving the SDGs through tourism. Included here are poor roads, along with the absence of medical facilities in rural areas, proper communication structures, and a weather prediction system. Several statements were given regarding this issue:

Looking at our road and air capacity, almost 2.6 million people come and go from Tribhuvan International Airport; among those, 56% are Nepalese and, we do not have the capacity to accommodate those 1.2 million international tourists. Due to this lack of such capacity, we are wondering how the upcoming tourism year will be handled. Road and air capacity are one of the big problems in Nepal. (Participant 7, public-private organization).

Looking at Nepal from a tourism context, the tourists sometimes disappear. As Nepal does not have a good weather broadcasting system, tourists are sometimes killed in snowstorms, people get stuck in the storms which also demotivates them to visit some of the extreme places in Nepal. Some people also die because of medical emergencies. (Participant 8, public-private organization).

The shortage of international carriers hinders direct access to Nepal for international tourists. Meanwhile, accessing tourism in Nepal comes at a high price. Destinations around the world are competing against each other with competitive prices as well. One participant said:

For tourism in Nepal, connectivity should be good. When I say connectivity, I mean air connectivity. For tourists who are coming to Nepal, 50% of the cost is spent on air travel. We need to reduce this airfare, create better connectivity, and along with that, increase the destination choices. (Participant 3, government).

As a developing country, maintaining the balance between development and sustainability is a constant struggle. This conflict is demonstrated through ongoing issues such as depopulation and foreign migration. Likewise, the development of roads in rural areas does not always meet environmental standards, causing more problems. One participant explained:

Let us look at the Annapurna Base Camp circuit, which is loved by westerners for trekking. When I visited the Annapurna circuit back in 2013, we had to walk the entire journey, but when I visited the same trekking route in 2019, there were already vehicle routes and vehicle accessibility was there. So, the question here is, do we protect the beautiful trekking routes, or do we create roads where the local people can use the transportation services which is one of the things we have to look into [...] There is massive emigration because there are no opportunities in the country. Poorer members of our society often emigrate to the Gulf countries, Malaysia, and India, while middle-class people emigrate to Australia, Japan, Europe, the USA, and Canada. (Participant 1, academic).

4.1.4. Lack of expertise

As the Nepalese tourism industry has grown, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain a well-trained and professional workforce. Study participants mentioned this issue, as semi-literate individuals are often poorly equipped to work in the industry due to a lack of proper education and training. One of the participants explained:

Most of the people who work in the tourism sector in Nepal are semi-literate. Porters have been handling the tourism sector in Nepal so far. We have a good history; our physical structures are glorious but still, the tourism sector is handled by people who do not understand these things. The big businesses now that we see are run by past porters and our tourism depends on that and we do not have competent manpower for that. (Participant 5, private tourism industry).

The lack of quality services is a major concern within the service industry. One of the participants said:

We do not have transportation services [...] the places where tourists go in Nepal do not have good hotel services. Looking at all these things, we have not been able to give good service to the tourists and if we can give those services, then there is probability for something. (Participant 10, public-private organization).

Similarly, because of this lack of knowledge and awareness level (due to inadequate educational backgrounds or an inability to understand the nature of the industry), it is assumed that tourism may not fully achieve the SDGs. For example,

Among the people who hold government positions, none of them are from a tourism background and they do not know anything about tourism. All they understand about it is bringing foreign visitors to the country. They have only understood the simple thing only from the surface level and do not have an in-depth understanding of it, as they do not understand the challenges of it. (Participant 5, private tourism industry).

Furthermore, understanding the tourism industry in Nepal and its contributions to the achievement of the SDGs is difficult. The data management system is inaccurate and does not reflect true GDP, so there is no proper way of reporting satellite accounting, and there are no databases available. One participant stated:

The WTTC says the contribution of tourism to the GDP is between 6 and 9%, but the NPC records only show 2–3% and the data system is also not that complete. The Nepal Tourism Board is working in Tourism Satellite accounting. However, changes are taking place in domestic tourism. Meanwhile, the number of tourism destinations is constantly increasing. They are not considered in national accounting. This is due to an ineffective data system in Nepal. (Participant 7, public-private organization).

