

Sustainable Tourism Development in Bangladesh- Opportunities and Challenges for the Hotel Industry

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the opportunities and challenges faced by the hotel industry in Bangladesh in promoting sustainable tourism development. As an emerging destination for domestic and international travelers, the hotel sector has a critical role in fostering sustainability. Sustainable tourism balances environmental, economic, and social impacts while preserving resources for future generations. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and interviews with stakeholders such as hotel managers, guests, policymakers, and industry experts, to evaluate current practices and barriers to sustainability. Findings reveal that larger, internationally affiliated hotels are advancing eco-friendly initiatives like energy conservation and waste management, driven by access to resources and expertise. These practices improve operational efficiencies and attract environmentally conscious travelers. Smaller, locally owned hotels, however, face financial, training, and expertise constraints, limiting their ability to adopt sustainable measures. Community engagement, such as employing local staff and sourcing from local producers, emerges as a key opportunity to enhance guest experiences and support local economies. Challenges include inadequate infrastructure, skilled labor shortages, regulatory inconsistencies, and limited consumer demand for eco-friendly accommodations. Recommendations include policy support, infrastructure improvements, staff training, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. By addressing these barriers, the hotel industry in Bangladesh can align with sustainability principles, promoting environmental preservation, cultural conservation, and economic growth

Introduction

Bangladesh, renowned for its natural beauty and cultural heritage, is emerging as a significant player in global tourism, contributing 4.4% to the national GDP and creating 4.5 million jobs in 2019 (WTTC, 2020). Iconic attractions like the Sundarbans mangrove forest, Cox's Bazar—the world's longest sandy beach—and historical sites like Paharpur and the Sixty Dome Mosque underscore its tourism potential. However, the sector's rapid growth raises concerns about environmental degradation and cultural preservation, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable practices.

Sustainable tourism aims to balance economic, social, and environmental benefits by fostering eco-friendly initiatives and preserving resources for future generations. The hotel industry, as a pivotal component of tourism, has a critical role in driving sustainability while enhancing guest experiences.

This research investigates the current state of sustainability in Bangladesh's hotel industry, focusing on challenges, opportunities, and actionable solutions. Larger hotels show progress in adopting eco-friendly initiatives, while smaller establishments face barriers such as financial constraints, limited expertise, and infrastructural deficiencies.

Research Objectives

1. Identify sustainable practices in Bangladesh's hotel sector.
2. Analyze barriers to their adoption.
3. Explore stakeholder collaboration to advance sustainable tourism.

The findings aim to provide a roadmap for integrating sustainability into Bangladesh's growing tourism sector.

Literature Review

Sustainable tourism, as defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), balances the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting future opportunities. It emphasizes three core pillars:

1. **Environmental Sustainability:** Minimizes resource depletion, protects biodiversity, reduces pollution, and lowers carbon footprints.
2. **Economic Sustainability:** Ensures long-term financial benefits for local economies by fostering entrepreneurship, creating jobs, and supporting community livelihoods.
3. **Social and Cultural Sustainability:** Preserves cultural heritage, promotes social equity, and enhances interactions between tourists and host communities.

In Bangladesh, integrating these principles is critical to mitigating environmental degradation, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring equitable growth.

Global Lessons in Sustainable Tourism

Countries like Costa Rica and New Zealand demonstrate the potential of sustainability-focused tourism strategies. Costa Rica integrates conservation with community engagement, while New Zealand collaborates with indigenous communities, emphasizing eco-friendly policies and cultural preservation. These models highlight the importance of government policies, private sector initiatives, and community participation.

Sustainable Tourism in Bangladesh's Hotel Industry

While 77% of Bangladeshi hotels adopt energy-efficient lighting and recycling initiatives, challenges persist. Limited water conservation measures and reliance on coal energy undermine sustainability. Efforts in local hiring and sourcing contribute to community engagement but require expansion.

Barriers and Opportunities

High costs, infrastructural gaps, limited training, and inconsistent government support hinder sustainability adoption. However, opportunities for operational cost savings, enhanced customer satisfaction, and market differentiation offer potential benefits. Aligning policy frameworks, financial incentives, and community participation is vital for sustainable tourism development in Bangladesh.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze challenges and opportunities in sustainable tourism.

Data Collection Methods

- **Surveys:** Structured questionnaires were completed by 79 hotel managers and staff across Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, and Cox's Bazar, focusing on sustainability practices and challenges.
- **Interviews:** In-depth interviews with 10 policymakers, industry experts, and hotel operators provided insights into regulatory and operational aspects.

Sample Description

The sample included hotels of diverse sizes and affiliations, selected for their expertise in sustainability practices, ensuring comprehensive analysis.

Findings

Current Sustainable Practices

The survey reveals mixed sustainability practices among hotels in Bangladesh:

- **Recycling:** 77.2% of hotels recycle waste, but 10.1% still use plastic cutlery, indicating areas for improvement.
- **Water Management:** 6.3% overuse water, highlighting the need for better management and energy conservation strategies.
- **Energy Efficiency:** 77.2% use energy-efficient LED lighting, but inconsistent practices suggest a lack of consistent energy management. These results suggest that while many hotels implement basic sustainable practices, smaller hotels face challenges due to limited resources.

