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Sustainable tourism development in post-war settings: The influence of the slow city movement¹

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ABSTRACT

Wars can inflict profound harm upon a nation's cultural, historical, and natural treasures, jeopardizing tourism resources and potentially leading to their depletion or destruction. However, meticulous and judicious post-war tourism development planning can transform these crises into opportunities. However, it is rare to find countries that have emerged from conflict and shifted their focus toward tourism. This research delves into such a nation, one scarred by the ravages of war, to evaluate its tourism potential and its challenges as perceived by stakeholders. The study examines the current state and forecasts future implications for urban tourism development amidst the seldom-addressed post-war obstacles in tourism literature. Analysis of participant responses revealed a prevailing positive sentiment towards the Slow City Movement, with a majority expressing willingness to support a potential membership process actively. Its primary goal is to delineate the perspectives of local stakeholders on tourist development in a post-war context and to elucidate the role of revitalization in catalyzing the Slow City Movement's growth. The study closely intertwines with pertinent literature by employing qualitative data collection and analysis methodologies. MAXQDA, a robust qualitative data analysis program, facilitates data analysis, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of stakeholder perspectives and insights into post-war tourism development.

KEYWORDS

Slow City Movement, post-war, sustainable tourism, Azerbaijan, tourism development

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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia began in 2010 and eventually turned into a full-blown war on September 27, 2020. The conflict ended after 44 days with the ceasefire agreement signed on November 10, 2020, ending the Second Karabakh War. As a result, five provinces, four towns, and 286 villages that had been under Azerbaijani occupation for nearly 30 years were liberated (Çeliksoy, 2021). The war's end opened up new opportunities for Azerbaijan in the form of tourism. The natural beauty, historical artifacts, and cultural riches previously under occupation showcased Azerbaijan's tourism potential (Mammadov, 2022). Against this backdrop, tourism has gained increasing importance in recent years due to significant oil and natural gas price imbalances (Binns & Nel, 2002). Tourism is an affordable and popular tool for developing countries and regions to foster development (Qureshi & Dada, 2019). Additionally, tourism can help facilitate post-war recovery and development and can be used to develop war-affected regions quickly. However, a firm tourism policy and plan are necessary for sustainable post-war tourism development (Hall, 2003). Tourism holds immense potential in alleviating poverty through its ability to generate employment opportunities, bolster foreign exchange earnings, and stimulate economic growth, particularly in regions grappling with the aftermath of conflict. Its close alignment with sustainable practices further underscores its role as a catalyst for positive change. In post-war settings, promoting tourism emerges as a strategic avenue for fostering socio-economic development in affected areas or nations (Samarathunga, Cheng & Weerathunga, 2020). Recognizing its transformative impact, numerous international bodies, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and the European Union (EU), advocate for leveraging tourism to facilitate poverty reduction, economic diversification, cross-border integration, peacebuilding, post-conflict stabilization, and socio-economic revitalization (Novelli, Morgan & Nibigira, 2012). Tourism is a pivotal sector driving national economies, injecting significant contributions to economic growth through travelers' expenditures and fostering employment opportunities within communities. However, establishing a meticulously planned and sustainable tourism strategy is imperative to foster enduring economic progress. The notion of sustainability gained paramount importance in literature during the 1970s amid concerns over environmental degradation and resource depletion. Given that nature is a primary draw for tourism, it is imperative to formulate development blueprints that align with sustainable principles. The overarching aim of sustainable tourism policy lies in nurturing the preservation of natural resources for posterity while facilitating the sustainable advancement of the economy. A sustainable economic framework not only bolsters regional advancement but also markedly enhances the well-being of local populations. The ultimate objective of sustainable tourism development resides in ensuring that tourism serves as a boon to the environment and local communities, fostering social, cultural, and economic benefits, with the community at the core of sustainable tourism endeavors (Park & Kim, 2015).

