



## **Community Residents' Attitudes towards Tourism Development after the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Ait Ben Haddou, Morocco**

Hind Azougagh<sup>1</sup>

Pinyang Rao<sup>2\*</sup>

School of Tourism Management<sup>1,2</sup>  
Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, China<sup>1,2</sup>

### **Abstract**

Tourism is one of the activities most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, including residents' attitudes toward tourism. The development of tourism destinations in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic requires the cooperation of all stakeholders, including local residents. Therefore, it is important to understand residents' thoughts and attitudes regarding tourism development after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to examine the impact of COVID-19 on residents and tourism, and the willingness of residents to support tourism development after the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the objectives of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the residents of Ait Ben Haddou. This study provides an in-depth understanding of how this pandemic is affecting the attitudes of Ait Ben Haddou residents and how this will affect tourism development post-COVID-19. The results show that residents understand that tourism is important to their region and are willing to support it. However, COVID-19 has caused negative economic impacts that have caused many residents who rely on tourism to withdraw. The study recommends that tourism planners should develop plans and strategies to address the negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 disaster and ensure that the impacts of future disasters on tourism and residents are mitigated. Otherwise, COVID-19 could lead to negative repercussions and affect the future development of tourism.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Tourism development, Tourism recovery, Tourism impacts, Residents' attitudes, Community

Corresponding author: Pinyang Rao; E-mail: [rpy@zzu.edu.cn](mailto:rpy@zzu.edu.cn)  
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### **Introduction**

Over the past decade, several major events have had a significant negative impact on global tourism. However, despite the proven resilience of tourism to other crises, the impact of COVID-19 on tourism is considered more significant than any previous crisis or disaster and is expected to have a long-term negative impact on tourism (Gössling et al., 2020; Škare et al., 2021). COVID-19 has affected tourism in many areas and has

negatively impacted many tourism businesses due to travel restrictions and border closures. The resulting travel restrictions have caused many people, especially those working in the tourism sector, to lose their jobs and their source of income (Ibn-Mohammed et al., 2021; Gössling et al., 2020; Škare et al., 2021). It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on people and tourism worldwide, and in Ait Ben Haddou the same is expected. Tourism is the main economic pillar of Ait Ben Haddou and the cessation of this sector will have a significant impact on the livelihoods of residents. In addition, Ait Ben Haddou faces the threat of a decline in its main sector due to COVID-19, on which the region's economic growth depends. Although tourism is developing as a main sector in the region, no study has been conducted on this issue in the region. According to Godovykh et al. (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced people's lives in many ways, including their attitudes toward tourism. Therefore, communication with residents and understanding residents' thoughts and experiences during COVID-19 is an essential element in gaining support for tourism development after the COVID-19 pandemic (Kamata, 2022). Many studies have sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 on tourist travel behavior and the travel industry, but there is a dearth of studies examining the impact of COVID-19 on community residents and its effect on their attitudes. Residents are the most important part of the tourist destination and are the main drivers of tourism development in the region (Lim & Lee, 2020). Therefore, special attention must be given to them, because without their support, the recovery of tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be achieved.

Understanding resident attitudes and support is also important to the success of post-pandemic COVID-19 tourism development plans and strategies. Given the theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature, the purpose of this study is to determine residents' attitudes toward tourism development in Ait Ben Haddou after the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the objectives of the study, the research aims to answer the following questions: what is the impact of tourism development in the region and how do residents perceive it, how has the COVID-19 affected tourism and people in the region, and what attitudes residents develop toward tourism development after the COVID-19 pandemic. There are a considerable number of studies that demonstrate both negative and positive perceptions of tourism development by community residents. However, this study is the first of its kind on residents' attitudes toward tourism development in the COVID-19 era. The results of this research can provide insight into the problems faced by residents of Ait Ben Haddou during the COVID-19 pandemic and will be an appropriate source of information for policy makers and tourism planners to achieve tourism recovery after COVID-19. Furthermore, this study is considered important because it contributes to the development of the literature. The results of this study may prove useful for future comparative studies of other tourist destinations. It will also serve as a future reference for researchers working on the issue of residents' attitudes towards tourism development in the time of the COVID-19. On a practical level, the information obtained from this research could help authorities and tourism managers to improve conditions in the Ait Ben Haddou region.

