



**SOCIO, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS INFLUENCING SPORTS TOURISM  
IN ELGEYO MARAKWET COUNTY, KENYA**

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**Abstract**

Rural–urban linkages refer to the dynamic economic, social, and infrastructural interactions that facilitate the flow of people, goods, services, capital and information between rural and urban areas, fostering mutual development and interdependence across spatial boundaries. Sports tourism is a rapidly growing global sector that contributes to income generation, cultural exchange, and infrastructure development. Elgeyo Marakwet County, widely known as the “Home of Champions” and a powerhouse of athletics in Kenya, exemplifies how athletic excellence can transform rural landscapes into internationally recognized sports tourism destinations. This study assessed the role of sports tourism in promoting rural–urban linkages in the county. A mixed-methods research design, guided by the Core–Periphery Theory, was adopted. Data were collected from 397 respondents, comprising 133 athletes, 132 households, and 132 business operators, using questionnaires, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and observation schedules. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings indicate that athletics and tourism in Iten town were rated as the strongest drivers (mean scores of 4.67 and 4.51, respectively), followed by infrastructure (4.23). Approximately 54.3% of athletes were sponsored, 64.9% earned income from athletics, and 3.2% were foreign nationals, indicating the county’s growing global connectivity through sports tourism. Economic linkages were evidenced by a 600% increase in hotels, a 213% rise in businesses, and a 153% growth in household incomes between 2010 and 2025. Infrastructure improvements included a 400% expansion of tarmacked roads, a 650% increase in transport services, and growth in mobile money outlets from 1 to 47. Social and cultural linkages recorded mean scores of 3.76 (households) and 4.14 (athletes), while knowledge and institutional linkages averaged between 3.47 and 3.58. Key challenges identified include financial constraints (77.6%), seasonal income fluctuations (74.6%), limited access to capital (66.2%), inadequate infrastructure (53.5%), and insufficient support services (47.6%). The study concludes that sports tourism is a strong catalyst for rural–urban linkages, promoting economic diversification, entrepreneurship, and infrastructure development. However, its benefits are unevenly distributed, with urban areas gaining more than rural communities. The study recommends the development of a comprehensive sports tourism strategy incorporating sports diversification, professional marketing, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms to ensure balanced and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Sports tourism, socio-cultural factors, economic factors, rural-urban linkages, income generation, infrastructure development, Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya

## **Introduction**

Sports tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry, contributing to economic development, cultural exchange, and community transformation. According to Gibson (1998) and Weed (2008), sports tourism involves travel for the purpose of participating in, watching, or celebrating sporting activities. Globally, sports tourism is increasingly recognized as a catalyst for regional integration and sustainable development (Higham & Hinch, 2009). Previous studies have shown that tourism strengthens rural–urban linkages by facilitating the movement of people, goods, services, and information between rural and urban areas (Nadin & Stead, 2000; Timothy, 2005). Similarly, Pilving et al. (2022) found that collaboration between rural and urban tourism enterprises enhanced regional development, while Haulle et al. (2024) demonstrated the contribution of tourism to local livelihoods and community development.

In Elgeyo Marakwet County, sports tourism has gained prominence through the global recognition of Iten as the “Home of Champions” and a leading high-altitude training destination for athletes. The growth of training camps, accommodation facilities, and related services has fostered interactions between urban centres and surrounding rural communities. While urban areas provide training infrastructure and hospitality services, rural areas contribute food supplies, cultural experiences, and recreational landscapes, demonstrating strong rural–urban interdependence (Tacoli, 2003).

Despite the growth of sports tourism in Kenya, existing studies have largely focused on athletics performance, destination branding, and cultural diplomacy, with limited attention given to its role in promoting rural–urban linkages. Consequently, there is insufficient empirical evidence on how local communities and businesses benefit from sports tourism. This study therefore sought to examine the role of socio-cultural and economic factors of sports tourism in promoting rural–urban linkages in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya, with a view to informing policies and strategies for sustainable and inclusive regional development.

The main objective of the study was to examine the role of socio-cultural and economic factors of sports tourism in promoting rural–urban linkages in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya. Specifically, the study sought to examine the role of social factors of sports tourism in promoting rural–urban linkages in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya; assess the role of cultural factors of sports tourism in promoting rural–urban linkages in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya; and determine the role of economic factors of sports tourism in promoting rural–urban linkages in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya.

## **Understanding the Concept of Sports Tourism and Rural-Urban Linkages**

Sports tourism has become an important component of modern tourism, linking leisure, culture, and economic development through travel associated with sporting activities (Hall, 1992; Standeven & De Knop, 1999). It encompasses activities such as sporting events, training camps, adventure sports, and recreational tourism, all of which contribute to destination promotion, community identity, and local economic growth (Hinch et al., 2001). Globally, sports tourism is recognized as one of the fastest-growing segments of the tourism industry, contributing to destination branding, infrastructure development, employment creation, and economic recovery, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era (Higham & Hinch, 2018; UNWTO, 2022; UNWTO, 2023).

