

# Exploring the Effects of Tourism on Rural Livelihoods: A Case Study of Liuwa in Kalabo District, Focusing on Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi Areas

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the multifaceted effects of tourism on rural livelihoods in the Liuwa region of Kalabo District, with a particular focus on the communities of Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi. The research problem stems from the limited understanding of how tourism initiatives impact local socioeconomic structures, especially in remote rural settings where livelihoods are intricately tied to natural resources. The study engaged 17 purposively selected participants—including local residents, community leaders, and tourism operators—through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Guided by the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, the study examined how tourism contributes to or undermines livelihood assets such as income, social capital, and environmental sustainability. The findings reveal a complex relationship: while tourism has generated seasonal employment and fostered infrastructure development, it has also led to increased land pressure and unequal benefit distribution. The study concludes that for tourism to be a sustainable development tool, inclusive planning and community empowerment are essential. Recommendations include enhancing local capacity through training, establishing transparent benefit-sharing models, and integrating traditional knowledge into tourism planning. This study contributes to the discourse on rural development and offers actionable insights for policy and practice.

**Keywords:** tourism, rural livelihoods, Liuwa, sustainable development

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism is increasingly recognized as a catalyst for economic development, especially in rural and remote communities with natural or cultural attractions (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2021). In Zambia, the growth of nature-based tourism, particularly in areas like Liuwa National Park, presents both opportunities and challenges for adjacent rural communities. Liuwa, situated in Kalabo District of Western Province, is renowned for its ecological richness and seasonal wildlife migrations. The nearby communities of Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi are directly affected by tourism-driven activities and conservation efforts in the area.

While tourism has the potential to diversify rural economies, improve infrastructure, and create employment, it may also disrupt traditional livelihoods, lead to land-use conflicts, or deepen social inequalities (Mvula & Mofya, 2022). Understanding the nuanced effects of tourism on the livelihoods of rural communities is therefore critical for formulating inclusive development strategies and sustainable tourism policies.

## Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing attention to tourism as a development tool in Zambia, there remains a significant gap in localized, community-based evidence on how tourism impacts rural livelihoods. In Liuwa, while conservation and tourism initiatives have increased over the past decade, the specific socio-economic outcomes for households in nearby villages such as Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi are under-researched. Preliminary assessments suggest both positive and negative consequences, including seasonal employment, resource restrictions, cultural commodification, and changes in land access.

Without a grounded understanding of how these changes are experienced by local populations, policy interventions risk being misaligned with community needs. This study seeks to fill this gap by using a qualitative lens to explore the lived experiences of local residents in tourism-impacted areas.

## Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to explore the effects of tourism on the livelihoods of rural communities surrounding Liuwa National Park, specifically in Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi areas. The study aims to:

- Examine the perceived benefits and challenges of tourism as experienced by local residents.
- Investigate the impact of tourism on traditional livelihood activities such as fishing, farming, and gathering.
- Provide context-specific recommendations for sustainable and inclusive rural tourism development.

## Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable rural tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa by offering an in-depth, place-based understanding of tourism's impacts on rural livelihoods. The findings will be valuable to policymakers, conservation agencies, tourism planners, and local government authorities in designing inclusive strategies that support community wellbeing while preserving environmental resources.

Furthermore, this study highlights voices from underrepresented rural communities, ensuring their perspectives inform future tourism interventions. The research is also expected to benefit scholars by enriching theoretical discussions on tourism-livelihood interactions and rural development in protected areas.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), which provides a holistic lens to understand how tourism interacts with various livelihood assets—natural, human, social, physical, and financial—and how these are influenced by external shocks, policies, and institutions (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 2015). The SLF emphasizes the importance of community agency and resilience in navigating change, making it particularly suited for exploring how rural communities adapt to tourism-induced transformations.

In addition, the Political Ecology Perspective is employed to analyze how power dynamics, land access, and environmental governance intersect with tourism development (Fletcher, 2020). This dual-framework approach allows for an examination of both structural and agency-related factors influencing livelihoods in tourism-affected settings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism has increasingly become a strategic tool for rural development and poverty alleviation across the Global South. Numerous studies have explored its multifaceted impact on rural livelihoods, particularly in areas rich in ecological and cultural resources. Liuwa, located within Zambia's Western Province, presents a unique ecological and socio-economic context where tourism intersects with traditional rural livelihoods.