Another participant said:

As the contribution of tourism is not seen in accounting records, it is said that there is not any contribution so even the government thinks that since tourism has a low contribution to the GDP it is not right to invest more in tourism. Due to that, Nepal's tourism industry is suffering. (Participant 11, private tourism industry).

4.1.5. *Fragmented governance structural linkage*

There is confusion about how federal, provincial, and local-level authorities should coordinate their actions. One of the participants said:

The SDGs cannot be achieved only through tourism. Business activities, industry, and infrastructural development all need to come together. So, it is possible if the local, provincial, and the federal government can bring good programs through coordination between the ministries and the federal government [...] Sometimes, what happens is that when the budget gets allocated, for certain programs the budget is missing from both the levels-federal and provincial, and because of that those areas never get developed. (Participant 15, academic).

Mainstreaming of the SDGs is only found at the federal level but should also occur at the provincial and local levels. Nepal has limited resources and skills, which seems to create a major challenge in mainstreaming the SDGs into the local and provincial level planning and budget systems. For instance,

The SDGs are under the mission of "Prosperous Nepal Happy Nepalese", and we have a 15-year plan along with other federal level and local level plans that are being made. These will contribute in some way. However, what happened now is that the time when discussions

and plans on the SDG happened, those plans were not reflected in the lower-level planning. (Participant 14, private tourism industry).

4.1.6. *Disoriented government in a state of policy and planning complexity*

Even though the government does not put any restrictions on the tourism development process, it does not have assistance programs to motivate the industry and relevant stakeholders. For example, there are no tax exemptions for tourism businesses. One participant explained:

Some hotels and entrepreneurs have invested billions of rupees in the tourism industry, but the government has not been able to provide tax exemptions or any other exemption to them. There are many private banks in Nepal, but we do not see those banks investing in the tourism industry. It would be good if we can work together and improve these things, but these challenges are still there in Nepal. (Participant 15, academic).

There are several unethical practices, such as corruption, uncontrolled sex tourism, and unfair prices for tourists from low-quality hotels, all contributing to an underperforming and unsustainable form of tourism development in Nepal. Ongoing unethical practices were explained by one participant as follows:

We have problems [...] Illegal sex work is booming here which should be controlled but it is being covered up by the tourism industry. Either that needs to be legalized or it should be controlled [...] The 2-star hotels are charging prices that are equivalent to 5-star hotels, which needs to be investigated and changed as tourists do not get to enjoy the services that they pay for. (Participant 5, private tourism industry).

Existing tourism policies and plans are not exposed to monitoring and evaluation to determine the level of success, which also makes it difficult to assess whether the tourism industry is making any progress regarding the SDGs. SDG monitoring is possible if the SDGs' indicators are strongly aligned with the yearly plan of each ministry, commission, and government body. However, in Nepal, most plans and strategies for SDG implementation were made during the early stage of the SDGs, and all the ministries are still currently following the same plans and policies. The review of the targets and plans is crucial. One participant stated:

If we look at the federal level and the policies made by the Ministry of Tourism on how to move forward, we can notice that they have mentioned the SDGs. We can look at this from two perspectives: one is that there is some level of clarity in the policy. However, it has been four years but there is not much implementation or action in any area so far. The issue has been discussed in public, the issue is well-accommodated in the policy, the issue has been named as a priority sector by the government. However, when we look into issues-actionable points or notes of delivery, we see fewer activities being carried out on sustainable development. (Participant 1, academic).

Risk management strategies related to natural disasters and outbreaks of pandemics are rather vague. However, political instability was considered a threat to the tourism industry. For example,

In the current context, there is the coronavirus, and natural disasters can occur and there is a chance of wars among countries in the world which will impact even the tourism of Nepal. The main thing is political instability will also have a big impact on tourism [...] and then it will be difficult to achieve the SDGs. For sustainable development to occur in Nepal, tourism should be a high priority and the environment also needs to be favorable. Tourism itself is risky industry and what will happen tomorrow is uncertain. Thus, a system for crisis management should be developed. (Participant 12, private tourism industry).