In Kenya, athletics has become an important part of national identity, with Iten gaining international recognition as a premier high-altitude training destination for elite athletes (Njoroge et al., 2011; World Athletics, 2024). The success of sports tourism is closely linked to rural–urban interactions, which involve the movement of people, goods, services, information, and financial

resources between rural and urban areas (Wehrmann, 2014). Such linkages enhance market access, employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and regional integration, thereby promoting balanced and sustainable development (Adjei et al., 2021). Consequently, sports tourism presents significant opportunities for strengthening rural–urban linkages while fostering socio-economic development.

### **Drivers of Sports Tourism**

Sports tourism has emerged as a major contributor to global tourism growth, driven by a range of environmental, cultural, infrastructural, and institutional factors. Gibson (2020) observes that sports tourism flourishes in destinations that offer a mix of appealing natural environments, accessible facilities, and cultural heritage that attracts both participants and spectators. Weed (2021) further notes that sports tourism depends on the ability of destinations to leverage their unique characteristics, including natural scenery, recreational infrastructure, accommodation diversity, and promotional strategies that highlight the tourism experience. Each of these factors influences how effectively a destination attracts visitors and benefits local communities through employment creation, investment inflow, and international visibility.

### **Impacts of Sports Tourism on Rural-Urban Linkages**

Sports tourism contributes significantly to rural–urban linkages through employment creation, economic growth, social development, and infrastructure improvement. As one of the fastest-growing sectors of the tourism industry, sports tourism stimulates local businesses, creates jobs, and supports entrepreneurship through increased demand for hospitality, transport, and related services (OECD, 2010; Perić, 2018). In Kenya, the growth of sports tourism in Iten has expanded hotels, restaurants, sports equipment businesses, and small enterprises, while also creating market opportunities for rural producers supplying goods and services to urban centres (Muga, 2019; Mutiso, 2021). These linkages contribute to poverty reduction and inclusive economic development.

Beyond economic benefits, sports tourism promotes social cohesion, cultural exchange, and human capital development by fostering interaction among diverse communities and creating opportunities for skills development in sports management, hospitality, and event organization (Lin, 1995; Njoroge et al., 2011; Wu & Yang, 2019). Additionally, sports tourism encourages infrastructure development, including improvements in roads, accommodation facilities, sports academies, and communication networks, which enhance connectivity between rural and urban areas (Clark & Misener, 2015; Shi & Chen, 2019). In Kenya, infrastructure improvements associated with sports tourism in Iten have enhanced access to markets and services for surrounding rural communities, thereby strengthening regional integration and sustainable development (Muga, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Growth Pole Theory, Core–Periphery Theory, and Cumulative Causation Theory, which collectively explain the dynamics of sports tourism development and rural–urban linkages. The Growth Pole Theory, advanced by François Perroux (1950), posits that economic development originates from specific nodes or growth poles characterized by dynamic industries and high levels of investment, which then stimulate development in surrounding regions through multiplier and spread effects. The Core–Periphery Theory developed by John Friedmann (1966) explains the spatial structure of development arising from such growth processes. It distinguishes between economically dominant cores and less developed peripheries. The Cumulative Causation Theory proposed by Gunnar Myrdal explains how regional inequalities are reinforced over time

through self-reinforcing processes. Together, these theories explain how sports tourism drives spatial development patterns in Elgeyo Marakwet County.

### Conceptual Framework

The dependent variable in this study is weak rural–urban linkages in sports tourism, which represents the main problem being investigated. This problem is influenced by social, cultural, and economic factors such as employment opportunities, income levels, land values, availability of health and education services, transport networks, sports infrastructure, communication facilities, and interaction between local communities and athletes. The relationship between these variables is influenced by intervening variables, which include government policies, urban planning, funding, training programs, and development plans such as the County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) and Integrated Development Plan (IDEP). These factors can either strengthen or weaken the effectiveness of sports tourism in improving rural–urban linkages. When the identified factors interact effectively, they contribute to integrated rural–urban development and a stronger rural–urban continuum through sports tourism activities.