## **Literature Review**

The support of local residents is essential to achieve sustainable tourism development and has become a key factor in the development of sustainable tourism strategies (Fredline et al., 2013; Sharpley, 2014; Styliadis & Terzidou, 2014). Many studies have emphasized the participation of residents in the decision-making process of tourism development, as their involvement has a direct impact on the development, quality, and sustainability of a tourism destination (Muresan et al., 2016; Vareiro et al., 2013; García et al., 2015; Woo et

al., 2018; Šegota et al., 2017). According to Sharpley (2014), understanding residents' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors is fundamental to successful tourism development. Results from previous studies have shown that residents' attitudes toward tourism are influenced by the perceived impacts of tourism. Erul et al. (2020) highlighted that residents are key stakeholders in creating sustainable tourism destinations and found that their level of support for future tourism is related to their perception of tourism impacts. Similarly, Ramón et al. (2019) reported that the resident forms his or her attitude toward tourism through a cost-benefit analysis based on his or her perception of the impacts of tourism. Tourism development can be perceived by residents as positive, as it contributes to infrastructure development, increases employment opportunities, improves living standards, and contributes to economic growth (Woo et al., 2019; Sinclair-Maragh & Gursoy, 2017; Nazneen et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2013).

At the same time, tourism development can have negative effects on residents due to the environmental costs associated with it, such as increased traffic, congestion, pollution, overcrowding, and depletion of natural resources (Liu & Li, 2018; Nunkoo et al., 2013; Nunkoo & So, 2016). Tourism development can also have negative socio-cultural effects, as it can lead to increased prostitution and criminal activity, increased drug and alcohol use, disruption of local residents' lifestyles, and commercialization of traditional culture (Sharma & Gursoy, 2015; Kim et al., 2013; García et al., 2015). Social exchange theory suggests that for residents to support tourism development, there must be a balance between the costs and benefits of tourism. If residents believe that the costs of tourism outweigh its benefits, they may choose to abandon the exchange. On the other hand, if residents believe that the benefits of tourism outweigh its costs, they are more likely to engage in interactions that support future tourism development in their community (Özel & Hozak, 2017; Nunkoo, 2016; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2017; Sharpley, 2014).

Attitudes toward tourism can vary considerably among residents of the same community, depending on a variety of personal factors. As a result, many researchers have explored these factors to explain and predict residents' attitudes toward tourism. Among the key factors influencing residents' attitudes toward tourism are the economic benefits it provides. Almost all studies that have examined the relationship between economic benefits and residents' attitudes toward tourism have reported a positive relationship. Untong et al. (2010) in their study on factors influencing local residents' support for tourism development in four destinations in Thailand identified that economic benefits have the most direct impact on local residents' attitude towards tourism. Similarly, García et al. (2015) pointed out that residents' perceived economic impact is one of the factors that most influence residents' attitudes toward tourism development. This is because tourism brings direct economic benefits and increases employment opportunities for local residents. Previous studies have also examined the influence of proximity on how residents perceive the impacts of tourism. In a study conducted in India, Liu & Li (2018) found that residents living near the tourist zone were less supportive of tourism growth than those living farther away due to increased cost of living, alcohol consumption, and environmental pollution. In contrast, residents living farther away from the tourist zone were more supportive of tourism growth due to increased employment opportunities and better access to recreational facilities. Vodeb & Medarić (2013) found that the level of residents' involvement in the tourism industry shows some correlation with their attitudes, as residents involved in the tourism industry are generally supportive and more likely to recognize its positive impacts. Rasoolimanesh et al. (2015) in their study conducted in a

World Heritage Site in Malaysia found that economic gain and involvement in the planning and management process have significant positive effects on residents' perceptions of tourism. Previous studies have also shown mixed results regarding the influence of residents' demographic variables on their attitudes towards tourism development. Variables such as age, gender, education, income, community attachment, and length of residence were found to be factors influencing residents' perceptions of tourism impacts and their support for tourism development (An et al., 2021; Sharpley, 2014; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Sinclair, 2017; Almeida-García et al., 2016; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012; Wang, 2013; Muresan et al., 2016; Afthanorhan et al., 2017; Harun et al., 2018).