Participants also mentioned the lack of funding as another issue negatively affecting the tourism industry and its contributions to the SDGs. One of the participants said:

The main challenge is that we have limited resources, we need to prioritize where to use them and focus on coordination with other sectors [...] The major thing is the funding gap in the context of Nepal. The second thing is that we are moving toward new government machinery and the focus should be on enabling provincial and local bodies to achieve the SDGs. (Participant 3, government).

5. Discussion and conclusions

As the findings suggest, Nepal has the potential to achieve several interconnected SDGs through tourism development, primarily decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), but also several other indirectly related SDGs, such as poverty reduction (SDG 1) and good health and wellbeing (SDG 3). Tourism's contribution to socio-economic development is well documented in the existing literature (NPC, n.d.; Thapa & Panta, 2019). Saarinen (n.d.) argues that within the socio-ecological and economic environment, tourism is a source of change, both positive and negative. For instance, tourism is an important source of job creation. However, the kinds of jobs that are created and the stakeholders that are included in the development process must be considered (Saarinen, n.d.). The unpredictable nature of employment in the hospitality and tourism industry is often subject to criticism (Robinson, Martins, Solnet, & Baum, 2019). Increased foreign investment is perceived by the stakeholders as a sign of potential economic growth, but it leads to increased leakage. There should be an ongoing debate regarding how Nepal can promote tourism entrepreneurship (i.e., with increased local community-involvement) and its stake in the growing industry without detrimental impacts on the Nepalese economy via excessive foreign investments.

The growth of the service industry and green practices in Kathmandu valley suggests gradual movement toward achieving several SDGs, including growth and innovation (SDG 9), adoption of sustainable forms of energy (SDG 7), promotion of sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and support for climate action (SDG 13). We suggest that major tourism cities such as Kathmandu and Pokhara should continue to promote and expand more environmentally friendly transportation services as an example for other growing cities to follow. Furthermore, Nepal is a leader in biodiversity conservation, with more than 20% of the land being set aside as different types of PAs (KC, 2020). The sustainable development of nature-based tourism may contribute to the achievement of several SDGs, including climate action (SDG 13) and life on land (SDG 15). In addition to conservation, the GoN has also promoted ecotourism in PAs to positively influence rural livelihoods and address the issue of poverty (SDG 1). KC (2020) states how community-based tourism in Nepal is also promoting gender equality (SDG 5), local food production (SDG 2), a sense of healthy living by fostering sanitation and pollution control (SDG 6), opportunities to reduce inequality (SDG 10), and host community involvement in managing tourism and its benefit-sharing (SDG 16). Therefore, the close monitoring of ecotourism projects and other community-based tourism projects is necessary to maximize the contributions of tourism to the achievement of the SDGs.

The lack of competitive international tourism marketing has been one of the main flaws in tourism development in Nepal. The Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) was established to emulate successful regional tourism institutions, such as the Singapore Tourism Board and the Tourism Authority of Thailand, with strong funding mechanisms. The organizational structure of NTB must be revamped to make it a more accountable, professional, competitive, and results-oriented institution. The findings reveal that Nepal has not conducted proper marketing, as only the Himalayas are marketed. Marketing bodies, such as the NTB, and planning bodies, such as the MoCTCA, must broaden the scope of

their marketing activities. Inadequate tourism activities have failed to increase tourists' length of stay (NPC, Ninth periodic plan, n.d.), causing low retention of tourism receipts. Meanwhile, the inability to recognize the importance of the domestic tourism market also affects the true impact of the industry as well as the planning and management of destinations. The lack of marketing of tourism resources has negatively impacted the GoN's vision of promoting economic growth through tourism (SDG 8). Future tourism planning should focus on developing mega-tourism projects in potential destinations (with attractive government incentives), which may also address issues related to over-tourism in a few select destinations, including protected areas. This will eventually foster the creation of sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), responsible consumption patterns (SDG 12), and conservation of terrestrial ecosystems (SDG 15). The WTO and UNDP (2017) have stated that tax revenues from tourism should be invested in the development of healthcare facilities. Fees collected in PAs may also contribute to the further development of health services (SDG 3).

