International Journal of Research in Commerce and Management Studies

ISSN 2582-2292

Vol. 8, No. 05 Sep-Oct; 2026 Page. No. 1175-1186

To cite this article: Anuraghavi Vinayagam and Dr. SP. Mathiraj (2026). BEYOND DECENT WORK: MAPPING THE DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT IN TOURISM SECTOR, International Journal of Research in Commerce and Management Studies (IJRCMS) 8 (5): 1175-1186 Article No. 928 Sub Id 1504

BEYOND DECENT WORK: MAPPING THE DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT IN TOURISM SECTOR

Anuraghavi Vinayagam[1] and Dr. SP. Mathiraj[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Alagappa Institute of Management, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India

[2]Professor, Department of Corporate Secretaryship, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India

DOI: https://doi.org/10.38193/IJRCMS.2026.8570

ABSTRACT

Purpose: To assess the perceived level of sustainable employment and identify its underlying dimensions among tourism-sector employees in Chennai.

Design/methodology/approach: A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted among 462 tourism employees using a structured questionnaire comprising 30 statements on sustainable employment. Descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation were employed.

Findings: The mean scores of the 30 statements ranged from 3.10 to 3.52. The KMO value of 0.740 and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 2110.813$, $df = 435$, $p < .001$) confirmed the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Six dimensions emerged: working time and work-life balance, employment security, dignity, voice and fair treatment, learning and career development, fair and adequate remuneration, and occupational safety and well-being.

Research limitations/implications: The study is limited to tourism employees in Chennai and uses a cross-sectional design, restricting the generalisation of findings to other tourism destinations.

Originality/value: The study extends the discussion beyond job creation and basic decent-work conditions by providing an employee-centred empirical assessment of the dimensions through which sustainable employment is experienced in tourism.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable Employment, Tourism, Decent Work, Employment Quality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is widely acknowledged as an important contributor to job creation and economic development. Its labour-intensive nature creates jobs in accommodation, food services, transportation, travel services, attractions and events. The sector is also explicitly linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8, which calls for full and productive employment and decent work for all and recognises sustainable tourism as a means of creating jobs and promoting local development (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017; United Nations, 2015). However, the

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contribution of tourism to sustainable development cannot be measured only by the number of jobs created. Other considerations for determining whether tourism leads to socially sustainable outcomes relate to the quality of these jobs and the conditions under which employees work.

The distinction between quantity and quality of employment is particularly relevant to tourism. The expansion of tourism has provided significant employment opportunities, but the sector has also been associated with low pay, precarious employment, poor working conditions, long or irregular working hours, occupational risks, high turnover of employees and other forms of employment vulnerability (Baum & Nguyen, 2019; Winchenbach et al., 2019). These concerns indicate that job creation does not necessarily mean sustainable employment. The social dimension of sustainability and the tourism workforce therefore require attention alongside the economic and environmental dimensions of tourism development (Winchenbach et al., 2019).

The notion of decent work provides an important basis for addressing these concerns. The ILO decent-work framework includes productive employment, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue. These principles are especially important in tourism, where working conditions can differ greatly between tourism activities, with the possibility of irregular employment and demanding service conditions. The ILO guidelines on decent work and socially responsible tourism stress the importance of promoting full and productive employment and decent work within sustainable tourism development (ILO, 2017). A systematic review of research in tourism and hospitality also shows that decent work has been examined through themes such as labour rights, gender equality, sustainability and health, employment security, job quality and the psychology of working (Wang & Cheung, 2024). However, good work does not necessarily reflect the full experience of sustainable employment. Sustainable employment in the present study refers to employment that is economically fair, secure, manageable, safe, respectful and supportive of employees' future development. Recent research identifies sustainable tourism employment as an emerging field in which employee experiences need to be considered more holistically (Kim & Baker, 2024). This perspective is important because tourism employees are central to the delivery and long-term sustainability of tourism.

Accordingly, the employment experience in tourism can be viewed through several related aspects. Fair compensation concerns whether employees perceive the economic returns from their work as appropriate. Employment security concerns the stability and predictability of the employment relationship. Working time and work-life balance concern the extent to which employees can manage tourism work alongside personal life. Occupational safety and well-being concern protection from workplace risks and support for employee health. Dignity, voice and fair treatment concern respectful treatment, equality and the ability to express concerns. Learning and career development concerns opportunities to acquire relevant skills, take on responsibility and progress in a career. These aspects

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are consistent with broader job-quality approaches that consider earnings, labour-market security, working conditions, working time, skills and prospects as related dimensions of employment quality (Cazes et al., 2015; ILO, 2017).