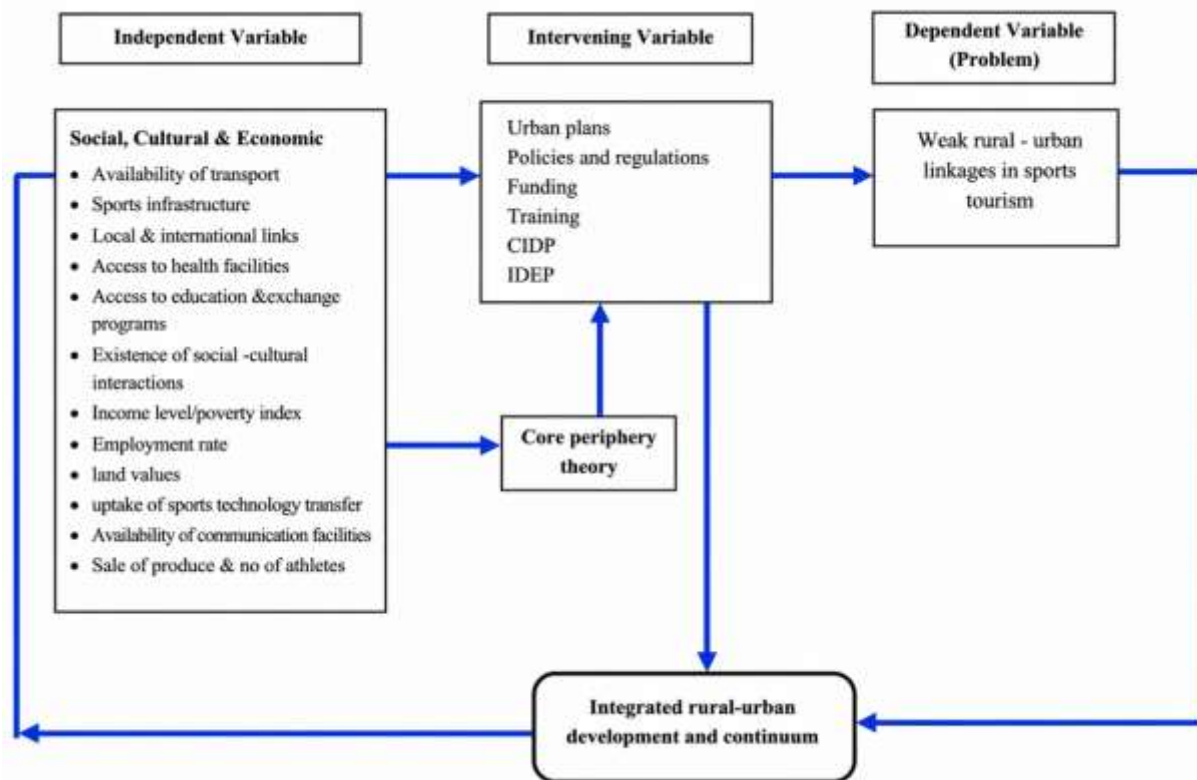


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

The study was carried out in Elgeyo Marakwet County, which is located in the North Rift Valley Region of Kenya, approximately 35 kilometers East of Eldoret town. The county covers a total area of 3,029.6 km<sup>2</sup>. Elgeyo Marakwet County is characterized by a diverse topography consisting of highlands, escarpments, and lowlands, which contribute to variations in climate, vegetation, and land use. The county's economy relies heavily on agriculture, livestock keeping, and sports-related activities, which have recently become an important driver of tourism and rural-urban linkages.

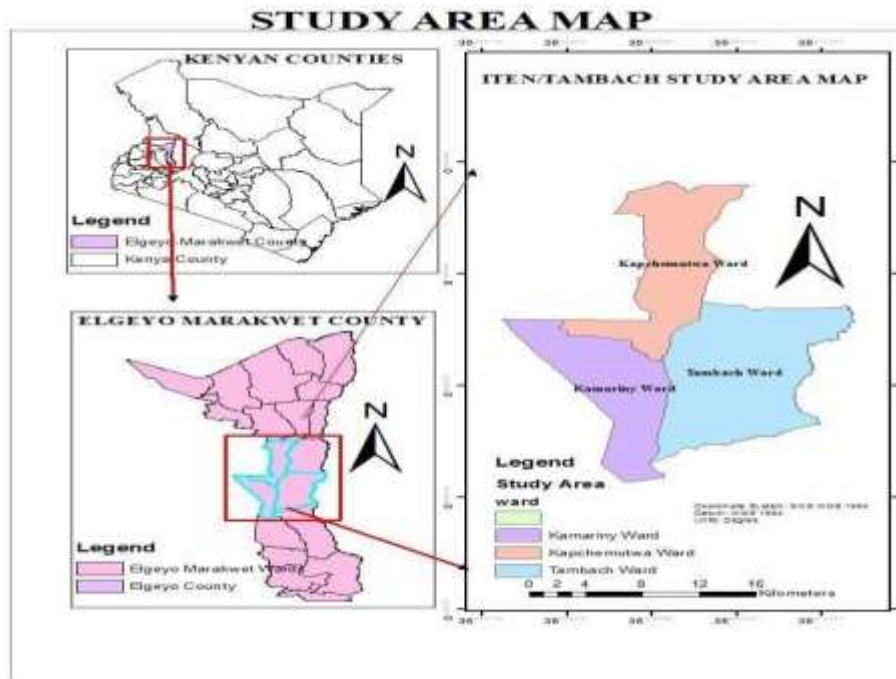


Figure 1 Study Area Map (Adopted from Iten Municipality Integrated Development Plan)

## Research Design

This study adopted a mixed research design that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component enables the collection of numerical data that can be statistically analyzed to determine relationships among variables, while the qualitative component allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and insights. The integration of the two approaches enhances the validity and reliability of findings by allowing for triangulation of data.