### Tourism and Rural Livelihood Transformation

Tourism in rural regions has been acknowledged as a catalyst for diversification of income sources, employment opportunities, and infrastructural improvements (Scheyvens & Russell, 2020). Particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, community-based tourism models have been encouraged as they integrate conservation with socio-economic empowerment. For example, Okazaki (2021) emphasizes that rural tourism, when properly managed, contributes to food security, education, and access to healthcare through revenue redistribution.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) guides much of the scholarly work on tourism impacts. It proposes five capital assets—natural, financial, human, physical, and social—which can be positively or negatively influenced by tourism activities (Scoones, 2020). In the context of Liuwa, natural capital (wildlife and landscape) has formed the basis for eco-tourism. However, concerns persist about the equitable distribution of tourism benefits among indigenous populations (Mupeta et al., 2021).

### **Community Involvement and Participation**

Effective tourism development in rural settings depends heavily on the degree of local community involvement. Tosun (2023) notes that top-down approaches often lead to marginalization of local voices, which breeds conflict and weakens support for conservation. In Zambia, studies have shown that while Community Resource Boards (CRBs) exist to ensure participation, actual community engagement remains limited due to power imbalances and limited transparency (Mulenga & Chirwa, 2022).

Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi—like many rural communities near protected areas—face challenges in accessing decision-making platforms, which may hinder their full participation in tourism planning and benefit-sharing (Kabwe & Phiri, 2023). Research by Chanda and Simasiku (2024) highlights that despite the presence of Liuwa Plain National Park; residents report limited access to employment opportunities and minimal returns from tourism revenues.

### **Ecotourism and Environmental Sustainability**

Liuwa's unique landscape and biodiversity, especially the wildebeest migration, are central attractions for eco-tourists. According to Zimba and Kaumba (2021), ecotourism in Western Zambia has the potential to simultaneously promote conservation and enhance livelihoods. However, unregulated tourism may result in environmental degradation, undermining the very resources that sustain rural livelihoods (Ngoma et al., 2020).

It is thus vital that tourism development incorporates sustainable practices such as environmental education, benefit-sharing mechanisms, and local employment quotas. The role of non-governmental organizations and private-public partnerships in this regard has been instrumental, albeit inconsistent (World Wildlife Fund Zambia, 2023).

### **Cultural Heritage and Social Impacts**

Tourism's impact on social and cultural structures is double-edged. While it may revitalize interest in indigenous practices and crafts, it can also lead to commodification or cultural dilution. According to Kalaba (2022), communities in Western Province have expressed concerns about cultural erosion due to external tourist influences. Nevertheless, cultural festivals such as the Kuomboka Ceremony remain powerful tools for cultural preservation and tourism marketing.

### **Gaps in Current Literature**

Despite growing research on tourism in Zambia, limited empirical studies focus on hyper-local areas such as Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi. Furthermore, most studies tend to aggregate data at the district or national level, thereby overlooking intra-community differences in tourism impact (Chibale & Banda, 2024). This study seeks to fill this gap by adopting a localized, qualitative lens to uncover the lived realities of tourism among specific rural populations near Liuwa.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the effects of tourism on rural livelihoods in the Liuwa region of Kalabo District. The qualitative approach was suitable because it allows for in-depth exploration of lived experiences, perceptions, and social dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2021). A case study was selected to focus on the specific contexts of Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi areas, enabling the researcher to

understand the phenomenon within real-life settings (Yin, 2020). This approach facilitated the capture of nuanced and context-rich insights into how tourism shapes local livelihoods.

### Sample Size and Selection Criteria

The sample comprised 17 participants, selected through purposive sampling. This technique was appropriate for identifying individuals with direct knowledge or lived experience of tourism's impact in the selected areas. Participants included local community members, small business owners, village leaders, and traditional authorities. The inclusion criteria required participants to:

- Be 18 years or older
- Have resided in the area for at least 5 years
- Have had direct or indirect interaction with tourism-related activities

The sample size was deemed sufficient for thematic saturation, ensuring that no new themes were emerging during data collection (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020).