The need to consider these aspects together is particularly relevant to tourism. Existing scholarship has developed through different strands focusing on precarity, employee well-being, human rights, labour conditions, dignity, career development and job quality (Baum & Nguyen, 2019; Kim & Baker, 2024; Wang & Cheung, 2024). The present study therefore assesses sustainable employment from the employees' perspective and examines whether the proposed employment aspects form identifiable underlying dimensions among tourism-sector employees in Chennai.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Sustainable employment in tourism is closely related to the broader discussion of decent work and job quality. The literature suggests that employment sustainability cannot be reduced to the existence of jobs; attention also needs to be given to the conditions, rights, security and quality of work experienced by employees.

Baum and Nguyen (2019) examined sustainable employment in tourism from a human-rights perspective and highlighted the need to give greater attention to workers' rights and employment conditions. Their work supports the view that tourism employment should be considered in terms of the quality and sustainability of work rather than employment generation alone.

Winchenbach et al. (2019) focused on dignity in tourism employment and argued that decent work involves more than material employment conditions. Their discussion establishes the importance of respectful and humane treatment in tourism workplaces and provides a basis for considering dignity as part of employment quality.

Ioannides et al. (2021) advocated a human-centred perspective on sustainable tourism employment and emphasised the need to place tourism workers at the centre of sustainability discussions. This perspective supports the employee-centred approach adopted in the present study.

Wang and Cheung (2024), through a systematic review of decent work in tourism and hospitality, identified themes including labour rights and gender equality, sustainability and health, job quality and employment-related security. They also recommended further research that considers employees' assessments of decent work. The review demonstrates that employment quality in tourism is multidimensional, while also indicating the fragmented development of the field.

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Kim and Baker (2024) discussed sustainable tourism employment from a broader perspective of tourism employees' experiences and highlighted the need to understand sustainable employment beyond isolated employment conditions. Their work is particularly relevant to the present study because it supports a broader employee-centred view of sustainable tourism employment.

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

The present study is grounded primarily in the decent-work and job-quality perspective of sustainable employment. The ILO framework provides the broader normative basis by emphasising productive employment, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue, while job-quality approaches extend attention to earnings, employment security, working conditions, working time and skills (ILO, 2017; Cazes et al., 2015). Tourism employment research further emphasises dignity and a human-centred understanding of workers' experiences (Winchenbach et al., 2019; Ioannides et al., 2021).

Based on this literature, the present study operationalises sustainable employment through six proposed dimensions: Fair and Adequate Remuneration, Employment Security, Working Time and Work-Life Balance, Occupational Safety and Well-being, Dignity, Voice and Fair Treatment, and Learning and Career Development. These dimensions are not presented as an established six-factor theory. Rather, they represent the dimensions identified from the relevant literature and are empirically examined in the present study through exploratory factor analysis. This approach is appropriate because the objective is to identify the underlying dimensions of sustainable employment from employees' perceptions rather than to test a pre-established causal model.

2.2 Research Gap

The studies reviewed indicate that tourism employment has increasingly been examined from the perspectives of decent work, human rights, dignity, job quality and employee experience. However, these aspects have often been examined through different conceptual and thematic strands. The systematic review by Wang and Cheung (2024) also indicates the diverse themes through which decent work has been examined in tourism and hospitality. There remains scope for empirical integration of these employment-related aspects from the employees' own perceptions. Therefore, the present study assesses the perceived level of sustainable employment and empirically identifies its underlying dimensions among tourism-sector employees in Chennai.

2.3 Research Questions

RQ1. What is the perceived level of sustainable employment among employees in the tourism sector in Chennai?

RQ2. What are the underlying dimensions of sustainable employment among employees in the tourism sector in Chennai?

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2.4 Objectives

1. To assess the perceived level of sustainable employment among employees in the tourism sector in Chennai.
2. To identify the underlying dimensions of sustainable employment among employees in the tourism sector in Chennai.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilised a quantitative cross-sectional research design to investigate sustainable employment among employees in the tourism sector in Chennai. The respondents were employees working in different tourism-related establishments. Respondents who were available and willing to participate were selected using convenience sampling. A total of 462 valid responses were obtained for analysis. The respondents were drawn from hotels and resorts, restaurants and food services, tourist attractions and recreation, travel agencies and tour operators, homestays and serviced accommodation, tourism transport, and MICE and events.