The choice of the mixed research design was appropriate because it provided a comprehensive understanding of the role of sports tourism in promoting rural–urban linkages. The quantitative approach helped in assessing measurable indicators such as income generation, employment opportunities, and infrastructural development associated with sports tourism. The qualitative approach helped in exploring stakeholders' views and experiences regarding the influence of sports activities on community interactions and economic integration.

## Target Population and Sample Size Determination and Sampling Techniques

The target population was 54,158 people being the residents of Iten according to 2019 KNBS Statistics. The sample size was determined using Yamane (1967) formula and the calculated sample size was 397 respondents. Research participants were drawn from Athletes, households and business people. The study employed a combination of stratified, simple random, and purposive sampling techniques. The area was first stratified into three wards; Tambach, Kapchemutwa, and Kamariny to ensure representation of both urban and rural areas. Simple random sampling was used to select households, athletes, and business operators. Purposive sampling was applied to identify key informants including county government officials and relevant stakeholders in tourism, sports, and planning.

## Methods of Data Collection

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires administered through the KOBO Collect mobile data collection platform to households, athletes, and local businesses. The use of

KOBO Collect enabled digital data entry, real-time data storage, and integration of responses with GPS coordinates.

Key Informant interviews were conducted with county officials and Athletics Kenya personnel to provide insights into institutional support, policy impacts, and project outcomes. Observation schedules were used to document visible indicators such as facility usage, market activities, and infrastructural improvements.

Secondary data were obtained from CIDP, IDEP, textbooks, government offices, and online databases.

Data collected included indicators of: Economic linkages such as income generation and employment creation; Social and cultural interactions between local communities and visitors; Knowledge and skills transfer; Infrastructure development; and Market connections.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were applied extensively using SPSS. Frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were computed. Cross-tabulations were performed to examine relationships between variables. Comparative analysis was conducted to examine differences in perceptions between stakeholders. Key informant responses were analyzed thematically to complement quantitative findings.

### **Data Validity and Reliability**

The study validity was enhanced by designing the questionnaire to align with the study objectives. The instruments were reviewed by the research supervisor and experts. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. According to Cronbach (1951), a coefficient of 0.7 and above is considered acceptable for social science research.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

A total of 397 questionnaires were administered using the KOBO Collect digital platform, of which 370 were successfully completed, yielding a response rate of 93.2%. The remaining 6.8% were incomplete due to respondents declining to complete all sections, connectivity issues during submission, or surveys that were started but not finished. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate above 70% is considered excellent for statistical analysis, thus validating the robustness of this study's findings.

### **Socio-Demographic Characteristics**

The study adopted a sample size of 370 respondents drawn from three key categories, namely athletes, household representatives, and business sector participants. The distribution of respondents was structured to ensure representation across the main stakeholders involved in sports tourism within Elgeyo Marakwet County. Out of the total sample, 124 were athletes, 123 were household respondents, and 123 were business sector participants, reflecting a fairly balanced representation across the three groups. The socio-demographic analysis revealed distinct patterns across these categories. Athletes were predominantly youthful, with the majority falling within the 20–30-year age bracket, followed by those aged 31–40 years. This indicated that sports tourism in Elgeyo Marakwet County was largely driven by a young and economically active population in their prime athletic years. This age concentration was consistent with the physical demands of competitive athletics, particularly long-distance running, which typically peaks within these age ranges.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

