

# Opportunities and challenges for domestic tourism development in South Wollo, Ethiopia

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*Domestic tourism is a cornerstone of economic development, yet it has not received adequate attention compared to international tourism. Therefore, the objective of this study is to assess the opportunities and challenges of domestic tourism in Ethiopia, with a particular emphasis on selected tourist destinations in the South Wollo Zone. The study employed a qualitative research design, with a total of 26 participants for interviews selected purposively. In addition, three focus group discussions were conducted. This research study revealed several opportunities for the development of domestic tourism, including the government's commitment to domestic tourism development in Ethiopia, the presence of diversified tourism resources in the study areas, the local community's hospitality and tourist-friendly nature, and the occurrence of numerous cultural and religious events significant for domestic tourism development. However, the development of domestic tourism is also influenced by various challenges. One major issue is the absence of clear statistical information to measure the changes and continuities in domestic tourism development. Moreover, there is a low level of attitude towards domestic tourism in the study area. The lack of interest among travel agencies and tour operators in marketing the study area as a domestic tourism spot further hinders progress. Marketing and promotion efforts are also limited, with a shortage of organised trips/tours targeted at domestic tourism. Furthermore, the existing domestic tourism market is largely controlled*

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*by external operators and brokers, rather than by local community members or entrepreneurs. There has also been a failure to create competitive new tourism products and a low recognition of domestic tourism from both the local community and the operators. The study forwarded possible strategies for developing domestic tourism in the area.*

**Keywords:** *domestic tourism, challenges, tourism destination, South Wollo Zone*

## 1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Tourism and travel do not always entail international travel (Boniface, Cooper and Cooper, 2016). A significant amount of travel occurs within individuals' own countries when they visit nearby sites, take city breaks, travel for business purposes, attend sporting events or concerts or see friends and family (Dube, 2021; Kannisto, 2018; Rowe and Smith, 2002). Domestic tourism has been taking place around the world, possibly before the birth of Christ (Aidoo, 2006). Historically, domestic tourism was the first form of tourism practised, and today, it continues to account for most trips (Bhatia, 2002; World Tourism Organization, 2020). Since domestic tourists travel shorter distances and often rely on cars, it can help destinations minimise seasonality and reduce reliance (Singh, 2009; Fennell, 2020).

Domestic tourism plays a key role in job creation and strengthening domestic value chains, particularly in both developed and developing countries (Rylance and Spenceley, 2017; Woyo, 2021). It generates employment opportunities for small businesses, as international tourists tend to stay in high-end hotels or bed-and-breakfast accommodations (Glen and Mearns, 2018; Goh, 2021; Woyo, 2021). However, due to its ability to produce foreign exchange and present chances for the transfer of capital and knowledge, the tourism sector's potential for economic development is frequently linked to international travel (Ashley et al., 2007; Bama and Nyikana, 2021). Compared to international tourism, domestic tourism may be seen as more reliable as domestic tourists usually keep travelling within their country for different reasons, even during international crises (Lebrun, Su and Bouchet, 2021; Baniya and Paudel, 2016).

Ethiopia was chosen for this study because it is a country with untapped potential for tourism development (Nigatu, Aregaw and Tegegne, 2023; Robinson and Jonker, 2016; Teshome, Dereje and Asfaw, 2022). Recently, the tourism sector has been recognised and given significant attention in Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plan (Ali, 2016). Ethiopia is experiencing rapid international tourism growth (Sustainable Tourism Master Plan, 2015–2025). Despite Ethiopia's rich diversity of natural, cultural and historical tourism resources, its tourism industry, especially domestic tourism, remains underdeveloped (Nigatu and Tegegne, 2021). Similarly, the South Wollo Zone has huge potential for developing domestic tourism. However, despite this promise, there exists a paradox between its potential and the actual situation of a low volume of tourism due to various obstacles. Therefore, this research is intended to investigate the opportunities and challenges of domestic tourism development in the South Wollo Zone.

## 2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Domestic tourism offers significant potential for development in many countries (Agyeiwaah and McKercher, 2024; Seyfi, Hall and Saarinen, 2023). However, it has

yet to received the attention it deserves compared to international tourism (Makhaola and Proches, 2017; Kwoba, 2018). In East Africa, domestic tourist numbers have been rising, yet Ethiopia's domestic tourism, particularly in the South Wollo Zone, has remained stagnant over the years (Meron, 2018). This is surprising given the region's rich natural, cultural, historical and religious attractions, which offer immense potential for domestic tourism.

The limited focus on domestic tourism in Ethiopia, particularly in the South Wollo Zone, represents a gap in the literature and a missed opportunity for economic development in Ethiopia. Although a few researchers have explored the topic (Bayih and Singh, 2020a, 2020b; Mehret, 2019; Meron, 2018), the challenges and opportunities specific to this region remain largely unexamined. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the factors that impact domestic tourism in the South Wollo Zone, emphasising its growth potential and identifying the challenges that need to be addressed. By doing so, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of an underexplored area of Ethiopian tourism, offering insights that could inform strategies and policies to unlock the full potential of domestic tourism for both local and national economic development.

