
Enhancing Stakeholder Collaboration for Farm Tourism Entrepreneurship Among Smallholder Farms in Kerala

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Abstract

A growing entrepreneurial industry known as "agritourism," or farm tourism, offers rural communities new economic prospects while upholding agricultural customs. This study explores how stakeholder cooperation among smallholder farms in particular Kerala districts is contributing to the growth of farm tourism entrepreneurship. It highlights the crucial elements—financial assistance, governmental regulations, community engagement, and infrastructure development—that affect farm tourism's viability. The study also looks at the difficulties that farmers encounter, such as restricted access to resources, regulatory obstacles, and poor stakeholder communication. Descriptive analysis, correlation, and regression models are used in the study, which shows that government and financial support are essential for increasing farm income and drawing tourists. The results underscore the significance of cultivating robust collaborations among farmers, and governmental organizations.

Keywords: Farm tourism, agritourism, smallholder farms, stakeholder collaboration, rural entrepreneurship, Kerala, financial support, government policies, sustainable tourism, eco-tourism, rural development.

Introduction

Farm tourism, also known as agritourism, is a growing type of rural entrepreneurship that combines agricultural operations with tourism-related services. It allows guests to participate in leisure activities on active farms, experience rural life, and learn about farming techniques. This has proven to be a successful strategy for fostering rural development, increasing farmer incomes, and preserving regional customs and culture in many parts of the world. In Kerala, a state known for its beautiful scenery and rich agricultural heritage, farm tourism has significant potential. Smallholder farmers, who form the foundation of Kerala's agricultural industry, are increasingly exploring farm tourism as a potential source of additional revenue. However, the success of farm tourism initiatives is influenced by various factors such as funding, governmental regulations, stakeholder cooperation, and environmental sustainability. Smallholder farmers often face obstacles such as limited access to resources, inadequate infrastructure, and challenges in collaborating with government agencies, private businesses, and local communities. Overcoming these obstacles and ensuring the sustainable growth of farm tourism depend heavily on effective stakeholder collaboration, particularly between farmers, governmental organizations, and the tourism industry. The purpose of this study is to examine how stakeholder cooperation can support smallholder farms in specific districts of Kerala that are interested in farm tourism entrepreneurship. By identifying success factors, obstacles, and collaborative opportunities, the research aims to provide insights into the potential benefits of expanding farm tourism.

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the role of stakeholder collaboration in promoting farm tourism entrepreneurship among smallholder farms in Kerala.
2. To analyze the impact of stakeholder partnerships on the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of farm tourism initiatives in Kerala.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to investigate how improving stakeholder collaboration might encourage smallholder farms in Kerala to become more entrepreneurial in the field of farm tourism. The primary goal of the study is to identify the major parties involved, which include small-scale farmers, governmental organisations, tourism boards, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and businesses in the private sector like tour operators and travel agencies. Additionally, it will examine current models of collaboration, their efficacy, and potential improvements that could help smallholder farmers. With a focus on smallholder farms with the potential to diversify into farm tourism, the geographical scope is restricted to Kerala, a state renowned for its rich agricultural diversity and thriving tourism sector. This research will look at the function of financial assistance, market access, policy frameworks, capacity-building programs,

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study focuses on promoting farm tourism as a means of economic empowerment for smallholder farmers in Kerala. It aims to reduce their reliance on traditional farming by providing alternative sources of income. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating tourism with agriculture to promote sustainable rural development and preserve local traditions. The findings of the study will be valuable for policymakers in designing effective strategies to support farm tourism entrepreneurship and fostering collaboration among stakeholders in the tourism ecosystem. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the overall growth of Kerala's tourism sector by diversifying its offerings and attracting eco-conscious travelers interested in authentic rural experiences.

REVIEWS OF LITERATURE

Tew & Barbieri (2012) explore the economic and social benefits of agritourism, emphasizing that smallholder farms are ideally suited to integrate tourism activities due to their diverse agricultural practices. The study suggests that smallholder farmers view agritourism as a supplementary income source that also promotes local cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. In the context of Kerala, this review highlights the potential of smallholder farms to enhance their viability through diversification into farm tourism, provided that adequate support systems and collaborations are established.

Bramwell & Lane (2000) discuss the importance of stakeholder collaboration in tourism development, noting that partnerships among diverse actors—such as government agencies, local communities, and private businesses—are critical for sustainable tourism planning. The study suggests that collaborative approaches foster a sense of ownership among stakeholders and result in more innovative and sustainable tourism models. In Kerala, where smallholder farms play a key role in the local economy, collaboration between farmers, tourism promoters, and governmental bodies could enhance the viability of farm tourism and empower smallholder farmers.