| Demographic Variable | Category           | Athletes (%) | Households (%) | Business (%) | Sector |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|--------|
| Age                  | Below 20           | 1.4          | 10.3           | 4.9          |        |
|                      | 20–30              | 69.5         | 24.6           | 35.7         |        |
|                      | 31–40              | 24.0         | 21.9           | 24.6         |        |
|                      | 41–50              | 0.0          | 18.6           | 15.1         |        |
|                      | 51–60              | 5.1          | 12.7           | 9.7          |        |
|                      | Above 60           | 0.0          | 11.9           | 4.9          |        |
| Gender               | Male               | 59.7         | 48.6           | 55.1         |        |
|                      | Female             | 40.3         | 51.4           | 44.9         |        |
| Education            | None               | 5.7          | 13.5           | 9.7          |        |
|                      | Primary            | 18.6         | 27.3           | 20.5         |        |
|                      | Secondary          | 40.8         | 32.7           | 29.5         |        |
|                      | Tertiary           | 34.9         | 26.5           | 40.3         |        |
| Income Level         | Low Income         | 48.0         | 55.2           | 28.4         |        |
|                      | Middle Income      | 42.5         | 34.1           | 46.7         |        |
|                      | High Income        | 9.5          | 10.7           | 24.9         |        |
| Duration of Stay     | Below 5 years      | 38.6         | 12.4           | 15.8         |        |
|                      | 5–10 years         | 34.2         | 21.6           | 27.3         |        |
|                      | Above 10 years     | 27.2         | 66.0           | 56.9         |        |
| Household Size       | 1–3 members        | 22.4         | 18.9           | 25.3         |        |
|                      | 4–6 members        | 51.3         | 47.8           | 49.2         |        |
|                      | Above 6 members    | 26.3         | 33.3           | 25.5         |        |
| Residence/Origin     | Local Residents    | 62.8         | 88.6           | 81.3         |        |
|                      | Non-local/Migrants | 37.2         | 11.4           | 18.7         |        |

The study analyzed both demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents, including age, gender, education level, income level, duration of stay, household size, and place of residence or origin. The findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the population involved in sports tourism in Elgeyo Marakwet County and how these characteristics influenced rural urban linkages.

With regard to age distribution, the results showed that athletes were predominantly youthful, with the majority aged between 20 and 30 years, followed by those aged 31 to 40 years. Very few athletes fell outside these age brackets, and none were above 60 years, reflecting the physically demanding nature of athletics which favors younger individuals. Household respondents, however, exhibited a more balanced age distribution across all categories, including older age groups above 60 years, indicating that sports tourism affected all generations within the community. Similarly, business sector participants were largely concentrated within the economically productive age groups of 20 to 40 years, suggesting that younger individuals were more actively engaged in tourism-related enterprises.

In terms of gender, the findings indicated that male respondents dominated the athlete category, although female participation was also substantial, demonstrating gradual progress toward gender inclusivity in sports. The household category showed a slight female majority, while the business sector had more male respondents than female. Overall, gender representation across the three categories was relatively balanced, highlighting the importance of both men and women in supporting and benefiting from sports tourism activities.

Regarding educational attainment, the results revealed that most athletes had attained at least secondary education, with a considerable proportion having tertiary qualifications. This suggested

that education played a significant role in enhancing awareness and participation in sports tourism. The business sector recorded the highest proportion of respondents with tertiary education, indicating that higher education levels facilitated entrepreneurial capacity and the ability to exploit tourism opportunities. Household respondents, on the other hand, displayed a wider variation in education levels, including individuals with no formal education, reflecting the general rural population structure.

Regarding income levels, the findings showed that a large proportion of athletes and household respondents fell within the low-income category, whereas business sector participants were mainly in the middle-income bracket, with a notable proportion in the high-income category. This indicated that sports tourism provided income-generating opportunities, particularly for those engaged in business activities, thereby contributing to economic improvement within the region. The presence of higher income earners within the business category suggested that some entrepreneurs had successfully capitalized on the increasing demand for goods and services associated with athletes and tourists.

Concerning duration of stay, the findings revealed that most household and business respondents had lived in the area for more than ten years, indicating a stable and well-established population. In contrast, athletes showed more variation in their duration of stay, with a significant proportion having resided in the area for less than five years. This suggested the presence of migrant athletes who relocated to the region due to its favorable training environment, thus enhancing population mobility and strengthening rural–urban linkages.

The study also examined household size, where the majority of respondents across all categories reported having between four and six household members. A considerable number of households also had more than six members, indicating extended family systems that could benefit from sports tourism through shared economic activities such as accommodation and small-scale businesses. Smaller households were less common but still represented an important segment of the study population.

Finally, in terms of residence or origin, the results showed that most household and business respondents were local residents of Elgeyo Marakwet County, while a significant proportion of athletes were non-local migrants. This demonstrated that sports tourism attracted individuals from other regions, thereby promoting interaction between local and external populations. Such movements contributed to the strengthening of rural–urban linkages through the exchange of skills, culture, and economic opportunities.

### **Athletic Participation Characteristics**

The study examined athletic participation characteristics to understand the role of sports activities in promoting tourism and rural urban linkages within Elgeyo Marakwet County. The findings showed that long-distance running dominated athletic participation, with 53.5% of athletes specializing in this discipline, followed by middle-distance running at 30.3% and marathon running at 12.2%. Only a small proportion engaged in other sporting disciplines. This pattern indicated that the region had a strong orientation towards endurance events, which aligns with the county's reputation as a hub for elite distance runners. The dominance of long-distance and middle-distance events also reflected the environmental suitability of the area for endurance training and competition.