Since local residents are not a homogeneous group, many studies have applied cluster analysis to divide local residents into groups with different perceptions. For example, Lopes et al. (2019) used cluster analysis to segment residents' perceptions of impacts generated by tourism activity in a rural community in northeast Portugal. They identified three distinct groups: *the indifferent ones*, *the moderately optimistic ones*, and *the optimists*. Chiappa et al. (2017) used cluster analysis to analyze residents' perceptions of cruise tourism development and identified five groups of residents: *cultural lovers*, *supporters*, *cautious*, *critics*, and *indifferent*. Lundberg (2015) examined the relationship between the level of tourism development and residents' attitudes in three destinations in West Sweden and identified four groups of residents: *development supporters*, *cautious developers*, *ambivalent/cautious*, and *skeptics*. Scalabrini & Remoaldo (2020) used a similar approach to analyze residents' perceptions of tourism in a Brazilian industrial city and identified four groups: *enthusiasts*, *skeptics*, *optimists*, and *moderate optimists*. Nguyen (2022) used cluster analysis to segment residents' perceptions of tourism impacts in Sapa, Vietnam, and identified three clusters: *supporters*, *pessimists*, and *neutralists*. Other studies that have used this method include those conducted by Harun et al. (2018), Sánchez-Fernández et al. (2019), Vareiro et al. (2013), and Brida et al. (2010). All these studies divided residents into groups that were strongly supportive of tourism and groups that were less enthusiastic or strongly opposed to tourism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reshaped the tourism industry and destinations around the world, one of these destinations being Ait Ben Haddou. Ait Ben Haddou is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Morocco. Its rich cultural heritage and architecture attract tourists from around the world. Ait Ben Haddou, a destination where tourism plays an important role in its economy, is expected to be severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including its residents. Godovykh et al. (2021) believe that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on tourism, including the attitudes of tourists and residents toward tourism. The pandemic not only changed people's lives and economic conditions, but it also rapidly changed perceptions of tourism (Godovykh et al., 2021). According to Kamata (2022), communication with residents during the COVID-19 pandemic is important for understanding and predicting their attitudes toward tourism after the pandemic. Given the potential effects of the perception of the COVID-19 pandemic on attitudes, this study hypothesizes that the COVID-19 pandemic influences residents' attitudes toward tourism.

## Research Methodology

### Research Method

Bryman (2016) stress that the researcher should choose the research approach that will best answer the research questions. Since the aim of this study is to explore the attitudes and support of community residents for tourism development after the COVID-19 pandemic,

the qualitative research method was chosen as appropriate to achieve the aim of this study. One of the main reasons for using qualitative research is that it allows for the exploration and description of experiences and social phenomena (Silverman, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as an appropriate method of data collection for this study because the researcher was able to obtain more in-depth and detailed responses from participants (Bryman, 2016) while allowing the researcher to maintain a degree of control during the interview process. The semi-structured interview also allowed the researcher to ask additional questions and ask participants to clarify or elaborate. In order to reflect the idea of a representative group and to obtain a broad range of perspectives and experiences, participants were selected from different demographic characteristics. The inclusion criteria were that participants must be residents of the community and have lived there for a long time. All participants were given the right not to answer any questions they did not want to answer and to stop the interview at any time and for any reason. The interviews lasted 3 days and took place from 26 October to 28 October 2021. An interview guide containing questions and topics to be discussed was used to conduct the semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included questions on the demographics, residents' perception of the impact of tourism development, their views on the role of government and investors in tourism development, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the community and tourism, and their willingness to support tourism development post COVID-19. Saturation was reached in the fifth interview, but two more interviews were conducted to confirm saturation. In total 7 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted in Moroccan Arabic, the first language of all participants, and lasted between 30 and 80 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, then manually translated and transcribed by the researcher.

### **The Study Area**

The study area chosen for this study is the Kasbah Ait Ben Haddou located in the southeast of Morocco in the province of Ouarzazate. The study area was purposely chosen because of the severity of the problem in this region and because no previous research has been conducted on this problem in this area. Kasbah is an Arabic term used to designate a fortified village in pre-Saharan North Africa. The Kasbah Ait Ben Haddou is considered a great example of southern Moroccan architecture, dating from the 17th century. Most of the original inhabitants of the Kasbah have moved to more modern houses in the new village, where new buildings are being constructed to accommodate the growing tourism industry. At the beginning of the 20th century, the village began to receive thousands of tourists per year. Most of the residents now depend on tourism, some of them sell souvenirs and artifacts to tourists, others work as tour guides. Thanks to its unique architecture and incredible atmosphere, the Kasbah Ait Ben Haddou has been the filming location for many famous movies and TV shows such as *Gladiator*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Laurence of Arabia*. In 1978, Kasbah Ait Ben Haddou was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Since then, it has been carefully restored using traditional building methods and materials to preserve its architectural integrity. Although the site has retained its authenticity, lack of maintenance, lack of infrastructure and services, and the small number of inhabitants in the village has led to serious deterioration.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data analysis was conducted based on Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach which consists of 5 main steps: reading and familiarizing with the data,

coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and naming themes. Braun & Clarke (2006) and Gibbs (2007) identify thematic analysis as one of the most important strategies for analyzing qualitative data. In step 1, all transcripts were read through in order to become familiar with the data. In step 2, broad coding was adopted, where the data was organized according to the research questions. Next, complete coding was used where the coded data in each node was systematically read and a code was applied to sections of the data. For instance, for the node “impact of tourism development”, data on the construction of roads, hotels, guesthouses, and restaurants were coded as infrastructure development. The next step involved identifying the most recurring topics. During this step, it was noted that the topics in the “impact of tourism development” node had either a positive or negative orientation. They were therefore grouped into two major categories. In step 4, the coded data were revisited to ensure that they were aligned to the research questions. No major changes were done in this step. Finally, theme names were chosen based on the content of the data. For instance, the theme “financial hardship” describes the financial challenges the community members with no alternative source of income experienced during the pandemic when tourist activities were halted. The data-analysis process was supported by NVivo 12 software.

### **Data Validation**

Although it is difficult to generalize the results of qualitative research, the researcher must ensure the validity of the findings. According to Creswell. J.W. & Creswell. J.D. (2017), qualitative validity refers to the strategies and procedures used by a researcher to demonstrate the accuracy of results and assure readers of that accuracy. To increase the validity of qualitative research, the researcher checks the accuracy of the results using certain strategies. According to Creswell. J.W. & Creswell. J.D. (2017), it is best to use multiple strategies to assess the accuracy of results. Strategies used to ensure the validity of the research are *member checking, rich and thick description, prolonged time, and clarification of bias* (Creswell. J.W. & Creswell. J.D., 2017). Member checking was done during the interview process to increase the validity of the results. During the interview, the researcher rephrased or summarized the information and then asked the participant questions to determine accuracy. The main goal of this process is to provide authentic, original, and reliable qualitative results. To make the results more realistic and richer, the researcher used detailed description to convey the results in a way that allows the reader to be present in the setting. This detailed description increases the possibility for other researchers to replicate this study under the same conditions. To avoid respondent bias and increase the level of trust between the researcher and the participants, the researcher spent a considerable amount of time on the study, including the setting and the participants. Research bias was fully disclosed and controlled so as not to influence the interpretation of the data. Following the reliability strategies suggested by Gibbs (2007), the researcher checked the transcripts for errors made during transcription, and when analyzing the data, the researcher ensured that there were no deviations in the code definitions.

## **Results & Discussion**

### ***The Impact of Tourism Development***

Tourism development has had social and economic impacts on the residents of the community. The impacts can be categorized as either positive or negative:

## ▪ Positive Impacts of Tourism Development

### Improved Quality of Life

Tourism significantly improved the quality of life for the residents. In the past, the region was “like a deserted place and the living conditions were limited and difficult”. Development of the tourism industry provided opportunities for (self) employment like tour guides, working in hotels, small and medium enterprises such as grocery shops, selling carpets, taxis and artists. *“Tourism has helped everyone in this area, like taxi drivers...there are no other industries in the area, like agriculture or fishing, tourism is the only resource, and most people here work in tourism.”*-Participant 5.

Job opportunities in the tourism sector have low entry barriers. For instance, to work as a tour guide, one only needs to learn a few foreign languages. This improved access to employment opportunities regardless of educational attainment. *“People whose circumstances did not help them study or work, and thanks to tourism, were able to earn a living.”*-Participant 7.

### Infrastructure Development

The community has certainly experienced a shift in the level of infrastructure development before and after tourism development. Initially, the region was like a deserted place but has since seen the development of products and services targeting tourists such as restaurants, cafes, and accommodation facilities. *“...the area before tourism was like a deserted area, there were no houses, no services, not even paved roads...and with the rise of tourism, the area started to develop.”* -Participant 2.

Infrastructure development has largely been supported by easy access to financial services from institutions such as Souss-Massa-Draa and UNESCO. *“...UNESCO has taken responsibility for the restoration and financial support of the Kasbah.”* -Participant 6. *“In the first decade of the 21st century, the Souss-Massa-Draa region supported us financially to build a guesthouse in our house.”* –Participant 2.

### Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Authorities within the tourism sector, such as UNESCO, put a regulatory framework to preserve the cultural heritage. The framework provides clear guidelines on human activities such as using brown color to paint exterior walls, construction materials to be used, and restricted use of lighting. *“...UNESCO has helped put in place regulations to preserve the Kasbah, such as banning the use of cement in construction, and has restored the Kasbah several times, and to this day it is still carrying out restoration work.”*-Participant 2.