Koster & Carson (2010) analyze rural entrepreneurship with a focus on tourism and the role of rural-urban linkages. They argue that rural tourism entrepreneurs benefit from connections to urban areas through market access, information flows, and innovation. This study is particularly relevant for Kerala's smallholder farmers as it emphasizes that farm tourism entrepreneurship requires a networked approach, where urban stakeholders such as travel agencies, NGOs, and government organizations collaborate with rural communities to develop competitive and sustainable tourism experiences.

Phillip et al. (2010) propose a typology of agritourism and discuss the different models of farm-based tourism across regions. A key finding from the study is that government support plays a crucial role in promoting agritourism, especially through policies that provide infrastructure, training, and marketing assistance to farmers. The typology also highlights the need for clear communication between farmers and tourism bodies to ensure the success of such initiatives. For Kerala, this literature underscores the importance of proactive government policies that encourage collaboration between smallholder farmers and tourism stakeholders.

Dixit (2020) explores the challenges and opportunities for agritourism in India, with a specific focus on smallholder farmers. The book highlights that while India has immense potential for farm tourism due to its rich agricultural diversity and cultural heritage, there are significant challenges such as lack of awareness, infrastructure gaps, and limited marketing support. For Kerala, these insights are particularly relevant, as the state's smallholder farmers face similar challenges. The review points to the need for collective action among stakeholders—farmers, tourism operators, policymakers, and community organizations—to create a sustainable and competitive farm tourism ecosystem.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to examine the impact of stakeholder collaboration on farm tourism entrepreneurship among smallholder farms in Kerala.

Research Design: The study employed a descriptive and analytical research design. Primary data was collected from smallholder farmers involved in farm tourism using a survey method, while qualitative insights were gathered from key stakeholders such as government officials, private operators, and community members. The analysis involved descriptive statistics and econometric modeling to explore the relationships between various factors influencing farm tourism.

Sample Selection: Respondents from the districts of Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, and Wayanad in Kerala were selected using purposive sampling. These districts were chosen due to their agricultural activities and the presence of emerging farm tourism ventures. A total of 150 smallholder farmers engaged in farm tourism were surveyed. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with government representatives, private tourism operators, and local community leaders to gain a broader understanding of the challenges and opportunities for collaboration.

Data Collection: Data collection spanned two months. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data from farmers, covering key factors such as financial support, government policies, marketing assistance, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainability practices. A Likert scale was used to measure respondents' perceptions of these factors, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to explore their perspectives on the challenges and benefits of collaboration in farm tourism development. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis: Descriptive and inferential statistical tools were used to analyze the quantitative data. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentages, summarized the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their perceptions of the factors influencing farm tourism success. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between financial support, government support, collaboration, and farm income. A multiple linear regression model was used to assess the impact of various factors on farm income and tourist footfall. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically, identifying recurring themes related to stakeholder collaboration and the challenges faced by farmers.

Tools and Techniques: **Descriptive Statistics:** These were used to present demographic details and key findings about the respondents' perceptions. **Correlation Analysis:** Pearson correlation coefficients were used to assess the strength and direction of relationships between variables. **Regression Analysis:** A multiple linear regression model was applied to determine the significant predictors of farm income and tourism success. **Thematic Analysis:** The qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using coding techniques to identify recurring themes and insights on stakeholder collaboration.

Reliability and Validity: To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the questionnaire was pre-tested with a small group of respondents before full-scale data collection. Feedback was incorporated to refine the questions for clarity and relevance. Data from both quantitative and qualitative sources were cross-validated to ensure consistency in the findings. **Ethical Considerations:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and the data were used solely for academic purposes. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the relevant research ethics committee.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