The results further showed that a majority of athletes (77.9%) had participated in international competitions. Specifically, 42.2% competed at both local and international levels, while 35.7% competed exclusively at the international level. Only 22.2% had participated solely in local competitions. This demonstrated that the county functioned as an important global athletics hub

whose athletes were integrated into international sports circuits. Participation in international competitions also implied greater inflows of income, sponsorship, and recognition, which had multiplier effects on local tourism and economic development.

The study also assessed athletes' years of participation in sports. The results revealed that 42.4% had participated for more than five years, 36.2% for three to five years, 15.1% for one to three years, while only 6.2% had less than one year of experience. These findings indicated the presence of a mature and experienced athletic community with sustained involvement in sports. Long-term participation was important in maintaining the county's reputation as a training destination and in mentoring upcoming athletes.

Nationality analysis indicated that 96.8% of athletes were Kenyan nationals, while 3.2% were foreign athletes. Although foreign athletes formed a small proportion, their presence was significant in promoting sports tourism. These international athletes were found to generate demand for accommodation, training services, nutrition, and transport, thereby stimulating local economic activity and enhancing rural–urban linkages. Their participation also strengthened intercultural exchange and global visibility of the county.

Sponsorship and income distribution among athletes revealed notable disparities. The results showed that 54.3% of athletes had sponsorship support, while 45.7% did not. In terms of income, 64.9% reported earning some income from athletics whereas 35.1% earned no income. Among those earning, only 10.8% received more than KES 1,000,000 annually, while the majority earned substantially less. This indicated that while athletics created income opportunities, financial benefits were unevenly distributed and many athletes still faced economic uncertainty.

**Table 2: Athletic Participation Characteristics**

| Characteristic    | Category             | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Sport Type        | Long Distance        | 198       | 53.5           |
|                   | Middle Distance      | 112       | 30.3           |
|                   | Marathon             | 45        | 12.2           |
|                   | Other                | 15        | 4.1            |
| Competition Level | Local Only           | 82        | 22.2           |
|                   | International Only   | 132       | 35.7           |
|                   | Both (Local & Int.)  | 156       | 42.2           |
| Experience        | Less than 1 year     | 23        | 6.2            |
|                   | 1–3 years            | 56        | 15.1           |
|                   | 3–5 years            | 134       | 36.2           |
|                   | Over 5 years         | 157       | 42.4           |
| Sponsorship       | Sponsored            | 201       | 54.3           |
|                   | Not Sponsored        | 169       | 45.7           |
| Income Level      | Over KES 1 Million   | 40        | 10.8           |
|                   | KES 500K – 1 Million | 54        | 14.6           |
|                   | KES 100K – 500K      | 92        | 24.9           |
|                   | Below KES 100K       | 54        | 14.6           |
|                   | No Income            | 130       | 35.1           |

### Drivers of Sports Tourism in Elgeyo Marakwet County

Key informant interviews conducted with officials from the County Department of Tourism revealed that sports tourism in Elgeyo Marakwet County was driven by a combination of institutional and socio-economic factors. The findings indicated that athletics-related activities such as training camps, organized competitions, and the county's strong athletic reputation formed

the backbone of sports tourism in the region. These factors had positioned the county as one of the leading destinations for athletics-based tourism in Kenya.

The study established that the region's strong reputation in athletics, especially in long-distance running, significantly contributed to the growth of sports tourism. The consistent production of high-performing athletes from the area enhanced its global visibility and credibility, which in turn attracted foreign athletes, coaches, sports managers, and tourists. This reputation acted as a major pull factor in the expansion of sports tourism activities and increased the county's recognition both nationally and internationally.

In addition, the presence of athletics training camps was identified as a key driver of sports tourism. These camps provided essential services such as accommodation, professional coaching, training facilities, nutrition support, and rehabilitation services, creating a supportive environment for both professional and upcoming athletes. The concentration of such facilities encouraged continuous inflow of visitors and strengthened the county's position as a training hub.

The study further identified several training camps operating within the county. The most frequently mentioned camps included Kiprun Camp, Elite Training Camp, and Town Hall Camp, alongside others such as Giani Camp, Nike Training Camp, Green Hill, Esmi, and Kamariny Camp. These camps served as critical infrastructure for sports tourism and acted as centers of economic activity through employment creation and demand for local goods and services.

Organized competitions and athletics events also contributed significantly to sports tourism growth. Such events attracted spectators, officials, sponsors, and support teams, increasing demand for hospitality services, transport, retail trade, and communication services. Sporting events further enhanced destination marketing by showcasing the county's athletics culture and tourism potential. The international orientation of county athletes is further summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3: Competition Level of Athletes**

| <b>Competition Level</b>     | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Local Only                   | 82               | 22.2                  |
| International Only           | 132              | 35.7                  |
| Both (Local & International) | 156              | 42.2                  |

Institutional support from the county government and relevant stakeholders was also found to play a significant role in promoting sports tourism. Efforts aimed at marketing the region, supporting sporting events, and improving tourism-related infrastructure contributed to the sustained development of the sector. Public and private sector collaboration was therefore important in enhancing competitiveness and expanding the county's tourism economy.