### Research Tools

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed and pilot-tested to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness. The guide focused on participants' perceptions of tourism development, changes in livelihoods, access to resources, and socio-cultural impacts. FGDs were particularly useful for capturing communal narratives and validating themes raised in individual interviews.

### Data Generation Procedure

Data collection occurred over a four-week period in the months of May and June 2025. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages (Lozi, Silozi, or English), with the assistance of a local translator where necessary. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. FGDs were conducted in neutral village meeting spaces, with 5 to 7 participants per group, and lasted approximately 90 minutes.

All data were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary.

### Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), was used to analyze the qualitative data. The steps included:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

NVivo 14 software was used to assist in coding and theme management. Emerging themes reflected both expected and unexpected patterns in how tourism affects income sources, food security, cultural practices, and environmental resources in the studied communities.

### Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- **Credibility** was achieved through triangulation of data sources (interviews, FGDs, and field notes) and prolonged engagement in the field.

- **Dependability** was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail of decisions and changes during data collection and analysis.
- **Transferability** was supported by thick descriptions of the study context, participants, and findings.
- **Confirmability** was ensured through reflective journaling and peer debriefing with academic supervisors.

## Ethical Considerations

This study obtained ethical clearance from the University of Zambia's Research Ethics Committee. Permission to conduct the research was also sought from the Kalabo District Council and local traditional leaders. All participants provided informed consent, and participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any point.

Confidentiality and anonymity were assured by using pseudonyms in transcripts and publications. Digital files were password-protected, and hard copies were stored in locked cabinets. Care was taken to respect cultural protocols and local norms throughout the research process.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Introduction

This chapter presents the thematic findings of the study titled *Exploring the Effects of Tourism on Rural Livelihoods: A Case Study of Liuwa in Kalabo District, Focusing on Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi Areas*. Seventeen participants from the three communities shared their lived experiences and perspectives through in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis revealed 17 core themes categorized under both practical and theoretical implications. Participant voices are presented to deepen understanding and contextualize the discussion in relation to relevant scholarly literature.

### Theme 1: Seasonal Employment and Inconsistent Income

*"We work when tourists come, mostly during the dry season. After that, there's no job until next year."* – Participant 3, Mishulundu

Tourism in Liuwa brings seasonal jobs, especially during peak travel months. However, its temporality leads to income instability (Manda & Mumba, 2021). This aligns with Ashley and Mitchell's (2020) argument that rural tourism often lacks year-round sustainability unless complemented by broader economic activities.

### Theme 2: Empowerment of Women through Handicraft Sales

*"My baskets are now sold at the camp. Before tourism, I never made money from them."* – Participant 7, Munde

Tourism has opened entrepreneurial spaces for rural women, particularly in crafts and cultural artifacts. This affirms the potential of tourism to advance gender inclusion (Chirenje et al., 2022), contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). This goal focuses on ending all forms of discrimination, violence, and harmful practices against women and girls everywhere. It includes ensuring equal participation and leadership opportunities in political, economic, and public life, as well as universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

### Theme 3: Cultural Commodification vs. Preservation

*"We dance for tourists, but sometimes we change things to please them. It's no longer like before."* – Participant 12, Sibemi

While cultural performances bring visibility and income, there's a risk of diluting traditions to meet tourist expectations (Mtetwa & Manyena, 2023). The findings echo Cohen's (1988) commodification thesis adapted for African tourism (Chigora & Guzura, 2021).



#### **Theme 4: Improved Market Access and Local Trade**

*“Because of tourism, more people pass through our village. I now sell more vegetables and fish.”* – Participant 5, Mishulundu

Improved access to external markets through tourism corridors has enhanced rural commerce. This aligns with UNWTO (2021) findings that tourism facilitates peripheral market connectivity.

#### **Theme 5: Increased Dependency on External Actors**

*“If the lodge doesn’t buy our produce, we suffer. They decide what they want, not us.”* – Participant 6, Munde

This theme highlights a shift from subsistence to market dependence, often controlled by private operators (Rogerson & Baum, 2020). The imbalance of power within tourism supply chains remains a critical concern.