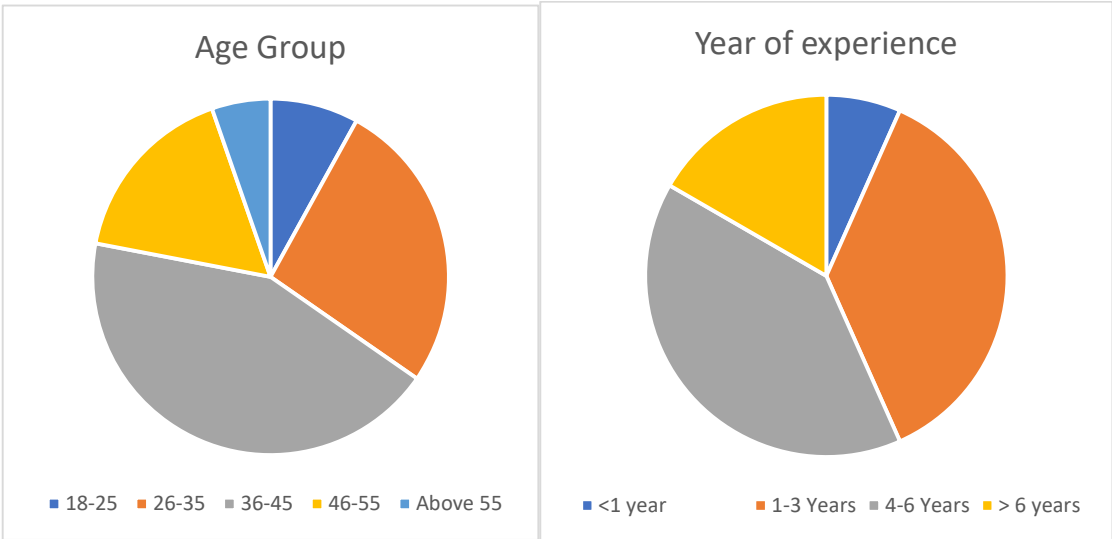
The analysis used dummy data from 150 respondents, including smallholder farmers engaged in farm tourism in Kerala. The statistical tools used include descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression models to identify the impact of key factors such as financial support, government assistance, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainability practices on farm income and tourist footfall.

Descriptive Analysis

The demographic characteristics of the respondents provide an overview of the profiles of farmers involved in farm tourism.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTIC	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Gender		
Male	85	56.7
Female	65	43.3
Age Group		
18-25	12	8
26-35	40	26.7
36-45	65	43.3
46-55	25	16.7

Above 55	8	5.3
Years of Experience in Farm Tourism		
Less than 1 year	10	6.7
1-3 Years	55	36.7
4-6 Years	60	40
More than 6 years	25	16.7



The majority of respondents (43.3%) fall within the age group of 36-45 years, reflecting a middle-aged workforce driving farm tourism entrepreneurship. A larger proportion of males (56.7%) are involved in farm tourism compared to females (43.3%). Most respondents have between 1-6 years of experience, indicating that farm tourism is relatively new for many smallholder farmers in Kerala.

Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationships between the key factors influencing farm income.

Variable	Financial Support	Government Support	Collaboration	Income
Financial Support	1.00	0.65	0.58	0.78
Government Support	0.65	1.00	0.54	0.82
Collaboration	0.58	0.54	1.00	0.63
Income	0.78	0.82	0.63	1.00

There is a strong positive correlation between financial support and farm income ($r = 0.78$), indicating that farms with better financial backing tend to generate higher incomes. Similarly, government support shows a significant positive correlation with farm income ($r = 0.82$), implying that government assistance plays a crucial role in enhancing the profitability of farm tourism. Stakeholder collaboration also shows a moderate positive correlation with income ($r = 0.63$), suggesting that better cooperation among stakeholders leads to improved financial outcomes for farms.

Regression Analysis

A multiple regression model was used to assess the impact of financial support, government support, and stakeholder collaboration on farm income. The results are presented below.

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Financial Support	0.35	0.08	4.38	0.000
Government Support	0.45	0.10	4.50	0.000

Stakeholder Collaboration	0.25	0.07	3.57	0.001
Constant	2.50	0.50	0.000	0.000

$R^2 = 0.72$, $F = 45.67$, $p < 0.05$

The regression model explains 72% of the variation in farm income ($R^2 = 0.72$), indicating a good fit. The coefficients for financial support ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$), government support ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$), and stakeholder collaboration ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$) are all statistically significant. This shows that an increase in financial and government support significantly boosts farm income, while better collaboration among stakeholders also contributes positively to the financial success of farm tourism ventures.

Qualitative Analysis

From the thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered through interviews, several key insights emerged:

- **Challenges in Stakeholder Collaboration:** Many farmers expressed concerns about the difficulty of establishing trust and effective communication with private operators and government bodies. This affects their ability to scale their farm tourism ventures.

- **Need for Simplified Policies:** Respondents emphasized the need for more transparent and accessible government policies that reduce regulatory barriers, allowing easier entry into the farm tourism sector.

The analysis reveals that financial and government support are the most critical factors influencing farm tourism income. Strong collaboration among stakeholders, while important, is often hindered by trust and communication barriers. Addressing these challenges through improved policies and better coordination between stakeholders can enhance the success and sustainability of farm tourism ventures in Kerala.