Specific movements advocate for alternative development paradigms, exemplified by the Slow City movement, also recognized as Slow City. These movements have arisen in reaction to apprehensions regarding the enduring consequences of relentless pro-growth capitalism and the perceived trend toward global homogenization (Mayer & Knox, 2006). Predominantly found in smaller municipalities, these movements prioritize endorsing local identity, sustainability, and domestically-driven economic systems (Servon & Pink, 2015). Slow cities are places where local leaders and residents rely on the unique local context and history to guide better and more sustainable urban development practices. The slow city approach emphasizes the connection between sustainable urban development, including the economy, environment, and equity, and the importance of preserving local uniqueness (Mayer & Knox, 2006).

Numerous studies have suggested that sustainable tourism planning and activities are effective solutions for destinations to revive their economic growth after wars (Dayoub et al., 2020; Sivesan, 2020; Lokuhetty, Jayawardena & Mudadeniya, 2013; Kamble & Bouchon, 2014). Previous research has shown a positive relationship between sustainable tourism and membership in the Slow City Movement (Park & Kim, 2015; Ekinci, 2014; Presenza, Abbate &

Perano, 2015; Özgeriş & Karahan, 2021). However, a comprehensive literature review has identified the gap in how Slow City Movement membership can be used as a solution for sustainable tourism planning in post-war destinations. Therefore, this study is unique and should be considered.

This study aims to explore the possibility of Azerbaijan joining the Slow City Movement. Since gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has faced economic challenges, making it crucial to focus on sectors that can significantly contribute to the country's economy, such as tourism. Azerbaijan has abundant tourism opportunities due to its natural, cultural, and historical resources. It is important to preserve and sustain these values, and the Slow City Movement can aid in this regard, ensuring the development of Azerbaijan's tourism sector and the protection and utilization of its existing resources. The study offers recommendations for local and national decision-makers, tourism enterprises, and future studies. This research is significant as no previous study has been conducted on Azerbaijan's potential for membership in the Slow City Movement. With the reintegration of the regions liberated from occupation, Azerbaijan is expected to experience significant tourism growth. However, not being a member of the Slow City Movement can be a significant weakness in the tourism sector. The study involved managers from the Azerbaijan State Tourism Agency (ADTA), who were interviewed about their perceptions of sustainable tourism and their opinions and ideas regarding the Slow City Movement's contribution to post-war tourism development. Assessing the contributions of Slow City Movements to a post-war tourism destination by understanding its advantages among managers and their meanings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Slow City Movement and Sustainable Tourism

In 1999, four Italian towns—Greve in Chianti, Bra, Orvieto, and Positano—collaborated with the Slow Food Association to establish Slow City (Cittaslow, 2011). This initiative aimed to foster local identity by integrating the Slow Food philosophy into urban planning within small communities. Slow City's primary objective is to amalgamate historical wisdom with contemporary prospects, fostering a comprehensive approach to community development (Mayer & Knox, 2006). A Slow City emphasizes sustainability and excellence, ensuring the preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage and community values. It advocates for bioarchitecture, organic farming, and the preservation of landscape biodiversity. Additionally, Slow City prioritizes traditional production methods, items, and craftsmanship while encouraging innovative techniques that uphold traditional production and spur the advancement of regional products. It prioritizes the vitality of communities, maintains their infrastructure, and opts for sustainable solutions that safeguard the future development of subsequent generations (European Manifest Cittaslow, 2012).

Azerbaijan and the Slow City Principles

The Slow City Movement, established in a small town in Italy in 1999, has gained worldwide recognition for its commitment to sustainability and the preservation of local natural and cultural characteristics. Member cities benefit economically by promoting their unique identities while adhering to the movement's principles. The Cittaslow Association, an international organization, invites municipalities with populations under 50,000 to join the movement by adhering to the principles of Slow Food and enhancing conviviality while preserving local environments. The certification process evaluates towns against 72 quality criteria, grouped into seven categories: Energy and Environmental Policies, Infrastructure Policies, Quality of Urban Life Policies, Agricultural, Touristic, and Artisan Policies, Policies for Hospitality, Awareness and Training, Social Cohesion, and Partnerships (Cittaslow, 2023).