The study will have both practical and theoretical significance. The study will serve as a crucial tool for increasing the interest of government agencies, private-sector stakeholders, academics and the media in domestic tourism development. It will foster better-informed policy dialogues between the government and the private sector, aiming to more effectively exploit the tourism potential within the study areas. The findings will provide valuable insights for policymakers and regional and federal government bodies to enhance the benefits and address the challenges of domestic tourism. Additionally, travel agents and tour operators will benefit from understanding the potential in the study area for domestic tourism, enabling them to include these destinations in their itineraries. By identifying challenges, the research will help formulate appropriate interventions to support domestic tourism development.

The study will contribute to the academic understanding of the challenges and benefits of domestic tourism, offering a theoretical framework for analysing the utilisation of domestic tourism resources. It will enrich existing literature by providing new insights into how domestic tourism impacts various stakeholders and how it can be leveraged more effectively. The research will also benefit tourism planning experts and academics by expanding knowledge on domestic tourism dynamics, offering a basis for future studies and theoretical development for domestic tourism in an East African context.

## 2.1 Literature review

Tourism attractions, forms and modes of travel determine the different types of tourism (Boniface et al., 2016; Richards, 2002). Domestic tourism is taken as travelling within one's nation for pleasure or business (Kabote, Mamimine and Muranda, 2017). According to UNWTO (1995), it entails residents moving for a maximum of a year to a location other than their typical place of residence, without taking up paid remuneration upon arrival. This includes both overnight stays and shorter excursions (Mafi, Pratt and Trupp, 2020; Mensah and Boakye, 2023; Yuksel, 2004).

Globally, domestic tourism is dominant but often underrepresented in tourism statistics due to measurement challenges. In 2018, there were an estimated 9 billion domestic tourist trips (also known as overnight visitors) worldwide (World Tourism Organization, 2020).

Historically, domestic tourism is the oldest form of tourism, with unrecorded trips taking place long before the Common Era (Liebelt, 2019). In the past, physical and financial barriers limited leisure travel to the elite. The modern concept of domestic tourism gained popularity in the 19th century with the introduction of annual summer holidays in England, a response to the Industrial Revolution's improved transport and higher wages (Burton, 1995). This era saw the rise of domestic day trips and, eventually, the broader growth of domestic tourism as travel became more accessible to urban dwellers (Holloway and Humphreys, 2022).

More significantly, domestic tourism is considered a vibrant sector in emerging economies, aimed at transforming the sustainable tourism industry by achieving the goals outlined in the 2023 United Nations World Tourism Organization agenda for sustainable development (Agyeiwaah and McKercher, 2024; Ngondo, Hermann and Venter, 2024). Studies have highlighted that developing well-managed domestic tourism can help diversify the economy at the grassroots level, reduce the carbon footprint of destination areas and contribute to creating a more balanced world (Agyeiwaah and McKercher, 2024; Ngondo et al., 2024; Struwig and du Preez, 2024).

In recent years, domestic tourism has become a major driver of the global tourism sector, accounting for 73% of global tourism and travel industry spending in 2017. Global spending on domestic travel and tourism increased by about 18% in 2023 over the previous year as the industry recovered from the effects of COVID-19. In 2023, domestic visitors spent a total of approximately 4.86 trillion U.S. dollars on travel and tourism, which is the highest amount ever reported (Statista Research Department, 2024).

Beyond its economic significance, domestic tourism fosters national unity and builds a sense of national identity (Gedecho and Nyikana, 2023). Domestic travel has the potential to strengthen national sentiment by acting as an integrating force (Mitekaro, 2018). When people travel to different parts of their own country, they can develop a deeper appreciation for their national heritage, which may contribute to preventing regional fragmentation. According to Moufakkir (2010), domestic travel can promote national integration by increasing people's understanding of various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups as well as the shared interests of a nation's citizens.

Additionally, domestic tourism is crucial in supporting small-scale enterprises, as travellers often purchase and use locally produced goods and services (Scheyvens, 2015). It significantly contributes to local employment and the growth of locally managed small enterprises (Andriotis, 2005). Activities like running guesthouses, ferry services, selling handicrafts and operating small restaurants can directly contribute to poverty reduction in certain regions (Kwoba, 2018; Scheyvens and Momsen, 2020; Trupp, Shah and Hitchcock, 2023). This is particularly true in Ethiopia, where domestic tourism, such as attending religious festivals, benefits various segments of society, including those from lower economic backgrounds, by selling products and services to visitors.

In recent years, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing and most dynamic sectors within the travel and tourism industry for many nations (Ansarinassab and Saghalian, 2023). As international travel was hindered by restrictions, health concerns and economic challenges, countries increasingly turned to domestic tourism to sustain their tourism economies. This change has not only lessened the industry's financial losses but also brought attention to how crucial it is to support regional travel markets (Kowalczyk-Anioł, 2023; Trupp and Dolezal, 2020). Nations that had previously depended primarily on foreign visitors were compelled to modify their approaches to draw in domestic tourists,

which resulted in the expansion of local tourism facilities and services (Gasga, 2022). Research indicates that the increase in domestic travel is not a transitory reaction, but rather a long-term chance for sustainable expansion that will build a more resilient tourism sector less reliant on the vagaries of foreign travel (Matiza and Kruger, 2022; Nyikana and Bama, 2023).