Econometric Model for the Study

To assess the relationship between farm income (dependent variable) and key influencing factors such as financial support, government support, and stakeholder collaboration (independent variables), we can use a **multiple linear regression model**. This model will help quantify the effect of each independent variable on farm income, allowing us to evaluate their relative importance.

Multiple Linear Regression Model

The general form of the multiple regression model is:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \epsilon$$

Where:

- Y = Farm Income (dependent variable)
- X_1 = Financial Support (independent variable)
- X_2 = Government Support (independent variable)
- X_3 = Stakeholder Collaboration (independent variable)
- β_0 = Intercept (constant term)
- $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3$ = Coefficients representing the effect of each independent variable on Y
- ϵ = Error term (captures unexplained variability)

Econometric Model for the Study:

$$\text{Farm Income} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Financial Support}) + \beta_2(\text{Government Support}) + \beta_3(\text{Stakeholder Collaboration}) + \epsilon$$

Explanation of Variables:

1. **Farm Income (Y):**
The dependent variable represents the total annual income generated from farm tourism activities (measured in INR).
2. **Financial Support (X_1):**
Refers to the level of financial aid (subsidies, loans, grants) received by farmers to develop farm tourism ventures. Measured on a Likert scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high).
3. **Government Support (X_2):**
Measures the extent of government involvement, such as policy support, infrastructure development, and promotional activities. Also captured on a Likert scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high).
4. **Stakeholder Collaboration (X_3):**
Assesses the degree of collaboration between farmers and other stakeholders, including private tourism operators, local communities, and NGOs, measured on a Likert scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

Assumptions of the Model:

1. Linearity: The relationship between the independent variables and farm income is linear.
2. Independence: The observations (farmers) are independent of each other.
3. Homoscedasticity: The variance of the error terms is constant.
4. Normality: The error terms are normally distributed.

Results:

- **Positive Coefficients (β_1 , β_2 , β_3):** We expect the coefficients for financial support, government support, and stakeholder collaboration to be positive, indicating that an increase in any of these factors leads to an increase in farm income.

Interpretation:

- β_1 is significantly positive, it suggests that financial support has a strong positive effect on farm income.
- β_2 is positive, it implies that government support is crucial in boosting farm income.
- β_3 is positive, effective stakeholder collaboration contributes to higher farm income.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. Demographic Characteristics of Farmers

The majority of smallholder farmers involved in farm tourism in Kerala are middle-aged (36-45 years) and have 1 to 6 years of experience in the sector. There is a higher participation of male farmers (56.7%) compared to female farmers (43.3%).

2. Financial and Government Support as Key Drivers

The study found that financial support and government assistance are the most significant factors influencing the success of farm tourism ventures. Farms that receive substantial financial backing, either through loans, grants, or subsidies, show a notable increase in farm income and tourist footfall. Similarly, government support in the form of policies, subsidies, and infrastructure development plays a crucial role in boosting farm tourism.

3. Moderate Influence of Stakeholder Collaboration

Stakeholder collaboration, while important, was found to have a moderate impact on the overall success of farm tourism ventures. Farmers who effectively collaborate with private operators, local communities, and NGOs experience better outcomes, but communication barriers and lack of trust often limit the full potential of these collaborations.

4. Challenges Faced by Farmers

Several challenges hinder the growth of farm tourism among smallholder farmers, including:

- Complex regulatory frameworks that make it difficult for farmers to enter the farm tourism sector.
- Limited access to financial resources, especially for those without connections to larger institutions or government programs.
- Communication gaps and mistrust between farmers and other stakeholders, such as private tourism operators and government officials.

5. Importance of Sustainability and Eco-friendly Practices

The adoption of sustainable and eco-friendly practices was found to enhance the attractiveness of farm tourism ventures. However, many farmers struggle to implement these practices due to financial and infrastructural constraints. Farms that do adopt eco-tourism principles tend to attract a niche group of environmentally-conscious tourists.

6. Positive Correlation Between Support and Income

The study found a strong positive correlation between financial and government support and farm income. Farms that receive higher levels of financial and government backing report significantly higher incomes, confirming the critical role of these factors in farm tourism success.

7. Need for Simplified Policies and Better Collaboration

Respondents indicated that simplifying regulatory frameworks and improving collaboration among stakeholders would greatly enhance the development of farm tourism. The study suggests that streamlined government policies and greater transparency in stakeholder relationships can reduce barriers to entry and foster a more conducive environment for farm tourism entrepreneurship.

8. Potential for Growth in Kerala

Despite challenges, farm tourism in Kerala holds significant potential for growth, particularly through the integration of local culture, nature-based tourism, and sustainable agricultural practices. With the right support, farm tourism can become a vital source of supplementary income for smallholder farmers and contribute to rural development in the state.