The interaction between athletes, local residents, business operators, and visitors created broader socio-cultural benefits. The continuous inflow of local and foreign athletes promoted exchange of ideas, culture, lifestyles, and business practices. These interactions strengthened social networks and improved integration between rural and urban communities. Athlete nationality supporting these interactions is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Nationality of Athletes**

| <b>Nationality</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Kenyan Nationals   | 96.8                  |
| Foreign Athletes   | 3.2                   |

## Impact of Sports Tourism on Rural-Urban Linkages

The study found that sports tourism significantly enhanced economic linkages between rural and urban areas. The sector generated income for athletes, households, accommodation providers, transport operators, retailers, food suppliers, and local traders. These activities expanded market opportunities and contributed to livelihood diversification within the county. Sponsorship and income findings illustrating these benefits are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5: Sponsorship and Income Distribution among Athletes**

| Characteristic | Category             | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------|----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Sponsorship    | Sponsored            | 201       | 54.3           |
|                | Not Sponsored        | 169       | 45.7           |
| Income Level   | Over KES 1 Million   | 40        | 10.8           |
|                | KES 500K – 1 Million | 54        | 14.6           |
|                | KES 100K – 500K      | 92        | 24.9           |
|                | Below KES 100K       | 54        | 14.6           |
|                | No Income            | 130       | 35.1           |

Sponsorship findings showed that 54.3% of athletes had sponsorship support, while 64.9% reported earning some income from athletics. These findings demonstrated that sports tourism played a major role in household income generation and improvement of living standards among beneficiaries. However, the benefits varied depending on performance level, sponsorship access, and involvement in tourism enterprises.

The county also benefited from strong international connectivity. A majority of athletes (77.9%) had participated in international competitions, while 3.2% of athletes were foreign nationals. Their presence generated demand for accommodation, nutrition, transport, communication services, and training support, thereby stimulating local enterprises and strengthening rural-urban economic flows, as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6: International Connectivity of Athletes**

| Indicator                      | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| International Only Competitors | 132       | 35.7           |
| Both Local & International     | 156       | 42.2           |
| Total International Exposure   | 288       | 77.9           |
| Foreign Athletes               | 12        | 3.2            |

Sports tourism further promoted employment creation through direct and indirect opportunities. Jobs were created in hotels, guest houses, transport services, food vending, retail shops, coaching services, physiotherapy, sports management, and facility maintenance. Training camps acted as convergence points for athletes, coaches, and support staff, thereby generating employment opportunities and demand for local goods and services.

The study also established that sports tourism strengthened social and cultural interactions through migration, exchange of skills, and contact between local communities and external populations. The movement of athletes into the region contributed to stronger people-to-people linkages and wider knowledge transfer. Such movements enhanced integration between rural and urban communities through the exchange of skills, culture, and economic opportunities. Residence patterns supporting this mobility are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7: Residence / Origin of Respondents**

| Category        | Local Residents (%) | Non-local / Migrants (%) |
|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Athletes        | 62.8                | 37.2                     |
| Households      | 88.6                | 11.4                     |
| Business Sector | 81.3                | 18.7                     |

Most household and business respondents were local residents of Elgeyo Marakwet County, while a significant proportion of athletes were non-local migrants. This demonstrated that sports tourism attracted individuals from other regions, thereby promoting population mobility and multicultural interaction.

The findings further indicated that the majority of respondents across all categories reported having between four and six household members. A considerable number of households also had more than six members, indicating extended family systems that could benefit from sports tourism through shared economic activities such as accommodation provision, catering services, and small-scale businesses, as shown in Table 8.

**Table 8: Household Size of Respondents**

| Category        | 1–3 Members (%) | 4–6 Members (%) | Above 6 Members (%) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Athletes        | 22.4            | 51.3            | 26.3                |
| Households      | 18.9            | 47.8            | 33.3                |
| Business Sector | 25.3            | 49.2            | 25.5                |

### Challenges Facing Sports Tourism

Despite the benefits associated with sports tourism, the study identified several socio-economic constraints affecting the sector in Elgeyo Marakwet County. Sponsorship and income distribution among athletes revealed notable disparities. While 54.3% of athletes had sponsorship support, 45.7% did not. Lack of sponsorship limited the ability of many athletes to access quality training, travel for competitions, medical support, and professional development opportunities.