With its diverse climates and rich natural resources, Azerbaijan aligns well with these principles and holds great potential to meet the Slow City Movement's membership criteria. The country boasts two of the 13 known global climate zones, encompassing 65% subtropical and 35% temperate regions (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, 2022). Its flat terrain is

complemented by prominent mountain ranges, including the Greater Caucasus, Lesser Caucasus, Talysh, and South Iran (Valiyev & Agaoglu, 1997). Azerbaijan's commitment to environmental policies is evident in initiatives such as the 2018-2022 national strategy for solid waste management, the Action Plan for Effective Water Resources Use (2020-2022), and the Azerbaijan 2030 strategy prioritizing socio-economic development (Presidency of Azerbaijan, 2022). These efforts reflect a strong foundation for meeting Slow City's environmental and socio-economic sustainability goals.

Another criterion is "Infrastructure policies". In recent years, much work has been done in Azerbaijan to increase the number of bicycle lanes. In addition, 120 pedestrian crossings were built on 27 streets to ensure smooth movement of pedestrians. One of the works carried out in Azerbaijan is the Smart City project. With this project, many cities in Azerbaijan are expected to be technology-equipped and people-oriented (Valiyev, 2022). The quality of urban life policies criterion has been included among the priority areas in Azerbaijan. The initial policy under discussion is a decree signed by President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan in 2021. Entitled "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-economic Development," this decree outlines significant themes and proposed objectives. These objectives, aimed at fostering the socio-economic advancement of the nation, include (1) sustainable economic restructuring, (2) fostering a dynamic, inclusive, and socially just community, (3) cultivating competitive human capital and a modern innovation landscape, and (4) facilitating substantial progress in the recently liberated territories (Presidency of Azerbaijan, 2022). Within the realm of agricultural, touristic, and artisan policies, agriculture holds pivotal importance in Azerbaijan, given the deep historical connections its people have to this sector. Consequently, the government has devised numerous strategic roadmaps to propel agricultural development, with one notable example being the "Strategic Roadmap for the Production and Processing of Agricultural Products in the Republic of Azerbaijan," enacted in 2016. In hospitality, awareness, and training policies, the Republic of Azerbaijan is dedicated to fostering innovation in the tourism sector and ensuring its prominence among other industries through aligned initiatives and investments. The Decree "Strategic Road Map for the development of specialized tourism industry in the Republic of Azerbaijan" signed in 2016 is of great importance for this development (Azerbaijan State Tourism Agency, 2016).

Azerbaijani people have permanently attached great importance to hospitality due to their roots. However, ADTA and tourism enterprises are taking many important steps to professionalize this work further. For example, in 2021, ADTA and the Tourism Training and Certification Center of the Azerbaijan Tourism Bureau (ATB) organized a seminar called "Certified Hospitality Training." The seminar was organized in cooperation with the American Hotel and Lodging Institute. The seminar was attended by 17 tourism industry stakeholders, hotel representatives, and representatives from ADTA and ATB (Salimov, 2022). One of the other issues that the Azerbaijani government attaches importance to is training individuals in the tourism sector. Due to this policy, educational institutes that can directly affect the tourism sector have been established in the country. One of these is the Azerbaijan Tourism and Business University. The university has set the goal of raising educated individuals for the country's tourism sector. Currently, 1,980 students are studying at the university. The university has so far trained 4,481 graduates for Azerbaijan's tourism sector (Azerbaijan Tourism and Business University, 2022). Baku Tourism Vocational College and Mingachevir Tourism College also operate. Within the scope of social cohesion, great importance has always been attached to solving problems such as unemployment and poverty in the country. At the same time, significant steps are being taken to integrate disabled citizens into society. The government provides different monthly and collective allowances to the elderly, disabled, unemployed, and disadvantaged groups (Veliyev, 2022). At the same time, the government provides much assistance to unemployed citizens in finding a job (Azerbaijan Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, 2021). Regarding partnership policies, ADTA concludes partnership agreements at the national and international levels to ensure the growth of the tourism sector in Azerbaijan. Since 1992, 12 memorandums of understanding (MoUs), 31 agreements, including 27 international ones, and two cooperation programs between 2020 and 2022 have been signed.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to evaluate Azerbaijan's potential to join the Slow City Movement. The study was focused on employees of the Azerbaijan State Tourism Agency. Since it is impossible to include the entire population in the scope of the research in terms of time and cost, the sample of the research consists of 14 people working in managerial positions in the Azerbaijan State Tourism Agency (ADTA). Purposive and convenience sampling methods, which are non-probability sampling methods, were used in the study. In the purposive sampling method, the group or groups that are suitable for the research and predetermined and defined for this purpose are included in the sample (Kozak, 2001). The convenience sampling method aims to include individuals from whom information and data can be easily collected (Kurtuluş, 2010). The interview technique, frequently used in qualitative research, was used in the study. The main reason for using the interview technique in the study is that it enables in-depth information to be obtained from the participants. The interview form was prepared after a literature review to ensure the interview was positive and productive (Mayer & Knox, 2006; Park & Kim, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The interview form consists of two parts. In the first part, questions were asked about age, gender, education, and employment to learn the demographic characteristics of the participants. In the second part, questions were asked about Slow City, and the aim was to learn their opinions on these questions. In the interviews with the participants, an informative presentation was made about the concept of a "Slow City," and following the presentation, the interview questions were directed to the participants. Before the interview started, it was explained to the participants that their answers would remain confidential and would not be shared with third parties. After the presentation to the participants on 15.02.2023, interviews were conducted between 15.02.2023 and 27.02.2023.