Kasbah of Ait Ben Haddou is listed as a world heritage site and certain stakeholders advocate for the preservation of its cultural identity. *“In 2014, heavy rains fell, causing a large number of houses to fall. At that time, UNESCO decided to remove Kasbah Ait Ben Haddou from the list of world heritage sites, but some foreigners prevented that from happening.”* –Participant 4.

### Environmental Protection

The development of tourism has led to the transformation of the environment in the region. Initially, the region was “full of garbage” but that has since changed and everyone had a stake to play in the transformation. Tourism created opportunities for collaboration between the community and environmental association in keeping the environment

friendly to the tourism activities. Environmental protection begins with individual efforts to clean personal spaces. “...if I clean my place and others do the same, the region will be clean.” –Participant 3.

The environmental association cleans the public spaces and has designated places for waste disposal. The community maintains the association by making contributions every three months. “There is an association responsible for cleaning the Kasbah, and we contribute to the expenses at the head of every three months. This association has put rubbish bins and cleans the Kasbah daily.” –Participant 7.

Tourists are also regarded as very sensitive to environmental pollution and only dispose of their waste in designated places. “...if a tourist has any rubbish, he keeps it until he throws it in the rubbish bin.” –Participant 1.

### **Preservation of Cultural Identity**

Despite the growth of the tourism sector, the community is still attached to traditions and customs. The participants talked about the religious customs with regard to prayer, traditional festivals, particularly wedding ceremonies and the “ahwash” traditional Amazigh dance, and the traditional mode of dressing. “Traditions and customs have not changed and we still practice them in the same old traditional way.” –Participant 4.

#### **▪ Negative Impacts of Tourism Development**

##### **Imbalance Between Tourism and Community Development**

While tourism development has significantly contributed to the growth and development of infrastructure, the development is limited to products and services within the tourism industry such as hotels, restaurants, and roads. There was a sense of neglect in community development as indicated by the long distance to schools and a lack of other social amenities such as hospitals, and parks. “There is no interest in anything that concerns the good of the community, such as building schools and hospitals.” –Participant 7.

##### **Cultural Decay**

The elderly within the community are still attached to the cultural practices, however, there has been an erosion of traditional customs and practices among the teenagers that are easily influenced by the foreign culture. This is evidenced in their mode of dressing and language. “Older people retain the same customs and traditions, but teenagers have been more influenced by tourists, which is evident in the way they speak and dress.” –Participant 6.

##### **Behavior Problems among the Youth**

Tourism development has led to the decadence of social behavior among the youth and this manifests in the form of drug use, early school dropout, and criminal activity. Though not rampant, the easy access to money from their wages encourages the youth to buy and consume cigarettes and alcohol. “Tourism affects the youth... Most of them use the money to buy cigarettes and alcohol...” –Participant 4.

While jobs opportunities within the tourism sector have low entry barriers, they also motivate school-going children to drop out of school early. “Children work as tour guides, and most of them leave school to work and help their families.” –Participant 6.

Lack of job opportunities may also encourage the youth to engage in anti-social behaviors such as stealing from tourists. “...the government... has not encouraged young



*people by providing them with job opportunities... and this can lead to young people developing bad habits, like stealing from tourists.*”–Participant 6.

A few participants felt that tourism development had not affected behavior in youth. Responding to the question of whether the sector development had affected youth behavior, participant 1 said, “*No, I don't think so.*”

### **Overdependence on Tourism Sector**

Tourism is the main sector driving the economy of the region. The agricultural, fishing, and textile sectors are poorly developed but probably the residents have a preference for the tourism sector because the employment opportunities have low entry barriers making it possible for the people with “little formal education” to find jobs. The sector is also perceived as an all-seasons sector and provided higher wages as compared to the seasonal agricultural sector. “*Agriculture is a seasonal activity, you have to wait a lot for the harvest, but tourism is different because you can work only one day a week and it gives you a good income that covers all your needs.*” –Participant 4.

Tourism provides economic linkages with other sectors and supports complementary businesses such as grocery shops and butcheries. “*... tourism is a source of income for all local residents, not only for those who work in tourism, but also for those who sell food, fruit and vegetable sellers, butchers and taxi drivers.*” - Participant 5.

### **Stagnating Quality of Life**

While most participants perceived tourism development as improving the quality of life, a few felt that the low entry barriers encouraged people to become complacent and not seek to improve their skill level. “*...you find someone who has a basic level of language and uses it to accompany tourists, and that's it, he doesn't try to improve himself, for example by learning new skills.*” –Participant 3.