## 2.2 Domestic tourism in Africa

Currently, tourism has played a decisive role in Africa's economic transformation (Zhou, 2022). Several African nations, such as Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, Mozambique, Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Morocco and Egypt, have captured significant portions of the tourism market, drawing both domestic and international visitors (Booyens and Visser, 2010; Kwoba, 2018; Melubo, 2020; Osiako and Szente, 2021; Rogerson, 2015).

In Africa, domestic tourism plays a significant role, contributing 56% of the continent's tourism revenue, with countries like Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana and others experiencing growth. Domestic tourism spent 82.3 billion dollars in Africa in 2019. In 2020, the statistics dropped to 48.1 billion dollars due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the domestic market started to recover and accounted for 67 billion dollars in Africa in 2021. This represented a 39.4% rise over the previous year (Galal, 2024).

Despite these positive trends, the development of domestic tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa has generally been slower compared to other African regions (Bakari, 2021; Novelli, 2015). Several factors hinder this growth. These factors such as lower engagement in domestic tourism, limited investment from governments to promote local travel and minimal competition among airlines in many African markets contribute to the slow development (Mato and Mosoma, 2022). High travel costs, including expenses for transportation and accommodation, further restrict travel frequency for many people (Makhaola and Proches, 2017).

## 2.3 Domestic tourism in Ethiopia

Ethiopian tourism development, particularly domestic tourism, is relatively recent (Wondirad, 2020). Historically, its impact on the Ethiopian economy was minimal until approximately five years ago (Eyassu et al., 2019; Mehiret, 2019). However, recent years have witnessed significant progress despite challenges related to political and social instability (Reda, 2021). Domestic tourism has become a crucial element of Ethiopia's tourism industry, with many Ethiopians travelling within the country for religious reasons, sporting events, conferences and business purposes (Ambaw and Nigatu, 2023).

Despite the growth, several challenges affect domestic tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa (Novelli, 2015; Nyasha, Odhiambo and Asongu, 2021). There is often limited awareness of affordable accommodation options, leading to the belief that travel is only for wealthy individuals. This perception reduces the likelihood of engaging in domestic tourism. Furthermore, most Africans lack a culture of saving for holiday travel, viewing it as a luxury rather than a priority. Travel is often considered an unnecessary expense unless it is for essential events such as funerals or weddings, with family responsibilities typically taking precedence. Additionally, the region's limited airline carriers and the dominance of international airlines restrict opportunities for regional travel.

## 2.4 Research methodology

Conceptually, the scope of the study was limited to assessing the opportunities and challenges of domestic tourism development. Geographically, the study is delimited the South Wollo Zone, more specifically to Dessie and its environs, including the Meqidella historic site, Gishen religious site, Woreillu town and palace ruins, Wuchalle historic sites, the statues of Geta Ambessa (Geta Lion) and Mekaneselam and its surroundings. These destinations were selected due to their rich heritage and historical significance.

We used the interpretivism research paradigm to understand the subjective meaning of social actions and to reveal interpretations and meanings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). As interpretive researchers, we emphasise the ‘understanding of the individual and their interpretation of the world around them’ (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017: 33). To reach conclusions and identify key findings, we went through a process that included data collection, analysis, interpretation and discussion of study design. We followed a qualitative research design. Utilising qualitative data was highly effective for identifying and analysing the challenges, opportunities and strategies related to domestic tourism. The choice of a qualitative research approach was motivated by its ability to provide valuable and comprehensive information on the subject matter of the study (Paraskevaidis and Andriotis, 2023). Utilising a qualitative approach was essential for uncovering the root issues and identifying potential strategies to promote domestic tourism development in the study area.

## 3 SAMPLING, SAMPLE SIZE AND METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

We used purposive sampling (a non-probability sampling method) because the quality of information is more crucial and relevant for studying the challenges faced by various destinations in becoming hubs for domestic tourism. In qualitative research, non-probability sampling techniques are preferred as they do not rely on probability theory but rather on the quality of the data gathered (Yin, 2014). Informants were selected purposively based on their knowledge regarding domestic tourism development in the South Wollo Zone.

The decision to use purposive sampling was based on its ability to identify key informants who can provide deep, well-informed insights on the topic. By ensuring that the perspectives of diverse and critical stakeholders, such as local government representatives, community members and domestic tourists, are included, a wide range of viewpoints is captured. Local community representatives were selected to provide a grassroots perspective on domestic tourism development and assess the community’s potential. Visitors were included to offer insights into practical areas for improvement and potential growth. Finally, government tourism officers were chosen to provide an authoritative perspective on policy implementation, tourism management and the alignment of local initiatives.