In this study, data analysis was conducted with MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis program. The primary purpose of data analysis is to reveal the original meaning and source of information of the collected data. Without making any changes to the data received from the participants, the data's value was measured through the analysis program, and the results were included in the study without any changes. Another stage of the study is coding. The coding stage is considered the most important stage in qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Participant responses are deciphered through this coding, and analyses are divided into the right topics. At the same time, coding also supports the reliability of participant responses. The researchers transcribed the data in a computer environment, creating transcripts. No changes were made to the research texts. However, while writing the research findings, some texts were translated into academic language for easier understanding (Kozak, 2001). While creating the transcripts, the real names of all administrators were hidden, and codes were given as P1 and P2 for each participant.

RESULTS

This section of the study provides the findings of the participant interview analysis. The data was coded using an inductive method to ensure objective analysis. The initial questions asked of the participants were about their age and year of residence. The obtained results are displayed in Table 1.

Upon analyzing the table, it is evident that the number of participants aged 25 and below is higher. Additionally, when the years of residence of the participants are analyzed, it is observed that most of them have lived in the region for 31 years or more. This implies that many of the participants possess a good understanding of the area and can provide a better assessment of the suitability of the Slow City Movement for the country.

Table 1.
 General Information About Research Participants

| Participant | Age | Education | Duration of Residence in Azerbaijan (years) |
|-------------|-----|-----------|---------------------------------------------|
| P1 | 32 | Bachelor | 32 |
| P2 | 30 | Bachelor | 30 |
| P3 | 42 | Master | 42 |
| P4 | 24 | Master | 24 |
| P5 | 35 | Bachelor | 35 |
| P6 | 22 | Master | 22 |
| P7 | 33 | Master | 32 |
| P8 | 22 | Bachelor | 22 |
| P9 | 25 | Bachelor | 25 |
| P10 | 27 | Bachelor | 27 |
| P11 | 32 | Master | 32 |
| P12 | 25 | Bachelor | 23 |
| P13 | 21 | Master | 21 |
| P14 | 20 | Bachelor | 20 |

When asked about their knowledge of the concept of a "Slow City," 71.4% of the participants stated that they were familiar with it, while 28.6% claimed otherwise. However, the responses varied when participants were asked to define what a "Slow City" meant to them. Most of the answers indicated that the concept promotes environmental friendliness and contributes to the sustainability of a city's ecological structure.

P7: *"Ecologically clean city, use of organic, non-GMO products, use of solar energy, use of traditional products and recipes in the concept of slow food."*

Participants highlighted that the movement contributes to both ecological structure and sustainability and preserves historical city structures.

P4: *"In my opinion, this concept is important for cities to preserve their historical characteristics. It is a concept in which cities preserve their characteristics in order not to be similar to each other".*

The participants were asked if they knew the cities of the Slow City Movement, and their answers were recorded.