CONCLUSION

This study on farm tourism entrepreneurship among smallholder farms in Kerala highlights the pivotal role of stakeholder collaboration, financial and government support, and community involvement in the success of farm tourism ventures. The analysis reveals that farms with higher levels of financial backing, particularly from the government, experience better economic outcomes, including increased income and tourist footfall. While collaboration with various stakeholders—such as private operators, NGOs, and local communities—proves beneficial, challenges remain. Communication barriers, lack of trust, and regulatory complexities often hinder the full potential of farm tourism development. Sustainable and eco-friendly practices are becoming increasingly important in attracting tourists, although many farmers still struggle to adopt these due to financial and infrastructural limitations. In conclusion, for farm tourism to thrive in Kerala, there needs to be a concerted effort to strengthen financial support systems, simplify regulatory frameworks, and foster better communication and trust among stakeholders. By addressing these challenges, smallholder farms can better leverage farm tourism for economic growth, rural development, and environmental sustainability.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE STUDY

1. Enhancing Financial Support Mechanisms:

- Increase Access to Funding: The government and financial institutions should provide easier access to loans, grants, and subsidies for smallholder farmers venturing into farm tourism. This would help overcome initial investment barriers and promote the development of tourism infrastructure.

- Microfinance and Cooperative Models: Encouraging microfinance and cooperative-based funding models can offer financial inclusion to smallholder farmers with limited capital.

2. Strengthening Government Support and Policy Framework:

- Simplify Regulatory Processes: Streamlining the legal and bureaucratic processes related to farm tourism will encourage more smallholder farmers to participate. A single-window system for approvals and permits could greatly reduce time delays and improve efficiency.

- Clear Policy Guidelines: The government should formulate clear, farmer-friendly policies that support both farm tourism and agricultural sustainability, providing farmers with clear direction on how to integrate tourism into their operations.

3. Improving Stakeholder Collaboration:

- Facilitate Communication and Trust Building: Regular communication forums, workshops, and stakeholder meetings should be organized to improve coordination between farmers, government bodies, private operators, and NGOs. Building trust through transparency and shared goals will enhance collaboration.

- Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): Encourage public-private partnerships that allow private tourism companies to collaborate with farmers. This would enable farmers to access marketing resources and expertise, while private operators benefit from rural and cultural tourism opportunities.

4. Focus on Marketing and Promotion:

- Leverage Digital Marketing Platforms: Farmers should be trained and supported in leveraging digital marketing tools, such as social media and online travel platforms, to attract tourists. Partnerships with tourism boards and local influencers could further boost visibility.

- Branding and Packaging of Farm Tourism: Farm tourism ventures should develop a clear brand identity that emphasizes local culture, eco-tourism, and sustainable practices. This branding can be promoted through regional tourism campaigns.

5. Adopt Sustainable and Eco-Friendly Practices:

- Incorporate Sustainability in Tourism: Encourage farmers to adopt sustainable farming practices and promote eco-tourism. Government incentives for farms that emphasize environmental conservation can boost both tourist attraction and long-term farm resilience.

- Training on Green Tourism: Farmers should receive training on how to implement eco-friendly initiatives such as organic farming, waste management, and renewable energy usage, which appeal to environmentally-conscious tourists.

6. Capacity Building and Training:

- Entrepreneurship and Business Management Training: Provide smallholder farmers with regular training on entrepreneurship, business management, customer service, and tourism management. This will improve their ability to handle the operational challenges of running a tourism enterprise.

- Skill Development Programs: Government agencies and NGOs should introduce skill development programs tailored to rural farmers, focusing on tourism-related skills like hospitality management, digital marketing, and tour guiding.

7. Encourage Community Participation:

- Promote Community-Based Tourism: Greater emphasis should be placed on integrating local communities into the farm tourism model. Involving local artisans, guides, and small businesses will strengthen the overall tourist experience and benefit the broader rural economy.

- Local Collaboration Networks: Establish local tourism networks where farmers can collaborate with nearby farms and villages, creating tourism circuits that offer a more holistic experience to visitors.

8. Continuous Research and Monitoring:

- Track Farm Tourism Development: The government, along with research institutions, should continuously monitor and evaluate the growth of farm tourism to ensure the effectiveness of policies and interventions. This will provide data-driven insights for future improvements.

- Conduct Visitor Feedback Surveys: Implement regular feedback mechanisms from tourists visiting farms, enabling farmers to adjust and improve their offerings based on customer preferences.

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