The sample was chosen from selected tourism destinations within the South Wollo Zone, including 26 participants selected purposively from local government tourism offices, visitors and community representatives. The researcher selected 10 community representatives, 10 visitors and 6 tourism sector government officers. This purposive selection of 26 participants across three key stakeholder groups ensures that the data collected directly supports the study’s objectives of understanding current barriers and identifying growth opportunities for developing domestic ecotourism in the South Wollo Zone.

We used interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) for this study. We conducted semi-structured interviews because they allow greater flexibility in the procedure and direction of the interviews (Kallio et al., 2016). This method allows respondents to speak in more detail and address the issues comprehensively. Semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate method as they facilitated two-way communication, allowing for a free flow of information between the respondents and the interviewer (Ruslin et al., 2022). They allow researchers to ask participants to elaborate on their answers, explore their perceptions and encourage them to freely share their ideas, experiences and views (Portugal, 2023). We used interview guiding questions related to the study objective. These interviews were conducted face-to-face, making them ideal for gaining insights and perspectives from a small number of respondents (Creswell, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are in-depth dialogues rather than closed-ended question-and-answer sessions.

Focus group discussion (FGD) is a widely utilised qualitative research method for data collection (Akyildiz and Ahmed, 2021). A focus group usually consists of 6–10 participants. The primary purpose of focus groups is to address ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions (Breen, 2007). This method was employed to validate findings obtained from personal interviews and questionnaires. Three FGDs were conducted in the study area to delve deeper into the research topics.

### **3.1 Methods of data management and analysis**

The data management activity in the qualitative study needs great care and is very challenging because it captures the thoughts and experiences of individuals from different contexts and data collection methods (Mack and Woodsong, 2005). To manage the data effectively, we started from the data collection stage of this research and maintained detailed notes on interview procedures and FGD guidelines.

In our data analysis, the emphasis was given to ‘sense-making’ or understanding a phenomenon, rather than predicting it (Bhattacharjee, 2012: 113). To provide a detailed understanding, the data were analysed using content and descriptive methods. Qualitative data require systematic analysis techniques to organise and describe the contents relevant to the study. The recorded data were transcribed into relevant categories and analysed based on the research questions posed. Moreover, we integrated used quotations in the presentation of the data analysis to illustrate key themes and insights. These quotations, ‘interspersed within selected paragraphs, can subtly signify richness of data’ (Eldh, Årestedt and Berterö, 2020: 2).

## **4 TRUSTWORTHINESS AND ETHICAL PRACTICES**

Trustworthiness in a qualitative study is associated with the credibility, transferability, conformability and dependability of the research (Bhattacharjee, 2012), and it is also a very challenging process (Paraskevaidis and Andriotis, 2023). To maintain the credibility of this research, three authors were involved in the field for a ‘prolonged’ time. Additionally, we faithfully transcribe interviews and maintain accurate records of interviews and documentation (Bhattacharjee, 2012). For transferability, we applied a thick description method (Geertz, 1973). The confirmability we maintained reflexive process – reflecting critically as a researcher and the human as an instrument (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The dependability of this qualitative study was checked with the experts and peers who are experienced in a qualitative study to review.

As qualitative researchers, we are often more flexible and adaptable rather than strictly predetermined. All the participants were given an informed consent form. In this form, we explained the purpose and benefits of participation, and their rights as research participants. Participants were informed about their voluntary participation and that they could withdraw at any time without reason. Besides informed consent, we maintained the confidentiality and privacy of the data and the participants. All information was kept confidential and protected from unauthorised access. We assure the confidentiality of the interviewees by making promises not to disclose his/her name in any report, paper, or public forum. The participant's identity was not identified in the quotations and recording (participant ID was used instead of a name).

#### 4.1 Data analysis and interpretation

In this paper, we analysed and discussed the potential of the South Wollo Zone of Ethiopia for developing domestic tourism. Moreover, we pointed out the opportunities and challenges that have impeded its growth as a domestic tourism destination. Additionally, this paper seeks to show the potential and the strategic interventions needed to unlock the domestic tourism potential of the area.

#### 4.2 Opportunities for domestic tourism development

The analysis of interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) data revealed that the study area is endowed with several significant opportunities for developing domestic tourism. These opportunities are summarised below.

*The presence of diverse resources:* Nestled in the heart of South Wollo Zone, a region rich in cultural, historical and natural treasures, it is a prime opportunity for domestic tourism to thrive. The abundance and diversity of tourism resources in this area provide a promising environment for the local tourism industry to thrive.

Among its many attractions, Gishen Debre Kirbe takes the centre stage as a religious pilgrimage site, drawing Ethiopian Orthodox Christians from all corners of the country. One participant highlighted its significance: *'For me, Gishen Debre Kirbe is not just a religious site; it's a place where faith and history converge, offering a unique spiritual experience that cannot be found anywhere else'* (Visitor participant P12). The presence of priceless and unique resources enhances its appeal, creating a prime opportunity for domestic tourism development. Pilgrims flock to this hub, making it a significant attraction for those seeking profound spiritual experiences.