### **Demographic Profile and Perceived Tourism Impacts**

The study reveals that the perceived impact of tourism differs according to demographic variables. The participants in the study were of different demographic profiles. Out of the total seven participants, five were male and two were female, with a minimum age of 26 years and a maximum age of 59 years. It is important to note that the number of male participants was twice the number of female participants and this may affect the interpretation of results.

While both male and female participants had positive and negative perceptions, the negative perceptions were predominantly from the male participants. Male participants felt that tourists were likely to introduce new cultural practices and erode traditional practices. They also felt that easy access to income led people to feel complacent and not seek to advance their level of skills. Some females also felt that tourism development was not likely to have any impact on youth behavior.

In terms of age, the results showed an even distribution of positive perception among the participants. However, participants in the age group 20-30 were more likely to perceive tourism development as having no impact on youth behavior than participants in other age groups. Participants in the age group 50-60 had stronger negative perceptions on the impact of tourism development on cultural decay and behavioral problems in youth.

In terms of education level, the results showed that positive perceptions of the impact of tourism development on improving the quality of life and preserving cultural heritage were stronger among participants with primary and lower secondary education.

Participants who had attained university education had more negative perceptions while participants who had attained upper secondary education had fewer negative perceptions.

Regarding place of residence, participants from the tourist area expressed strong positive and negative perceptions, while participants living away from the tourist area felt that tourism development did not have a negative impact based on the factors identified in this study.

### ***The Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism and the Community***

Drawn from this study, the major impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism and the community include financial hardships and psychological distress.

#### ▪ **Financial hardships**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about financial hardships to the community. The pandemic disrupted tourism activities, the main economic driver in the region, for the past two years. This led to the loss of employment for the people working in the tourism sector including taxi drivers and hotel personnel. As a result, the majority of the people lack the income to meet their daily needs. *“Most people here can't even pay the rent and water and electricity bills, now school has started and some parents can't afford it, there are even people who did not celebrate Eid al-Adha last year.”* –Participant 1.

In the face of financial difficulties, people started to look for alternative sources of income within and outside of Kasbah Ait Ben Haddou. *“The disruption of this sector has caused them financial difficulties, which has led a significant number of them to leave the region in search of financial resources in other industries or artisanal sectors of which they have no knowledge.”* - Participant 3. Those who could not leave the area resulted to agricultural activities. *“After the pandemic, people started looking for alternative sources of income and became interested in agriculture.”*–Participant 7.

#### ▪ **Psychological distress**

The financial stress resulting from the cessation of tourist activities during the pandemic and subsequent loss of jobs affected the psychological well-being of the community. Before the crisis, the community residents are described as having ‘ambitions and goals’, and being ‘encouraged and enthusiastic’. However, the crisis brought about a lack of trust due to fear of infection and a sense of resignation. *“...now most of them have retreated.”* – Participant 3.

### ***Residents' Attitude Towards Tourism Development After The COVID-19 Pandemic***

The participants perceive the need to develop strategies and plans that will help in the resumption and development of tourism in the community. To achieve tourism development, everyone including the government, community, and stakeholders within the tourism sector needs to play their role.

#### ▪ **Role of Government**

The participants perceive the role of the government as developing tourism infrastructure, creating an enabling environment, and diversifying economic activities. However, all the participants were concerned that the government was reluctant to invest in tourism development and attributed the development to community initiatives. *“The money earned from tourism is invested in the region. These are only the efforts of the residents, but the*

*government has not made any effort to improve the infrastructure of the region.”–Participant 3.*

While there are many hotels and bazaars, other essential facilities are missing and this affects performance in the tourism sector. For instance, the nearest bank and hospital are 30km away. It thus becomes difficult to attend to emergency medical cases and sometimes, merchants are not able to get immediate payment for products and services sold. “...when a tourist wants to buy one of my paintings but does not have enough money and there is no bank in the village where he can withdraw money, I sometimes have to give him the painting on condition that he sends me the money later.”-Participant 7.

The road infrastructure is poorly designed. The nearest fuel station is 30km away, the parking and alleys are inadequate and the main road has no provision for sidewalks and this creates traffic jams. “The road that connects Ouarzazate to Marrakech is quite difficult and inconvenient...there are no sidewalks, the infrastructure is poor and public lighting is almost non-existent...women feel annoyed when they return from the fields and find the road crowded with cars, forcing them to walk along the sides of the valley.” –Participant 4. Such structural challenges make Kasbah of Ait Ben Haddou a transit destination where tourists come and stay for “two to four hours” and leave for a different destination. To attract tourists and improve the performance of the sector, the participants felt that the government should be involved in developing infrastructure and suggested new tourist attraction facilities such as public squares, musical activities, and workshops. “There should be new activities in the area to encourage tourists to stay longer, such as music festivals or exhibitions, so that all the people in the area can benefit.” –Participant 6.