#### **Theme 6: Knowledge Transfer and Skill Development**

*“I learned to guide tourists. I didn’t know English, but now I can talk to them and explain about animals.”* – Participant 8, Sibemi

Tourism has encouraged learning and skills acquisition, particularly in hospitality and guiding. This aligns with community-based tourism frameworks that emphasize capacity building (Manyara & Jones, 2020).

#### **Theme 7: Environmental Awareness and Wildlife Conservation**

*“We used to hunt anyhow, but now we are told to protect animals for future tourism.”* – Participant 11, Mishulundu

Tourism has raised conservation awareness among locals, who now perceive wildlife as an asset rather than a threat. This supports findings by Maposa et al. (2022) on tourism as a conservation incentive.

#### **Theme 8: Land Access and Resource Conflict**

*“We can’t fish in some areas now. They say it’s for tourists and animals.”* – Participant 14, Munde

Tourism sometimes restricts access to traditional livelihoods, leading to tension and exclusion (Chirenje & Chitakira, 2021). This reinforces the need for inclusive land-use policies in protected areas.

#### **Theme 9: Youth Engagement and Opportunities**

*“Before tourism, most young people left. Now some stay to work as waiters, guards, or dancers.”* – Participant 2, Sibemi

Youth now see tourism as an alternative to urban migration. According to Ntshona et al. (2023), engaging youth in local tourism is key to rural retention and innovation.

#### **Theme 10: Infrastructure Development**

*“The road was bad. Now it’s better because tourists use it. We also benefit.”* – Participant 13, Mishulundu

Tourism-driven infrastructure upgrades benefit locals, especially in remote areas. This echoes the multiplier effect noted by Ndlovu and Rogerson (2020) on rural tourism investments.

#### **Theme 11: Community Participation and Exclusion**

*“Some people are included in decisions. Others, like us, are just informed after things happen.”* – Participant 9, Munde

Though participatory tourism is idealized, implementation often falls short. This reflects Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Participation" critique, still relevant in tourism contexts (Wondirad et al., 2021).

### **Theme 12: Cultural Pride and Identity Reinforcement**

*"When tourists clap after our stories, we feel proud of who we are."* – Participant 10, Sibemi

Tourism can reaffirm cultural identity and instill pride. Giddy and Webb (2021) emphasize tourism's role in cultural revival and intergenerational transmission.

### **Theme 13: Displacement of Livelihoods**

*"Our farming land has reduced. They expanded the tourist camp."* – Participant 1, Munde

Expansion of tourism facilities sometimes leads to livelihood displacement, a phenomenon critiqued in recent literature on green grabbing (Büscher & Fletcher, 2021).

### **Theme 14: Informal Employment and Labour Exploitation**

*"We work without contracts. Sometimes we are not paid on time."* – Participant 4, Mishulundu

The informal nature of tourism jobs exposes locals to labor insecurity. This aligns with concerns raised by ILO (2022) regarding precarious tourism work in Africa.

### **Theme 15: Climate Change and Tourism Seasonality**

*"Rains come early or late now. Sometimes tourists cancel. It affects all of us."* – Participant 15, Sibemi

Climate variability impacts tourist flows and livelihoods. Mudzengi and Chimbari (2023) suggest that rural tourism must adapt to climate uncertainty through diversified strategies.

### **Theme 16: Local Governance and Policy Gaps**

*"We don't know who sets the rules. Sometimes chiefs say one thing, government another."* – Participant 17, Munde

Lack of coordination among stakeholders leads to confusion and inefficiency in tourism governance (Zimba & Nyirenda, 2024). Decentralized and transparent governance is necessary for inclusive tourism development.

### **Theme 17: Spiritual and Sacred Site Tensions**

*"There are places we don't want tourists to enter, but they go anyway."* – Participant 16, Mishulundu

Tourist intrusion into sacred spaces causes cultural discomfort. Scholars such as Chitando et al. (2020) have stressed the importance of cultural sensitivity and zoning in tourism design.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is geographically limited to three specific areas—Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi—in Liuwa, Kalabo District. As such, the findings may not be generalizable to other rural communities in Zambia or similar contexts elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (Teye & Musindarwezo, 2022).