Haik Abun Eysus Moa Monastery and its museum are invaluable resources for domestic tourism development. The monastery boasts a museum that houses a rich collection of artefacts and artworks, ranging from religious paintings to books on parchment, serving as a repository of the monastery's history. The craftsmanship of monks from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century is on display, making it a cultural gem that significantly contributes to domestic tourism.

The monastery community also plays a key role in enriching the visitor experience through their handicrafts and artworks, particularly their renowned weaving practices. One participant emphasised: *'Our weaving tradition is more than just a craft; it is a legacy passed down through generations, and visitors are always fascinated by the skill and dedication it requires'* (Monastery member Participant 4). Another participant added: *'The nuns are always busy creating beautiful items like Gabi and traditional clothes, which are sold here and in our shops in Hayq and Dessie. These crafts connect*

visitors with our heritage' (Monastery member participant 1). The vibrant production, sale and display of these craft products within the monastery compound and in nearby towns underscore the community's deep connection to their cultural heritage, further enhancing the appeal of the monastery as a domestic tourism destination.

The monastery and the local communities around Lake Hayq engage in various cultural practices considered intangible cultural heritages, offering significant potential for ecotourism development in the area. Among these practices, the annual celebration day and traditional church education at Hayq Estifanos Abune Iyesus Moa Communal Monastery stand out as major intangible tourism attractions.

A local community member remarked: *'This festival is our asset as an entire community comes together to honor our history and culture, and it is something we are deeply proud of'* (Local community participant 2). Visitors are also deeply moved by the experience. One visitor shared,

*Witnessing the St. Estifanos festival was a very interesting event during my visit on September 25 and 26. The songs, the dances, the sheer devotion, it was incredibly powerful and something that will stay with me for a long time adding to the long history of the monastery I have ever almost more than a thousand-year history.* (Visitor participant 14)

The visitor participants' experiences with the festival reflect broader findings in cultural heritage and tourism research, where festivals and community-based heritage celebrations show a significant role in nurturing a sense of pride, identity and unity within local communities. Similar studies have shown that festivals and events often symbolise collective identity and cultural continuity (Hassanli, Walters and Williamson, 2021; Li et al., 2021). Additionally, Deng, Ruan and Zhang (2023) suggest that festivals and cultural events enhance both community cohesion and cultural tourism by offering immersive experiences that allow visitors to connect more deeply with local traditions.

A member of the monastery added,

*Currently, we have heard that the local community accepts the celebration as part of their heritage, not just as something belonging to the monastery alone. This is very encouraging for us because when the local community embraces it as their heritage, it greatly contributes to the sustainability of the annual celebration. It also helps us create a deeper connection with the community.* (Visitor participant 14)

The festival day, with its rich traditions of religious dance, music and ululation, creates a captivating atmosphere that attracts not only local worshipers but also visitors from across Ethiopia. A domestic visitor noted.

*The timing of the festival, so close to Meskel, makes it a truly special experience. For example, I will be at Gishen Mariam on September 27 for Meskel (the Finding of the True Cross) and on September 30 and October 1 for the Gishen Mariam Pilgrimage. Now, I am here to celebrate the Haik Abune Eysus Moa festival on September 25.* (Visitor participant 16)

The proximity of the festival to the eve of Meskel, a major Christian holiday, further amplifies its significance, drawing pilgrims who travel to nearby Gishen Maryam. Additionally, the natural beauty of Lake Hayq, where visitors can raft, swim and explore, adds to the allure of the monastery as a destination that beautifully blends spiritual and ecological tourism.

The participant's reflection emphasises the potential of the monastery as a domestic tourism destination, highlighting its unique combination of educational heritage, natural beauty and cultural vibrancy. Previous research underscores the value of blending cultural heritage with natural beauty to increase tourism appeal. Douglas,

Hoogendoorn and Richards (2024) found that sites offering educational and cultural experiences in scenic settings can attract tourists strongly. The participant's emotional connection and desire to stay longer are consistent with Li et al.'s (2024) findings, which suggest that immersive experiences tied to local culture and heritage strengthen visitor engagement, fostering repeat visits.

The monastery's role as a centre for traditional church education adds another layer to its significance. The continuity of this educational legacy, with students chanting songs by the lakeside, creates a captivating atmosphere for tourists. The annual celebration day, marked by religious dances, music and ululation, provides a unique cultural experience for both tourists and believers. The monastery is regarded as one of the earliest Ethiopian universities, with a history of attracting numerous students for advanced church education in theology, philosophy and other disciplines. Many scholars from this period wrote significant religious, philosophical, medicinal and astronomical texts, some of which are displayed in the monastery's museum, highlighting its historical importance in church education.

A participant highlighted the potential of the area for domestic tourism.

*I observed that at this monastery, the blend of traditional education, stunning lakeside views, and vibrant cultural celebrations makes it a place you never want to leave. It was so captivating that it overwhelmed my emotions and made me want to stay for a long time. It's not just a place of worship but a living piece of history that offers a rich, immersive experience. I felt truly blessed by the continuous singing of the traditional education students throughout the day and night. (Visitor participant 19)*

This unique combination of educational heritage, scenic beauty and cultural vibrancy underscores the area's significant potential for domestic tourism development.