According to most participants, limited infrastructure and technology access in certain regions may negatively impact the membership process.

P2: *"I think that there are enough cities/regions in the regions that can meet the general criteria for implementing the concept of the Slow City Movement. But first of all, several factors, such as lack of favorable infrastructure, late diffusion of technological innovations to the regions, and low access to financial opportunities for the development of local production in the regions, seem to be factors that will limit the implementation of the concept in Azerbaijan".*

P5: *"Azerbaijan's potential for membership in this movement to be weak."*

P5: *"I consider the potential to be weak because for the movement to be implemented in the country, the highest level of support for joining the movement is required."*

The majority of participants believe that membership will positively impact sustainable tourism.

P6: *"This could attract tourists who want to vacation in environmentally friendly places and are willing to support sustainable tourism. In addition, the membership of a Slow City can help promote local traditions and culture, which will attract tourists looking for an authentic and unique experience."*

Regarding the positive impact of the Slow City Movement on Azerbaijan's sustainable tourism, the statements of P2 and P4 below have come to the fore.

P2: *"One of the most fundamental conditions for sustainable tourism is to ensure that existing resources are used in a planned and 'fair' way to meet the needs of future generations. In this context, the membership of Slow City can ensure the development of communities by protecting local production, ensuring ecological sustainability with a more environmentally sensitive approach, and at the same time reducing the impact of pressures on communities."*

P4: *"I do not think it can be interesting for tourists who like to visit shopping centers in cities while traveling, but I think it can attract tourists who like authenticity and have a positive impact on tourism."*

Table 2.

Member countries or cities known to participants

| Participant | Country / City |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| P1 | Italy and Turkiye |
| P2 | Seferihisar and Halfeti (Turkiye) |
| P3 | Austria: Hartberg Turkiye: Ahlat, Akyaka, Arappir, Egirdir, Foça, Gerze, Gökçeada, Göynük, Güdül, Halfeti, İznik, Köyceğiz, Mudurnu, Perşembe, Seferihisar, Şavşat, Taraklı, Uzundere, Vize, Yalvaç, Yenipazar |
| P4 | Italy and Turkiye |
| P5 | I don't know |
| P6 | Germany, Italy, Hungary |
| P7 | Bad Essen, Svetlogorsk, Amalfi, Bazzano, İznik |
| P8 | Seferihisar (Turkiye) |
| P9 | I don't know |
| P10 | Italy and Germany |
| P11 | I don't know |
| P12 | Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany |
| P13 | Zurich (Switzerland) and Bergen (Norway) |
| P14 | I don't know |

In recent years, one of the most significant advancements in Azerbaijan's economic landscape is its notable shift away from reliance on oil revenues. Central to this diversification strategy is emphasizing bolstering sectors beyond the oil industry, with particular attention to tourism. Azerbaijan has implemented numerous initiatives to nurture its tourism sector's growth, resulting in substantial progress. Notably, experts predict that embracing the principles of the Slow City Movement will play a pivotal role in further enhancing Azerbaijan's economy. Feedback from stakeholders overwhelmingly suggests that participation in this movement would significantly benefit the non-oil economy.

P7: *"If we take into account the diversification process of our country's economy into the non-oil sector and the contribution of tourism in this direction and the inevitability of sustainability processes in the world, it can make positive contributions."*

P6: *"Participating in the Slow City Movement can help improve environmental standards in cities, which can lead to lower treatment costs for diseases related to environmental pollution. This can improve population health and ultimately increase labor productivity. Membership in a Slow City can attract tourists looking for environmentally friendly and safe accommodation. This can increase tourism revenues and create new jobs in the hotel and restaurant industry as well as other tourism-related fields."*

P2: *"Membership in the Slow City Movement can help solve the problem of unemployment and rural-urban migration and partially remove the constraints on social development currently observed in the regions and promote economic revitalization."*

P9: *"It can strongly influence the development of the non-oil sector."*

When asked about the potential impact on Azerbaijan's cultural and social structure if it were to become a member of the Slow City Movement, the following answers were given:

P1: *"Both positive and negative. The negative side is that tourists bring culture with them, and this does not affect the national culture."*

P2: *"Communities will more actively help preserve historical and cultural values, which will strengthen community identity and support more inclusive development."*

P3: *"It prevents rapid gentrification of residential areas, creates an environmentally friendly production environment, and reduces pollution levels."*

P7: *"I think it will have a positive impact on society. It encourages the maximum protection of our ecology, the economical use of the resources we have, and the consideration of future generations."*

P9: *"It can strongly support the preservation of environmental greenery and its transfer to future generations."*

To the question of how Azerbaijan's membership in the Slow City Movement would impact the country's natural and environmental structure, the answers are as follows:

P7: *"The air of our city will be cleaned; it can affect the more efficient use of natural resources."*

P13: *"A cleaner environment, a decrease in diseases caused by GMO foods, and noise pollution can be affected."*

P2: *"It will help protect the environment, more sustainable use of land and other natural resources."*

P4: *"Since urbanization will decrease, member cities and villages will become more environmentally friendly."*

Within the Slow City Movement framework, a key priority in member countries is obtaining institutional approval before implementing any changes within member cities. This approach ensures the preservation and respectful utilization of each city's distinctive character and heritage. During discussions with participants, inquiries were made regarding the Citizens' Movement's influence on conservation efforts and sustainable usage practices. The consensus among the majority of respondents is that membership in the Slow City Movement significantly enhances the preservation of these cities' historical fabric and unique charm.

P3: *"Positive, preservation of historical-cultural heritage, community traditions, enrichment of local flora and fauna."*

P6: *"Azerbaijan's membership in Cittaslow can help Azerbaijan find a balance between protecting the environment and using its resources. The Cittaslow Association promotes sustainable development that preserves natural resources while providing economic growth and meeting the needs of the population."*

P9: *"The fact that member cities are not subject to change without the approval of the association affects continuity."*

In response to the question about the impact on the city and the local population if Azerbaijan becomes a member of the Slow City Movement and the participants' support for the

membership process, 71% of the participants had a positive opinion, and 29% had a negative opinion.

P2: *"In general, I think that a Slow City will only be beneficial for destinations, but it is necessary to take into account that the transformation of a city into a Slow City can lead to a rapid increase in interest, tourist flows, price increases, as a result of which the local population will become strangers in their own country. After a certain period, therefore, it is extremely important to correctly define the concept of development of the respective destinations and to implement it in a planned manner."*

P7: *"At this stage, I do not see the negative side, but I think it will take a long time to see the positive results of this process and to influence society."*

When participants were queried about the potential impact on local communities and businesses should Azerbaijan join the Slow City Movement, the responses were diverse. Among them, 43% expressed optimism that membership would spur regional economic growth, another 43% believed it would yield positive outcomes overall, while 14% saw it as a potential remedy for unemployment issues.

P2: *"It will make a great contribution to solving problems such as unemployment in the regions."*

P9: *"It can contribute to the economic development of the regions."*

P8: *"It will make a great contribution to the further development of businesses and increase the economic freedom of local people."*

When participants were surveyed regarding their inclination to support the membership process, the results revealed that 57.1% favored "Yes," 28.6% remained undecided, and 14.3% expressed opposition to "No."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research aims to investigate the potential of Azerbaijan to be accepted into the Slow City Movement and, at the same time, to help shed light on the process in case Azerbaijan can become a member of the movement. The fact that sustainability is one of the pillars of the concept increases its importance. Considering that, the sustainability of the tourism sector in the globalizing world is predicted to be achieved more easily with membership, which further increases the importance of the movement. When we look at the examples in the world, we see different, creative, and ultimately investing in the future of calm and people. Each practice inspires other members and/or prospective members of the movement and encourages them to improve themselves. From this point of view, it is possible to say that member cities and prospective cities of the Slow City Movement support each other intensely with the integrative effect of the Slow City Movement (Çakır et al., 2014).