The participants also felt that the government should create an enabling environment by regulating the construction of shops and bazaars, reducing taxes, and creating training opportunities to increase interaction between the tour guides and tourists, improve their cultural competency, and ensure the information shared is correct. “The level of awareness of people working in the tourism sector must also be improved, and this will only be possible through the creation of schools and training centers aimed primarily at developing their skills and capabilities.” –Participant 3.

Licensing of businesses in the tourism sector also enables credible businesses to operate in the tourism sector. According to participant 5, this will go a long way to formalize the business environment and eradicate illegitimate businesses in the sector. Least to say, the confidence of tourists to work with licensed businesses and other agencies will greatly improve and so is the marketing of the region as a good tourism destination. “The government... should make it easier for people to get licenses to open cafes or shops and encourage them, because sometimes people face some difficulties.”-Participant 5.

Economic diversification is important to secure the financial stability of the community. The community specializes in tourism which came grinding to a halt during the COVID-19 pandemic. To prevent such economic and financial risks in the future, the participants suggested diversifying the economy to include agricultural activities and crafts. “Residents should learn from this experience and be concerned about their children's education and learn other professions or crafts to offset any future decline in tourism.” -Participant 7.

#### ▪ **Role of the Local Community**

The local community views tourism development as a double-edged sword that while it's the major source of income, it's also unstable and discourages children from pursuing further studies. As such, the participants would only encourage people to pursue

opportunities within the industry as alternative means of income. Nonetheless, the community has embraced tourism in this area as evidenced by their being welcoming to tourists, the will to participate in the upcoming development projects to bring back the business vigor and splendor that existed before COVID-19 and revive the business for tourism and the peaceful co-existence with the tourists. The local community is willing to be involved in tourism development strategies and plans. Participant 1 stated that she is “...ready and even planning to open a guest house in my house to accommodate tourists in my village after the recovery of tourism”. There are conflicting ideas on tourism planning between community members, and therefore priorities should be set right.

*“...one of the founders of the film studios in Ouarzazate had previously come to Ait Ben Haddou to build a new film studio, an idea that was supported by many locals because it would help attract tourists, but was opposed by others, especially elderly local residents who refused to give up land to build a film studio because of their limited thinking and lack of appreciation for the positive effects of this project, which is to create jobs and attract more tourists to the area.”-Participant 4.*

The community residents have accepted tourism and can coexist with tourists in the area. They have managed to establish strong ties to the point of intermarrying with tourists. This argument signifies that there are no conflicts between the host community and the tourists. “...there has never been any objection to the presence of tourists in the area nor any attempt to humiliate them, rather things have developed to the point of marrying with them.” –Participant 7. Drawing from this analysis, the study has established that the local community has a very positive attitude and is willing to participate in tourism development post-COVID-19 and build sustainable ties for their communities to continue benefiting from tourism.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The results of the study contribute to the existing literature by describing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents' attitudes toward tourism development. In addition, this study has expanded the body of knowledge on residents' perceived impacts of tourism development. From the overall analysis, the residents of Ait Ben Haddou strongly support the development of tourism and perceive the impacts of tourism in a positive light. The results reveal that residents' support for tourism development has a parallel relationship with perceived economic benefits. The more positive the perception of economic benefits, the more residents support tourism development in their community, which is consistent with previous studies (An et al., 2021; Untong et al., 2010; García et al., 2015; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015). In this study, the high economic reliance on tourism was found to be the greatest negative impact of tourism development in Ait Ben Haddou. With the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism development was interrupted in Ait Ben Haddou. As a result, the economic benefits that community residents derive from tourism have been significantly reduced.

The results of this study revealed that while residents positively perceive the impacts of tourism and support further tourism development, the negative economic impacts resulting from COVID-19 caused many residents of Ait Ben Haddou to withdraw. In order to avoid economic disruptions caused by unexpected events, special attention must be paid to the diversification of economic activities, as dependence on a single industry exposes the economy to significant risks (Icoz, O. & Icoz, O., 2019). This study also explored the impact of demographic variables on residents' attitudes toward tourism

development, which may be useful for further comparative studies on factors influencing residents' attitudes toward tourism development. The results of this study confirm that perceived economic benefits are a key factor in supporting tourism and the most important predictor of residents' attitudes toward tourism development. This is because tourism brings direct economic benefits and increases employment opportunities for residents of Ait Ben Haddou. Residents' proximity to the tourist area was also found to be an important factor influencing residents' perception of tourism impacts, which is consistent with previous studies (Liu & Li, 2018). Participants living in the tourist area expressed strong positive and negative perceptions, while participants living far from the tourist area felt that tourism development has no negative impact.