The presence of Jema Nigus stands out as a significant opportunity for domestic tourism development. Every year, the birthday of Prophet Mohammed is celebrated here, attracting an estimated 80,000 visitors who stay for three days to participate in various ceremonial activities. However, the lack of modern infrastructure and accommodation limits the site's potential.

A local community member highlighted the significance of this opportunity, stating.

*Jema Nigus is a place of immense spiritual and cultural importance. If we had better facilities, we could accommodate even more pilgrims and showcase our traditions to a wider audience. The festival not only brings people together but also offers a glimpse into our rich cultural heritage. (Mosques personnel participant 2)*

In addition to Jema Nigus, other attractions in South Wollo Zone, such as the Geta Mosque, established in the mid-19th century, and the annual commemoration of Adwa's victory, contribute to the region's cultural richness. The collaborative efforts of Wollo University and the South Wollo Zone Culture and Tourism Department further solidify the area's status as a historic destination. Meqidela Historic Sites and Dessie, with its historic palaces and the Dessie Museum, also play a role in attracting visitors. The Mosque of Deger Aba Shehiye, built in 1868, and its annual celebration of Prophet Mohammed's birth draw thousands of followers. Additionally, events like the Aholele Cultural Festival and Abegare in Tehuldere Woreda, along with Lake Haik's natural beauty and historic sites like Tedbabe Maryam and Aba Giworgis Gasicha, contribute to the region's potential for domestic tourism development.

**Government commitment to domestic tourism development:** Overall industry negligence over the years has resulted in the underdevelopment of diversified natural, cultural and historical tourism resources. Despite having the largest number of world

heritage sites in Africa, Ethiopia attracts less than a million international tourists annually, placing it at the lower end of tourist destinations in Africa. However, the Ethiopian government has recently emphasised tourism development at the federal, regional and local levels, with a particular focus on domestic tourism as a viable growth tool.

An office representative from the South Wollo Zone Tourism office noted,

*We recognize that the underdevelopment of our tourism resources has been a significant issue. However, we are now actively prioritizing tourism development across all sectors, especially domestic tourism. It is crucial not only for boosting our economy but also for poverty alleviation, as outlined in our Growth and Transformation Plan. Our goal is to leverage Ethiopia's rich heritage to create more opportunities and attract a larger number of visitors.* (Office participant 23)

The office representative's statement highlights the strategic importance of tourism development in the South Wollo Zone, emphasising the untapped potential of tourism resources, particularly domestic tourism. This focus aligns with Ethiopia's broader economic objectives, such as poverty alleviation and economic growth, which are central components of the country's Growth and Transformation Plan (Tegenu, 2010). The representative's remarks reflect a growing recognition that leveraging Ethiopia's rich cultural and natural heritage can play a crucial role in driving economic opportunities and increasing visitor numbers.

Similar studies underscore the role of tourism in economic development, particularly in developing countries. For instance, studies by Agyeiwaah and McKercher (2024) have shown that well-managed domestic tourism can significantly contribute to diversifying local economies and reducing poverty. Likewise, Demissie (2024) highlights the significance of domestic tourism in Ethiopia's economic development, suggesting that the promotion of cultural heritage sites not only increases tourist inflows but also stimulates broader economic benefits.

*The friendliness of the local community:* The local community's hospitality and tourist-friendly nature are well recognised in Wollo, particularly in the South Wollo Zone. The communities here are known for their warm hospitality and tolerance, with a long-standing tradition of welcoming visitors and respecting diverse religious practices.

A resident emphasised this, stating.

*Our community has always been open and welcoming to visitors. We take pride in our hospitality and are eager to share our traditions and culture with those who come here. Our religious tolerance and friendly relationships are deeply rooted in our history, and we believe they play a crucial role in making our area a welcoming place for tourists.* (Local community participant 7)

In conclusion, the South Wollo Zone of Ethiopia is a region rich in untapped opportunities for domestic tourism development. Its diverse array of natural, cultural, historical and religious attractions positions it as a potential hub for local tourism growth. Key sites like Gishen Debre Kirbe, a major religious pilgrimage destination, and the Haik Abun Eysus Moa Monastery, with its extensive collection of artefacts and traditional crafts, offer unique cultural and spiritual experiences. Moreover, the annual celebrations and religious events, such as those at Jema Nigus and the historic commemoration of Adwa's victory, draw large numbers of visitors, highlighting the region's vibrant cultural heritage. Despite the region's vast potential, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and limited promotion have hindered the full realisation of its tourism capabilities. However, with growing government commitment to domestic tourism as a tool for economic development and the inherent hospitality of the local

communities, South Wollo Zone stands poised to become a significant contributor to Ethiopia's domestic tourism sector.