Challenges in Adopting Sustainable Practices

Key barriers to sustainability include:

- **High Initial Costs:** 79.7% of hotel managers cite high costs, especially for smaller hotels lacking access to capital.
- **Staff Resistance:** 10.1% of managers' report staff resistance, emphasizing the need for training.
- **Government Funding:** Only 3.8% of respondents perceive government funding as a challenge, suggesting limited awareness or access. These challenges highlight the need for government support, including financial incentives and targeted training programs.

Perceived Benefits of Sustainable Tourism

Hotel managers believe sustainability offers significant benefits:

- **Customer Satisfaction:** 78.5% report that sustainability enhances guest satisfaction, presenting a competitive advantage.
- **Operational Cost Reduction:** Only 6.3% view sustainability as a means to reduce costs, reflecting a lack of understanding about long-term financial benefits.
- **Growth Concerns:** 5.1% worry that sustainability may hinder growth, underscoring the need for continued education on its economic viability.

Support Needed for Sustainability

Hotel managers highlight the need for:

- **Government Grants:** 79.7% call for more government support through grants and policies.
- **Training Gaps:** 8.9% show a misunderstanding of sustainability goals, indicating the need for better education and communication.

Importance of Sustainable Tourism to Guests

Sustainability increasingly influences guest choices:

- **Booking Decisions:** 77.2% of hotel managers confirm that sustainability impacts booking decisions.
- **Minimal Consideration:** Only 7.6% of guests ignore sustainability, reflecting growing awareness among travelers.

Energy and Waste Management

Hotels show progress in energy conservation and waste management:

- **Energy Efficiency:** 77.2% use LED lights, but 8.9% continue inefficient practices, indicating the need for improved energy management.
- **Waste Management:** 77.2% recycle waste, but 10.1% continue improper disposal methods, underscoring the need for stricter waste management protocols.

Renewable Energy and Community Engagement

- **Renewable Energy:** 78.5% of hotels use solar energy, showing positive trends, though 10.1% still rely on non-renewable sources.
- **Community Engagement:** 78.5% engage with local businesses, supporting local economies.

Water Conservation and Staff Education

- **Water Conservation:** 79.7% use low-flow fixtures, but 7.6% still waste water.
- **Staff Training:** 77.2% of hotels provide sustainability training, but more comprehensive programs are needed to address gaps.

Recommendations

1. **Government Policy Support:** Strengthen regulatory frameworks and offer financial incentives, such as tax breaks and grants, to encourage sustainable practices. Policies should focus on promoting eco-friendly technologies and infrastructure upgrades in the hotel sector.
2. **Infrastructure Development:** Invest in improving essential utilities, including waste management systems and reliable water and energy supplies in key tourist areas. Enhanced infrastructure will enable hotels to adopt sustainable practices effectively, minimizing their environmental impact.
3. **Training and Capacity Building:** Establish comprehensive training programs to educate hotel staff on sustainable tourism. Partnerships with academic institutions and industry experts can create a workforce well-versed in eco-friendly practices, fostering a culture of sustainability across the sector.
4. **Stakeholder Collaboration:** Encourage collaboration among hotels, local communities, and environmental organizations. Such partnerships can help develop and implement impactful initiatives that address shared sustainability goals, such as biodiversity conservation and cultural preservation.
5. **Awareness Campaigns:** Design targeted campaigns to raise awareness of sustainable tourism practices among both operators and guests. Hotels can involve guests in eco-friendly activities, such as waste segregation and energy conservation, fostering long-term behavioral change.

These recommendations aim to position sustainability at the core of Bangladesh's hotel sector, addressing environmental, economic, and social dimensions. By adopting a cohesive approach involving government support, community involvement, and education, the sector can significantly enhance its sustainability, contributing to the country's reputation as an emerging sustainable tourism destination.

Conclusion

Bangladesh's hotel industry faces critical challenges in adopting global sustainability standards, despite the potential for economic growth and environmental preservation. Key barriers include financial constraints, infrastructural deficits, and limited awareness. While many hotels in Bangladesh are progressing toward sustainability, significant barriers such as high costs, staff resistance, and infrastructure challenges persist. However, positive perceptions of sustainability among hotel operators and guests present an opportunity for broader adoption. By addressing these barriers through training, financial incentives, and better infrastructure, the hotel sector can play a key role in sustainable tourism development. Small and medium-sized hotels, which dominate the sector, struggle with the high initial costs of sustainable technologies. About 79.7% of hotel managers highlight limited access to capital, restricting investments in renewable energy, waste management, and water conservation. While these technologies offer long-term savings, the upfront costs deter adoption, particularly among smaller operators.

Infrastructural inadequacies compound the problem. Irregular electricity supply and a lack of effective waste management systems hinder sustainable practices. Without reliable infrastructure, efforts like renewable energy adoption and proper waste disposal remain unfeasible. Awareness and capacity within the industry are also insufficient. Only 77.2% of hotels provide staff sustainability training, while domestic tourists often overlook eco-friendly accommodations, reducing demand for sustainable practices. However, sustainable tourism offers significant opportunities. Enhanced guest satisfaction, operational cost savings, and a competitive advantage in eco-conscious markets underscore the business case for sustainability. Collaborative efforts involving government support, private investments, and community partnerships are essential. Financial incentives, infrastructure improvements, and community-driven initiatives, modeled on successful cases like Costa Rica, can promote cultural and environmental preservation. By addressing these barriers, Bangladesh's hotel sector can embrace sustainability, fostering economic, cultural, and environmental progress.

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