The study also provides important practical implications for policy makers and practitioners in the tourism industry. Tourism practitioners need to understand the effects of COVID-19 on residents and assess their attitudes toward future tourism. In this study, we contribute to knowledge by exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on residents' attitudes and support for future tourism development. The results of the study provide several recommendations for planning successful tourism development after the COVID-19 pandemic, based on residents' preferences. In the case of Ait Ben Haddou, current development plans should focus on improving infrastructure, diversifying economic activities and creating an enabling environment. In addition, because destination conditions may change over time, residents' attitudes and support for future development must be constantly monitored and addressed (Kamata, 2022). This study may also have practical implications for other tourist destinations with similar characteristics to Ait Ben Haddou.

### **Conclusion**

The major impact of COVID-19 on the community identified in this study is the loss of livelihoods. This is due to the fact that tourism is the main and only driving sector of the economy of the region. After the cessation of this industry, people started to look for other sources of income within and outside the region. Most of them have not been able to cope with the economic impact of COVID-19, which has led some residents to leave the area in search of jobs and better living conditions. It is important to note that the lack of local population can lead to a decline in tourism, especially in small communities like Ait Ben Haddou, where tourism is heavily dependent on the support and presence of the local population. The economic hardship resulting from loss of income and unemployment has also affected the psychological well-being of the community. According to some participants, the crisis led to a lack of confidence and a sense of resignation among residents, which prompted many of them to withdraw. To prevent such economic and financial risks in the future, participants suggested diversifying the economy to include other activities such as agriculture to ensure the financial stability of the community. The results suggest that community residents, directly or indirectly involved in the tourism industry, are willing to support post-COVID-19 tourism development primarily because of its economic benefits. When participants were asked if the costs of tourism outweighed the benefits, all responded that tourism was beneficial to their community compared to its negative impacts.

The results also show that residents support alternative tourism development and suggest new tourist attraction facilities, which shows their desire to develop tourism in their community. However, the study results show that residents' trust in other institutions, such as the government, is very low. The residents are happy to live in the village, but they

complain about the lack of attention and responsiveness of the authorities. Almost all participants complained that the needs of the community were neglected and not addressed. The development was found to be limited to the products and services of the tourism industry. Currently, inadequate infrastructure and lack of other public facilities, such as hospitals and schools, are considered major problems in the village. This sense of dissatisfaction can lead people to leave their community and choose to withdraw, which can affect the sustainability of the tourism sector. However, despite the increase in tourism products and services, participants complained that the tourism facilities and services in the region do not meet the needs of tourists. Although the pandemic is far from over, and despite their low level of trust, participants showed a willingness to participate in the post-COVID-19 tourism development strategies and plans and promoted tourism development as a tool to improve their quality of life.

The path to tourism recovery will require the collaboration of all stakeholders in the tourism industry, including the local population. To ensure a better recovery of the sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities need to identify and understand the factors that influence residents' support for tourism development and develop better recovery strategies based on residents' desires and needs. It will be important to take into account the suggestions of the residents, restore community confidence, improve the sustainability and resilience of the sector, and ensure that benefits are distributed more equitably. This study showed that residents' support for future tourism development is not necessarily influenced by the perceived impacts of tourism or the level of tourism development, but also by external factors to which they may be exposed, such as pandemics. For this reason, the study recommends that tourism planners should develop plans and strategies to address the negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 disaster and ensure that the impacts of future disasters on tourism and communities are mitigated.

### **Research Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite the contributions of this study, it has several limitations. First, this study used a qualitative approach to explore residents' attitudes and perceptions in depth using a small sample of participants, as opposed to a quantitative approach. However, this could lead to difficulties in understanding the different types of opinions of residents. Therefore, additional research using a quantitative approach should be undertaken to further explore residents' attitudes toward tourism development after the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the results of this study may not be completely generalizable because the sample was limited to residents of Ait Ben Haddou. Residents of other destinations, with different cultural backgrounds, may have different attitudes. To overcome this limitation, future research should replicate this study in other destinations to develop a better understanding of other relevant variables and examine whether the same results will be obtained.

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