### 4.3 Domestic tourism development challenges

*The absence of clear statistical information to measure the change and continuities of domestic tourism development:* It is a known fact that measuring tourism is a difficult task. Measuring statistical information about domestic tourism is more difficult as compared to international tourism. In our study areas, there was a significant lack of reliable data on the number of domestic tourists. While some numeric reports are released by the South Wollo Zone and Woreda Culture and Tourism offices, these reports are often problematic, as indicated by responses from domestic tourism promotion experts in the South Wollo Zone. Many experts at the Woreda level report numbers inaccurately, leading to either over-reporting or under-reporting of tourist numbers.

This over-reporting and under-reporting of the statistical information in its full information creates a great problem for the development of domestic tourism in the study area. As one of our office participants expressed,

*'The absence of clear statistical information creates a problem on how to know the magnitude of domestic tourism...it also very challenging for planning and development of physical facilities and infrastructural requirements'* (Officer participant 25). The other informant also added that the lack of clear statistical information about tourism development in the study area creates a problem in marketing and promotion work. The participant stated that: *'Is very difficult to market and promote the destination for domestic tourism without knowing the profile of tourists/visitors, their physiological, psychological, and sociological wants of visitors and the tourist fashions and changes that are essential for an effective marketing campaign'* (Officer participant 24). The absence of clear statistical information about domestic tourism in the study area has also a negative implication on the administration as well as the decision-making process for the development of domestic tourism.

*Low recognition of domestic tourism:* The interviewee respondents affirmed that the attitude towards taking a tour as a domestic tourist in the study area is very low. The local middle-income communities do not fully recognise domestic tourism as a major component of national tourism. The interviewees also agreed that there is a low level of promotion and marketing for domestic tourism, partly due to the perception that domestic tourists spend less than international tourists. One participant added: *'Many in our community still view domestic tourism as less important compared to international tourism. There's a belief that domestic tourists don't contribute as much economically. This mindset has led to insufficient marketing and support for domestic tourism'* (Local community participant 1).

*Lack of interest among travel agencies and tour operators to market the area as a domestic tourism spot:* An officer from the South Wollo Zone Tourism office affirmed that,

*It's clear that Dessie and its surrounding areas have significant potential as tourist destinations, yet they are not being effectively marketed. Many tour operators have yet to not to include the area as a package holiday route...this destination is not part of the Ethiopian historic route, which hinders the growth of local tourism. We need more targeted efforts and collaboration to highlight these regions and create appealing travel packages that can attract both local and international visitors and need to work with operators to include the area in the historic tourist destination of Ethiopia as a wider package.*

*Lack of strong planning framework and policy on domestic tourism development:* One of the key findings of this study is that participants indicated that both the study area and the country as a whole lack a robust and effective planning framework, as well as policy guidelines for domestic tourism development. The destination needs a comprehensive and integrated planning scheme incorporated by different stakeholders like tour guides, tour operators, travel agencies, hotels and other hospitality establishments, local communities, transport facilitators and other domestic tourism-providing institutions and organisations.

*Limitation on the marketing and promotion of domestic tourism:* In Ethiopia, both domestic tourism and the tourism industry encounter challenges related to limited marketing and promotional efforts. Large-scale advertising on Televisions, Radios and other internet Media to promote domestic tourism for a larger audience is minimal in this study area. Using marketing and promotion tools as a balancing factor of the demands and supplies of tourism products and services is very minimal too. For the development of domestic tourism, travellers need updated information to select their destination. Besides traditional passive marketing practices (like television advertisement), it is necessary to promote the destination of the study area by using online social media to the public. Online social media marketing and promotion can be a way forward to create interactive conversations and build customer relationships. Social media marketing is necessary to encourage readers to share the message with their social networks and groups that influence people's decisions about the journey they plan to make. Therefore, marketing and promotion tools must be used to develop domestic tourism and attract travellers.

*Lack of organised trips/tours targeted domestic tourism:* The existing trip and tour organisations in Ethiopia boldly targeted international tourism, emphasising international travel domestic one. Many of the tour operators and travel agencies in Ethiopia have no clear marketing strategy towards domestic tourists because they do not consider domestic tourism a lucrative sector. Therefore, the tour organisers should consider the domestic market in their package tour to facilitate the development.

*Control of the domestic tourism market by external operators and brokers, rather than local communities and entrepreneurs:* This challenge is majorly seen in the domestic pilgrimage tourism in Gishern Debre Kirbe Mariyam, especially during the September and January celebrations. Such domestic pilgrimage tourism was organised by external brokers and event organisers, not by the local operators. This also creates economic leakages. The local communities only benefited from a small portion of the domestic pilgrimage tourism due to the domination of external event organisers and brokers. One of our participants indicated that: *'The local communities reap a few benefits from tourism ... the majority of the benefit was leaked to external promoters and traders because of the over domination of the tourism and related services by them during the celebration of St. Mary at Gishen Debere Kirbe'* (Officer participant 25).

*Failure to create competitive new tourism products:* In this study area, the tourism products vary from unique natural features to cultural practices like religious celebrations and many cultural expressions from traditional to modern. However, the varied resources are not competitive enough through value addition and new product development schemes. Currently, only a limited number of products are actively marketed, while others remain underutilised and overlooked as potential tourism offerings.