When examining Azerbaijani tourism literature, the absence of prior research on the subject underscores the significance of this investigation. This study fills a crucial gap and sets a precedent for guiding future research and potentially influencing similar contexts in other countries. Analysis of participant responses revealed a prevailing positive sentiment towards the Slow City Movement, with a majority expressing willingness to support a potential membership process actively. Given Azerbaijan's heavy reliance on oil and natural gas, which hampers the development of non-oil sectors, the Movement holds promise for fostering economic diversification. Furthermore, the involvement of state institutions signals substantial government support for the Movement's initiatives. The nation's persistent high unemployment rate is a pressing concern, and membership in the Slow City Movement is anticipated to alleviate this issue by fostering job creation opportunities. Despite Azerbaijan's status as an oil-dependent economy, this study sheds light on the potential for the country to engage in the Movement, thereby bolstering its non-oil sectors such as tourism.

Environmental degradation emerges as a paramount global threat in the era of globalization. The Movement's emphasis on environmental stewardship underscores its

importance, with participants showing keen interest in sustainable practices to preserve nature. Promoting sustainable development principles, including enhanced quality of life, ecological consciousness, and local governance, is poised to yield substantial benefits at both local and national levels. Participants affirm Azerbaijan's viability as a member of the Slow City Movement, advocating for its integration. To advance future research, it is imperative to solicit perspectives from diverse stakeholders beyond ADTA employees, including residents, tourism enterprises, and NGOs. Exploring the potential of formerly occupied regions and cities to embrace the Movement could further bolster sustainable tourism nationwide.

Involving all stakeholders in post-occupation regions is critical for effective implementation. While the Movement can boost tourism, locals often express concerns about cultural erosion and ethical dilemmas. Thus, community education initiatives must foster understanding and mitigate negative impacts. To fortify Azerbaijan's identity as a Slow City, collaborative efforts among educational institutions and public bodies should focus on environmental conservation and public awareness campaigns. Additionally, exploring opportunities for Slow Food Movement membership in Azerbaijan and its liberated regions could further solidify the nation's commitment to a sustainable, culturally rich future.

The findings of this study align with prior research on the benefits and challenges associated with adopting the Slow City Movement. Similar to findings by Mayer and Knox (2006), participants emphasized ecological sustainability, the preservation of local traditions, and the movement's potential to foster sustainable tourism. Additionally, consistent with Miele (2013), participants highlighted how adopting Slow City principles could improve urban livability, protect historical heritage, and enhance economic opportunities through tourism. However, the challenges noted by participants, such as inadequate infrastructure and technological access, echo the findings of Yurtseven and Kaya (2011), who identified similar barriers in other regions striving to meet Slow City criteria. Unlike other studies emphasizing rapid benefits, participants in this study suggested that tangible outcomes may take longer to materialize.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable urban development by providing a region-specific analysis of Azerbaijan's potential for adopting the Slow City Movement. It extends theoretical frameworks on Slow City by incorporating participant-driven insights into the movement's implementation challenges and benefits. The inductive approach used to analyze participant feedback offers a methodological contribution, demonstrating how qualitative methods can enrich the understanding of global movements in local contexts.

Practically, the study offers valuable guidance for policymakers in Azerbaijan. It highlights the potential of the Slow City Movement to diversify the non-oil economy, address unemployment, and promote cultural preservation. Furthermore, the findings suggest that targeted investments in infrastructure and technology, combined with community engagement, could help overcome barriers to membership. The study underscores the importance of a phased and planned approach to avoid rapid gentrification and its potential adverse effects on local communities.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, while rich in detail, the focus on qualitative methods might benefit from complementary quantitative analysis to provide broader insights. Third, the study primarily draws on participant perceptions, which may not fully capture systemic or institutional challenges. Lastly, the research focuses on Azerbaijan, and the findings may not be directly transferable to other contexts with differing socio-economic and cultural dynamics.

Future studies could explore comparative analyses between Azerbaijan and other regions that have successfully adopted the Slow City Movement. Longitudinal research could provide insights into the long-term impact of membership on local economies and communities. Additionally, integrating perspectives from government officials, business owners, and other stakeholders would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the movement's feasibility and impact.

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