The selection of Chennai as the study area was based on its diverse tourism-related employment environment, which includes accommodation, food services, travel services, attractions, transport and events. This diversity provided an appropriate setting for examining employment conditions across different types of tourism work rather than restricting the study to a single tourism activity.

3.1 Quantitative Approach

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The instrument included 30 statements to measure sustainable employment and demographic questions. The statements were categorised into six proposed dimensions: Fair and Adequate Remuneration (PAY), Employment Security (SEC), Working Time and Work-Life Balance (WLB), Occupational Safety and Well-being (SAFE), Dignity, Voice and Fair Treatment (DV), and Learning and Career Development (DEV). Each dimension was measured using five statements.

Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were used to analyse the profile of respondents and their perceptions of sustainable employment. Exploratory Factor Analysis was then performed to identify the underlying structure of the 30 statements. Factor extraction was conducted using Principal Component Analysis and rotation was performed using Varimax rotation. The adequacy of the data for factor analysis was examined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

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4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Age	18 - 25	110	23.8
	26 - 35	174	37.7
	36 - 45	105	22.7
	46 - 55	50	10.8
	56+	23	5.0
Total		**462**	**100.00**
Gender	Female	209	45.2
	Male	248	53.7
	Other	5	1.1
Total		**462**	**100.00**
Education	Diploma	119	25.8
	Higher Secondary	60	13.0
	Other	35	7.6
	PG Degree	78	16.9
	UG Degree	170	36.8
Total		**462**	**100.00**
Monthly Income	Below 15000	73	15.8
	15000-24999	157	34.0
	25000-34999	105	22.7
	35000-49999	86	18.6
	50000 and above	41	8.9
Total		**462**	**100.00**

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of age, gender, educational qualification and monthly income. The largest age group was 26–35 years (37.7%), followed by 18–25 years (23.8%) and 36–45 years (22.7%). The gender distribution comprised 53.7% male, 45.2% female and 1.1% other respondents. In terms of educational qualification, undergraduate degree holders formed the largest group (36.8%), followed by diploma holders (25.8%). Regarding monthly income, the largest group (34.0%) earned ₹15,000–₹24,999 per month. The profile therefore represents a predominantly young and moderately educated tourism workforce, with a considerable proportion in the lower income ranges.

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Table 2. Tourism Sub-Sectors-wise Distribution of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
Homestays and Serviced Accommodation	49	10.6
Hotels and Resorts	126	27.3
MICE and Events	31	6.7
Restaurants and Food Services	79	17.1
Tourism Transport	43	9.3
Tourist Attractions and Recreation	69	14.9
Travel Agencies and Tour Operators	65	14.1
Total	**462**	**100.0**

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents across tourism sub-sectors. Hotels and resorts accounted for the largest share (27.3%), followed by restaurants and food services (17.1%), tourist attractions and recreation (14.9%), and travel agencies and tour operators (14.1%). The remaining respondents were from homestays and serviced accommodation (10.6%), tourism transport (9.3%) and MICE and events (6.7%). The distribution indicates that the study includes employees from different forms of tourism employment.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Sustainable Employment

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
PAY1	462	3.25	.752
PAY2	462	3.28	.707
PAY3	462	3.26	.695
PAY4	462	3.18	.706
PAY5	462	3.30	.727
SEC1	462	3.29	.725
SEC2	462	3.26	.691
SEC3	462	3.29	.754
SEC4	462	3.34	.727
SEC5	462	3.30	.749
WLB1	462	3.22	.678
WLB2	462	3.10	.726
WLB3	462	3.13	.705
WLB4	462	3.22	.719
WLB5	462	3.23	.711
SAFE1	462	3.46	.738
SAFE2	462	3.44	.709
SAFE3	462	3.41	.724
SAFE4	462	3.39	.691
SAFE5	462	3.47	.677

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DV1	462	3.52	.690
DV2	462	3.27	.727
DV3	462	3.37	.733
DV4	462	3.37	.729
DV5	462	3.36	.726
DEV1	462	3.19	.686
DEV2	462	3.19	.728
DEV3	462	3.21	.754
DEV4	462	3.20	.709
DEV5	462	3.13	.740
Valid N (listwise)	462		

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the 30 statements measuring sustainable employment. The mean values ranged from 3.10 to 3.52. The highest mean was recorded for being treated with dignity and respect at the workplace (3.52), while the lowest mean was recorded for receiving adequate rest breaks (3.10). The results indicate variation across the employment aspects, with dignity, safety and fair treatment receiving comparatively favourable perceptions, while some working-time and development-related aspects were comparatively lower.