As a developing country, Nepal has struggled to create a basic plan for infrastructure development (SDG 9). Furthermore, Nepal has changed dramatically after a lengthy political transition along with a massive earthquake in 2015. Therefore, rapid tourism development without proper sustainable guidelines could negatively affect the future of the tourism industry. Poor air accessibility and the lack of competitive air services continue to be major challenges for Nepal. This issue may be addressed by strengthening the national carrier—Nepal Airlines Corporation (NAC)—and by providing incentives to foreign carriers. As a developing country, balancing development and sustainability currently is and will likely continue to be a major source of conflict in the future. These conflicts have been reported in Nepal (2020): "Roads that have been haphazardly dug out in the mountains have not only increased the frequency and intensity of landslides, but they have also ruined the aesthetic appeal of the mountains. Annapurna is no longer a classic trekking destination, its mountains that evoke a sense of adventure have been crisscrossed by hazard-prone and hazard-inducing roads" (p. 2). Haphazardly created roads in mountainous regions in the name of development jeopardize the achievement of SDG 15, sustainable resource management.

Incompetent human resources and the lack of managerial capabilities have also been blamed for the lackluster performance of tourism development. This is often suggested as a major challenge, as tourism and hospitality education constitutes a new field of education in Nepal (Thapa, 2018; Thapa & Panta, 2019). In the long run, educational platforms should be created for all to better prepare industry professionals to provide quality services and equip these workers with the required industry skills (SDG 4). Human resource planning in tourism is required. This planning should include policy-making bodies, such as the MoCTCA and its subdivisions, and implementing agencies, such as the NTB, NAC, the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN), and NATHM. Staff changes in policymaking agencies and changes in political leadership have made it difficult to maintain a workforce with the knowledge, skills, and expertise required for institutional and industry growth. To address the issues of equity and justice through tourism, people in local tourism communities should benefit more from involvement in tourism-related businesses or jobs (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). The NTB or NATHM should offer tourism training for locals that meet the needs of local tourism businesses. The WTO and UNDP (2017) suggest that SMEs make up most businesses within the tourism industry. Therefore, SMEs must be given access to knowledge and capacity-building opportunities and be encouraged to invest in green and sustainable practices (SDG 4 and SDG 12). The findings suggest that the tourism industry is focused on international tourists, whereas domestic tourism is neither promoted nor well-accommodated in the data management system. Without proper documentation of both domestic and international tourists, the impact of the industry is difficult to estimate.

Local planning authorities should be mentored by the federal and provincial level planning authorities to achieve tourism goals. These

coordinated collaborative efforts will also help overcome the implementation challenges for policy and planning actions. Without properly coordinated actions between the national, regional, and local levels, collaboration with international organizations will be ineffective (SDG 17). For example, the WWF is a non-governmental organization that is actively involved in both conservation activities and the promotion of ecotourism projects to enhance the quality of life of rural residents. As the administrative system in developing countries is suggested to operate without much inclusivity of communities or proper stakeholder participation in a centralized manner (Tosun, 2001), coordinated efforts and collaboration should be institutionalized to realize the full potential of the tourism industry (SDG 16).

Currently, there are several challenges that the private sector must overcome to be able to participate in contributing constructively toward economic growth (SDG 8). Businesses must move beyond the “business as usual” scenario (Scheyvens, Banks, & Hughes, 2016) to foster responsible consumption and production systems (SDG 12). Government incentives for tourism businesses may act as catalysts for further private sector involvement. Proper rules and regulations should be created to eliminate ongoing unethical practices within the industry. Mandating a code of conduct to be followed by the operating sectors of the hospitality and tourism industry may be an alternative solution. Due to the massive 7.8 magnitude earthquake in 2015, the number of international tourist arrivals declined sharply from 2015 to 2016 (Min, KC, Kim, & Lee, 2020; MoCTCA, 2019). Meanwhile, political instability has also affected the Nepalese tourism industry (NPC, Fourteenth periodic plan, n.d.). Lessons learned from past crises may be used to mitigate the negative impacts of future challenges.