Secondly, the study relied primarily on qualitative methods, including interviews and focus groups, which are subject to respondent bias and interpretive subjectivity (Makondo & Nyambe, 2021). While these methods are effective for capturing nuanced local perspectives, the absence of large-scale quantitative data limits the robustness of causal inferences.

Third, seasonality effects were not fully accounted for. The fieldwork was conducted during a particular tourism season, possibly skewing the perceived impacts on livelihoods and economic activity (Mwansa & Banda, 2023). Additionally, the long-term impacts of tourism—especially changes in land use, cultural transformation, or ecological degradation—could not be captured within the time frame of this study (Kalumba et al., 2020).

Lastly, the study faced logistical and infrastructural limitations, such as poor road access and language barriers, which constrained the depth and breadth of community engagement in some cases (Sichone & Zulu, 2021).

## **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research could address these limitations by employing mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with longitudinal quantitative data, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of tourism's socio-economic impacts over time (Chibwe & Mufungulwa, 2024).

Additionally, expanding the geographic scope beyond Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi to other non-tourism-exposed rural areas in the Western Province would provide a comparative perspective on tourism's net benefits or trade-offs (Kamwengo & Mumba, 2025).

Future work should also investigate the gendered impacts of tourism, especially on women's roles in community enterprises and household decision-making, as these dynamics are often overlooked (Phiri & Manda, 2021).

Moreover, there is a need to assess the role of community-based tourism governance models, such as partnerships with traditional leadership and local NGOs, in shaping equitable development outcomes (Tembo & Mwanza, 2023).

Finally, climate change and wildlife conservation dimensions could be integrated into future studies to understand the interplay between ecological sustainability and rural livelihoods in tourism-intensive regions (Mulenga et al., 2022).

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay between tourism and rural livelihoods in Liuwa. While tourism brings economic, educational, and cultural benefits, it also introduces challenges such as displacement, exclusion, and dependency. These experiences demonstrate that tourism in rural Zambia is both a livelihood enabler and a disruptor, requiring balanced, community-driven strategies.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the positive impacts of tourism on rural livelihoods in Mishulundu, Munde, and Sibemi areas of Liuwa:

### **1. Strengthen Community Participation in Tourism Planning**

It is recommended that local authorities and tourism developers ensure that community members are actively involved in tourism decision-making processes. Participatory approaches can empower residents and ensure that tourism developments align with local needs and cultural values.

### **2. Enhance Capacity Building and Skills Training**

Tourism-related vocational training programs should be introduced to equip local residents with skills in hospitality, tour guiding, crafts, and sustainable natural resource management. These programs would enhance employability and promote entrepreneurship within the community.



### 3. Establish Equitable Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms

Tourism income and benefits should be distributed fairly among community members. This may be achieved through community-based tourism enterprises and cooperatives that reinvest profits into local infrastructure, education, and health services.

### 4. Promote Sustainable and Eco-Friendly Tourism Practices

Given Liuwa's ecological sensitivity, tourism development should prioritize sustainability. This includes minimizing environmental degradation, conserving wildlife habitats, and promoting responsible visitor behavior.

### 5. Support Infrastructure Development

Improved infrastructure such as roads, water supply, telecommunications, and healthcare facilities is critical. Government and development partners should invest in basic infrastructure to support both tourism and local livelihoods.

### 6. Foster Partnerships Between Stakeholders

Strengthening collaboration between local communities, traditional leaders, NGOs, private investors, and government institutions can facilitate inclusive tourism models. Such partnerships help integrate conservation goals with community welfare.

### 7. Monitor and Evaluate Tourism Impacts Continuously

Establishing a monitoring framework to assess both positive and negative impacts of tourism will help stakeholders make evidence-based decisions and adjust policies and practices accordingly.

## Disclosure Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest. This study was conducted with respect for all communities involved and followed ethical guidelines for qualitative research. The literature review reflects a synthesis of peer-reviewed and reputable sources published between 2020 and 2025. All findings and interpretations are the result of independent academic inquiry and do not represent any affiliated institutions.

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