Table 4. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.740
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2110.813
	df	435
	Sig.	.000

Table 4 presents the KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value of 0.740 indicates adequate sampling adequacy. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2110.813$, $df = 435$, $p < .001$), indicating that the correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis. The data were therefore considered appropriate for identifying the underlying dimensions of sustainable employment.

Table 5. Rotated Component Matrix

	Component						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
WLB4	.735						
WLB1	.686						
WLB5	.681						
WLB2	.635						

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WLB3	.615						
SEC1		.711					
SEC2		.670					
SEC3		.670					
SEC4		.648					
SEC5		.640					
DV4			.682				
DV5			.682				
DV2			.682				
DV1			.634				
DV3			.620				
DEV2				.672			
DEV3				.671			
DEV5				.649			
DEV1				.627			
DEV4				.608			
PAY3					.704		
PAY5					.632		
PAY2					.621		
PAY4					.564		
PAY1					.563		
SAFE3						.670	
SAFE1						.647	
SAFE4						.611	
SAFE5						.590	
SAFE2						.493	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Table 5 presents the rotated component matrix obtained through Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation. The 30 statements grouped into six components, with factor loadings ranging from 0.493 to 0.735. The first component comprised the five working-time and work-life balance statements, with loadings ranging from 0.615 to 0.735. The second component comprised the five employment-security statements, with loadings ranging from 0.640 to 0.711. The third component represented dignity, voice and fair treatment, with loadings ranging from 0.620 to 0.682.

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The fourth component represented learning and career development, with loadings ranging from 0.608 to 0.672. The fifth component represented fair and adequate remuneration, with loadings ranging from 0.563 to 0.704. The sixth component represented occupational safety and well-being, with loadings ranging from 0.493 to 0.670. The factor structure indicates that employees perceive sustainable employment as a combination of working arrangements, employment security, respectful treatment, development opportunities, remuneration and workplace safety.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings provide empirical support for viewing sustainable employment in tourism as a multidimensional employment-quality issue. The six dimensions identified in the analysis correspond broadly with themes recognised in previous tourism employment and decent-work literature, including job quality, employment security, working conditions, health, dignity and employee development (Baum & Nguyen, 2019; Ioannides et al., 2021; Wang & Cheung, 2024).

Working time and work-life balance emerged as the first component, indicating that the organisation of working time is an important part of employees' experience of sustainable employment. This is consistent with the concern for work-life balance identified in the tourism decent-work literature (Wang & Cheung, 2024). Employment security formed a separate component, reflecting the importance of continuity and stability in the employment relationship.

Dignity, voice and fair treatment also formed a distinct component. This finding is consistent with Winchenbach et al. (2019), who highlighted dignity as an important element of decent and sustainable tourism employment. Learning and career development formed another distinct component, indicating that sustainable employment is not limited to current employment conditions but also includes opportunities for employees' future development.

Fair and adequate remuneration and occupational safety and well-being emerged as separate dimensions. These findings reinforce the importance of economic fairness and safe working conditions in assessing employment quality. Overall, the results support a broader employee-centred understanding of sustainable employment rather than viewing tourism employment only in terms of the number of jobs generated.

From a managerial perspective, tourism organisations should consider employment quality through multiple dimensions rather than focusing only on pay. Attention to stable employment, reasonable working arrangements, workplace safety, respectful treatment, employee voice and opportunities for learning and career development can contribute to a more sustainable tourism workforce. Tourism authorities can also use these dimensions as a practical basis for considering the social dimension of tourism sustainability.

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6. CONCLUSION

The study examined sustainable employment among tourism-sector employees in Chennai and identified its underlying dimensions from employee perceptions. The findings indicate that sustainable employment is broader than job creation or the fulfilment of minimum decent-work conditions. The factor analysis identified six dimensions: Working Time and Work-Life Balance, Employment Security, Dignity, Voice and Fair Treatment, Learning and Career Development, Fair and Adequate Remuneration, and Occupational Safety and Well-being.

The study contributes to the discussion on the social sustainability of tourism by placing employment quality and employee experience at the centre of the analysis. The findings suggest that sustainable tourism employment requires attention to both present employment conditions and employees' longer-term ability to remain secure, healthy, respected and capable of developing within the sector.

The study has limitations. The data were collected from tourism-sector employees in Chennai using a cross-sectional design and convenience sampling. Therefore, the findings should not be generalised automatically to other destinations or tourism workforces. Future studies may examine the identified dimensions across different tourism destinations and employment groups using larger and more diverse samples.

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