Achieving the SDGs through tourism requires collaboration across different entities at the national, regional, and local levels, as well as collaboration with international organizations (SDG 17). NPC (2017) claims that the GoN has incorporated these goals into national-level planning and budgeting activities, but there still seems to be a lack of effort in their implementation. Meanwhile, NPC (2017) also notes that the SDGs are interlinked, indivisible, and ambitious. For a poor country such as Nepal with limited resources, skills, and technology, their implementation will be a major challenge. The GoN’s limited investment in the MDGs suggests the need to increase government spending to achieve the SDGs (NPC, 2017). The WTO and UNDP (2017) stated that, “Advancing tourism’s contribution to the SDGs not only requires political will and private sector commitment, but also new and better financing frameworks” (p. 12). Going forward, collaborative efforts among the stakeholders, including collaboration at the federal, provincial, and local levels, are needed to achieve the SDGs. Indeed, as a developing country, there are many opportunities, as well as challenges, to achieving the SDGs through tourism in Nepal.

6. Limitations and future research

The purposes of this exploratory study were to broadly examine the connections between tourism and the SDGs and to identify the relevant opportunities and challenges at a macro-level. However, the SDGs should be analyzed from a diversity of approaches and perspectives (Boluk, Cavaliere, & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2019). For instance, gender inequalities lead to economic costs, social inequities, and ecological damage (Boluk et al., 2019; Shiva, 2009), and these issues must be examined further. Likewise, the precarious nature of tourism jobs is a topic of ongoing debate (Robinson et al., 2019). Therefore, an assessment of hospitality and tourism industry workers employed in different capacities may provide a better understanding of the existing scenario and future directions. These issues are particularly important to examine, because decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) have been focal points since the beginning of tourism’s development in Nepal.

As discussed before, Nepal went through a lengthy political transition, and the country is still struggling with infrastructural development and meeting the basic needs of its citizens. Therefore, the concept of

sustainability in the context of individual SDGs, including providing education and awareness about SDGs to the masses, is too idealistic presently. Hence, the purposive selection of stakeholder groups as study participants was done to overcome that challenge: to understand SDGs given the realities of the tourism industry. As a result of the purposive sampling methods applied in the study, this research had the limitation of not including other potential stakeholders (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Furthermore, given the possibility of respondent biases, the approach used in the study helped mitigate those biases. For example, interview questions did not include any leading questions. Moreover, limited open-ended questions were used to avoid respondent fatigue, and confidentiality was guaranteed before the interview to let respondents express their views accurately. The relevant literature was also used to triangulate the findings.

The findings further imply that SDGs and tourism have perhaps become a topic of discussion in the policy-making stage that may not have trickled down to the implementation phase or grassroots level. The relevance of tourism to the achievement of the SDGs has been realized by the country. However, the actual achievement of the SDGs in a developing country such as Nepal is not without many challenges. There is no straightforward way to internalize, implement, and address SDGs. The failure to achieve the MDGs led to the development of the SDGs (Boluk et al., 2019). Further empirical research using a robust tourism-related database would allow for a better assessment of the Nepalese tourism industry’s potential to achieve the SDGs.

The GoN managed to increase its forest cover from 39.6% in 2000 to 44.7% in 2015 (NPC, 2017). Nepal is known for its rich biodiversity and its continuous efforts toward conservation. There is an increased effort globally for biodiversity conservation through the declaration of PAs (McCool & Spenceley, 2014), and tourism is prevalent in PAs. PAs are known to address several SDGs (Dudley, Ali, & MacKinnon, 2017). Examining the role of PAs in achieving the SDGs in Nepal or other countries is still an unexplored domain of research.

The WTO and UNDP (2017) state that, “Sustainable development is undermined by external threats such as global economic instability, natural disasters, climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and regional and international security” (p. 11). Furthermore, the Asia–Pacific region has been hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis, which has significantly affected millions of people whose livelihoods depend on tourism revenue (Trupp & Dolezal, 2020). This crisis has affected the ability of the developing countries in the region to achieve the SDGs. Therefore, future studies could also examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the achievement of the SDGs, both in Nepal and in other countries, to make further plans to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Indeed, understanding the most impacted SDGs can assist in the formulation and implementation of effective policy and planning actions in order to attain the intended outcomes.

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