*Low recognition of domestic tourism both from the locals and operators:* The local communities did not consider the local travellers as tourists. They think the tourists are only ‘white people’ or consider tourism as an industry for the enjoyment of white people not for the locals. Many of the local communities believed that domestic tourism is not as important for the local economic revenue and as a means of conservation of nature and culture.

Other challenges in the sector include safety and security concerns. Unfortunately, these safety and security issues are impeding the growth of domestic tourism in Ethiopia. In particular, the political upheaval and unrest over the past two years have significantly impacted the development of domestic tourism in the South Wollo Zone. According to our participants, the number of pilgrims/domestic tourists who came to Gishen Debre Kirbe has decreased nearly by half the number from the previous years due to security issues and the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5 POSSIBLE STRATEGIES

From the voices of the interview participants and FGD discussants, the following strategic tools are suggested to develop the sector in the South Wollo zone. Facilitating links at the destination level between local entrepreneurs, tourism business operators, and communities is the first strategic tool.

The FGD discussants highlighted that many businesses in the study area, such as hotels, pensions, guesthouses and other business entities, operate independently. However, the business operators, entrepreneurs and local communities do not collaborate at the destination level to fully tap into the business and growth opportunities available. Establishing destination-level linkages among different stakeholders is crucial for creating a conducive business environment, which is essential for both domestic and international travellers. By leveraging the opportunities in the study area, business operators can strengthen their competitive advantage and enhance guest satisfaction. Most interviewees believed that destination-level business linkage is vital if stakeholders work together to explore the untapped domestic tourism potential of the study areas, such as religious festivals, cultural expressions and community ways of life. Therefore, fostering both business and non-business linkages among tourism business operators, local entrepreneurs, and local communities is essential for developing the domestic tourism potential of the study areas.

The second strategy pointed out by the participants of this study is incentivising public employees via different mechanisms. One of our interview participants stressed that,

*To increase the participation level of public employees in domestic tour culture we need to partner with local tourism operators to offer special discounts and packages. Imagine if they could get reduced prices for accommodation, guided tours, transportation, and even entry fees to attractions. That would motivate them to explore our local destinations. (Officer participant 9)*

The participants in the FGDs identified several strategies and mechanisms to incentivise public employees to engage in domestic tourism activities. These mechanisms include implementing a voucher system that provides travel credits or vouchers redeemable at various tourism spots within the study areas. Additional strategies involve offering additional leave days or flexible working arrangements for public employees who choose to travel domestically, as well as launching targeted campaigns and organising informational sessions or exhibitions within government offices.

The third strategy is creating awareness for different sectors regarding domestic tourism. As indicated by the interviewees, awareness creation programmes are the best strategy to educate and orient different stakeholders and tourism operators on the importance of domestic tourism.

The fourth strategy forwarded by the study participants is promoting and strengthening the supply chain between service providers. Therefore, the government must recognise the connection between tourism and other sectors, such as agriculture and handicrafts. A thorough study could be conducted to identify effective and innovative methods for integrating local communities into the tourism supply chain. Additionally, suppliers and service providers should collaborate to enhance their relationships within this chain.

Last but not least, strategies include developing a domestic tourism brand, maximising infrastructure and service facilities at destinations, and improving the management and administration of domestic tourism. In addition, these strategies emphasise human resources development, capacity-building programmes, and new product development and value addition.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to analyse the opportunities and challenges for domestic tourism in selected destinations within the South Wollo Zone in Ethiopia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the minimal impact of domestic tourism, the study identified several promising opportunities for its growth. These include the government's commitment, the development of diverse tourism resources, the local community's hospitality and the occurrence of numerous cultural and religious events that hold significance for domestic tourism development. However, the study also brought to light various challenges and bottlenecks hindering domestic tourism development in the area. These encompass the absence of clear statistical information to measure the changes and continuities in domestic tourism, low recognition of the sector and a lack of enthusiasm among travel agencies and tour operators in marketing the area as a spot for domestic tourism. Furthermore, there is an absence of a robust planning framework and policy for domestic tourism development, limitations in marketing and promotion, and a dearth of organised trips or tours targeting domestic tourism. Moreover, the control of the existing domestic tourism market is largely in the hands of external operators and brokers rather than local community/entrepreneurs, and there is generally low recognition of domestic tourism, both locally and among national operators. The study forwarded possible strategies that were identified by the participants.

## 7 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been forwarded based on the findings of the study:

- There is a need for rigorous and collaborative marketing and promotion. Different tourism operators and tourism-related service providers should come together and develop strong marketing programmes for domestic tourism development.
- We think that to develop domestic tourism it is necessary to develop a long-term plan and strategy.

- It is good to work on increasing the accessibility of the domestic tourism destinations. As found from our observations, many of the destinations in the study area are not accessible to domestic visitors.
- It is crucial to facilitate destination-level linkages between tourism businesses, local entrepreneurs and residents. This helps to increase the supply chain in service provision and increase the domestic tourism significance.
- The culture and tourism office should act as a catalyst in the development of destination forums, facilitating profitable and sustainable linkages between different stakeholders for domestic tourism development.

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