Income from athletics was also unevenly distributed and often uncertain. Only 10.8% of athletes received more than KES 1,000,000 annually, while 14.6% earned between KES 500,000 and KES 1,000,000, and 24.9% earned between KES 100,000 and KES 500,000. A further 14.6% earned below KES 100,000, while 35.1% earned no income from athletics. These findings indicated disparities in earnings and financial sustainability among athletes, where only a few elite performers earned substantial returns while many others remained financially vulnerable.

The findings further revealed that income was primarily derived from race winnings, sponsorship deals, endorsements, salaries for athletes employed in disciplined forces, and training stipends provided by agents and athletic organizations. However, these opportunities were not available to all athletes, resulting in unequal benefit distribution.

Although sports tourism created employment and business opportunities, benefits were not evenly distributed across all stakeholder groups. Some accommodation providers, transport operators, camp owners, and established entrepreneurs benefited more than smaller traders and low-income households. This uneven distribution reduced the broader developmental impact of sports tourism.

The study also indicated that some athletes faced career uncertainty due to injuries, inconsistent performance, and limited long-term financial planning. Without structured athlete support systems, many participants risked declining incomes after active competition careers ended.

Seasonality of tourism flows and competition schedules also affected income stability for businesses dependent on athletes and visitors. Periods of low visitation reduced demand for accommodation, food supply, retail trade, and transport services.

These challenges demonstrated that while sports tourism had significant economic potential, targeted interventions were necessary to improve inclusivity, financial sustainability, and equitable benefit sharing among all participants.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study concludes that sports tourism in Elgeyo Marakwet County is driven by a combination of economic, social, and cultural factors that collectively position the region as a globally significant athletics destination. The county's global reputation as home of champions functions as a powerful intangible asset generating continuous international attention and tourist flows averaging over 3,000 sports tourists annually. Community engagement, with local residents participating as accommodation hosts, vendors, guides, and event organizers, creates social sustainability and ensures that sports tourism is embedded within local communities, though benefit distribution remains unequal. Economic opportunities motivate entrepreneurship across hospitality, retail, transport, and related sectors. The concentration of businesses in sports tourism-related activities demonstrates that the sector has diversified the county economy and stimulated enterprise growth. The study concludes that the interaction of reputation, entrepreneurship, community participation, and social networks creates a comprehensive sports tourism ecosystem supporting sustained sector growth.

The study concludes that sports tourism has significantly strengthened rural-urban linkages across economic, social-cultural, and knowledge dimensions, though benefits are unevenly distributed spatially and socially. Economic linkages are strongest, with 86.5% of businesses reporting moderate to high performance, strong growth in business establishments, and household incomes for those involved in sports tourism significantly exceeding agricultural households. Social-cultural linkages manifest through daily interactions between athletes and local communities, homestay arrangements, sports mentorship, and participation in religious and cultural ceremonies. These interactions create bridging social capital connecting rural communities to global networks. Knowledge linkages involve flows of coaching methodologies, sports science, business management, and digital skills between local communities and external actors. However, knowledge transfer potential remains underutilized due to capacity gaps. The study concludes that sports tourism has transformed Elgeyo Marakwet County from agricultural periphery to globally connected sports tourism hub, though the uneven spatial and social distribution of benefits creates inequalities.

The study concludes that sports tourism faces multidimensional socio-economic challenges including financial constraints, benefit inequality, seasonal income volatility, youth educational neglect, cultural disruption, and capacity deficits. Financial constraints were the most pressing challenge, affecting 77.6% of athletes through lack of sponsorship and high training costs, while 74.6% of businesses experienced seasonal instability and 66.2% struggled to access capital. Social challenges included perceived benefit inequality among 63.2% of households, youth educational neglect affecting 47.6%, and cultural disruption reported by 38.6% of households.

The county government should strengthen local enterprise participation through business development support, market access programs, and improved linkages between local producers and tourism enterprises. The Department of Tourism should professionalize destination marketing and brand management through digital campaigns, partnerships, sports tourism packages, and a comprehensive tourism website with booking capabilities. Community participation should be

strengthened through inclusive planning, event organization, cultural programs, and equitable sharing of tourism benefits.

The Department of Tourism should diversify tourism products to reduce seasonality through cultural tourism, hiking, bird watching, amateur sports packages, and county-hosted competitions. Business associations and financial institutions should support enterprises with seasonal financing products, business diversification strategies, and entrepreneurship training. County departments should support cultural exchange initiatives, youth mentorship programs, and education integration strategies to ensure sports tourism strengthens rather than undermines social development.

The county government and Athletics Kenya should strengthen athlete support initiatives through sponsorship programs, affordable support services, mentorship, and financial literacy training. Athletics Kenya and the Department of Education should develop career guidance programs helping athletes balance training, education, and long-term employability. Capacity building programs should strengthen business management, customer service, marketing, and digital literacy among local tourism enterprises.

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