

Article

Agritourism as an Emerging Sustainable Tourism Industry in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: The primary aim is to provide a review of the benefits of agritourism for developing countries, such as the Central Asian country of Uzbekistan. This literature review discusses the importance of agritourism as a sustainable tourism strategy for the government and key stakeholders to support raising the standard of living and poverty levels of farmers and their families who are living in rural areas of Uzbekistan. The research method uses a literature review of the scientific research on agritourism in Uzbekistan. This was achieved through an extensive search of databases through the use of keywords that were collected to analyze and determine whether there were any gaps in the literature. This paper concludes that for less developed countries such as the Republic of Uzbekistan, agritourism is still in its initial stages of development and provides mainly economic benefits. This is because, in Uzbekistan, almost half of its population lives in rural areas and relies on the economic benefits of agriculture as their main source of subsistence and employment. However, in the future, there is a need to further develop new and innovative programs for agritourism businesses that can also promote the environmental and socio-cultural benefits for tourists to increase visitation to rural areas.

Keywords: agritourism; rural tourism; agriculture; economic benefits; sustainable benefits; socio-cultural benefits; Uzbekistan

**Citation:** Patterson, I.; Aslam, M.U.Agritourism as an Emerging Sustainable Tourism Industry in Uzbekistan. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 7519. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16177519>

Academic Editor: Colin Michael Hall

Received: 3 July 2024

Revised: 20 August 2024

Accepted: 27 August 2024

Published: 30 August 2024



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1. Introduction

Agritourism is derived from the term agriculture, which has been described as a means of allowing travelers to immerse themselves more deeply into the local culture and environment and to learn more about sustainable farming practices, which is termed agritourism. It was noted as early as 2004 that agritourism should be considered a sustainable strategy as it promotes the conservation of a rural environment through its socioeconomic development [1]. In addition, agritourism helps farmers preserve rural traditions, landscapes, and agricultural knowledge. UNWTO described sustainable principles as referring to the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee the long-term sustainability of tourism [2]. This is because the health of the environment is a major concern as the global population continues to grow, resulting in climate change-driven impacts that are accelerating, to the extent that the IPCC Report stated with 95% certainty that human activity is the dominant cause of observed warming since the mid-20th century [3].

Economic motives are seen to be the most important drivers for agritourism development that can assist agriculturalists in coping with the economic risks associated with fluctuations in the marketplace and climate change [4]. Over the last few years, rural areas have faced a wide range of problems that include an increase in unemployment rates, emigration to major cities, impoverishment of the soil, hydrogeological instability, and loss of agricultural traditions [5]. Agritourism is seen to be a new source of generating income and adding value, especially for developing countries. The additional revenue

stream comes from offering guests overnight accommodation and farm tours that can be crucial to the livelihood of small farms, diversifying their farming business, and providing a more stable income for farmers [6].

Sustainability is more than just the preservation of the natural environment; it is about considering the economic and social impacts of what we do and how we do it [7]. Sustainable practices respect and support the integrity of local cultures by purchasing local goods and participating with small, local businesses. They favor businesses that conserve cultural heritage and traditional values and support local economies [8]. Thus, sustainable tourism interventions require an understanding of both the social and demographic trends that influence traveler behavior and how well tourism products and service providers are able to cater to these needs and expectations [9].

EMR reports (<https://straitresearch.com/report/agritourism-market/>, accessed on 24 August 2024) that the global agritourism market size was worth USD 45,395 million in 2021. It is estimated to reach an expected value of USD 141 billion by 2030, growing at a CAGR of 13.4% during the forecast period (2022–2030). Revenue from agritourism in India is growing at an annual growth rate of 20% [10], whereas, in Yunnan, China, agritourism not only provides additional income and new occupations for rural communities but also has improved environmental preservation [11]. In the US, farm agritourism revenue has more than tripled between 2002 and 2017, and when adjusted for inflation, agritourism revenue grew from USD 704 million in 2012 to almost USD 950 million in 2017 [12].

The scope of this study will focus on the benefits of agritourism—from an economic, environmental, and socio-cultural perspective. It will also concentrate on the developing Central Asian country of Uzbekistan, where up to half of the population lives in rural areas, who mainly rely on agriculture as a means of employment, and for many it is their main means of subsistence. Agritourism also provides educational benefits, especially for developed countries, which include hospitality for farm-stay visitors, outdoor recreation, and different forms of entertainment.

The significance of this study is that it provides new evidence to support the importance of sustainable tourism in rural areas of Uzbekistan as a balance between the three pillars of tourism development—the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural that aim to guarantee the long-term sustainability of tourism. Sustainability is about more than just looking after the natural environment; it is also about considering the economic and social impacts of what and how we do it. This is becoming of increasing concern as the global population continues to grow, resulting in climate change-driven impacts that are now beginning to accelerate, especially for farmers in rural areas.

Agritourism is a sustainable tourism business that respects and supports the integrity of local cultures through the purchase of local goods and participation with small, local businesses in rural areas. There is a need to support businesses that conserve cultural heritage and traditional values in the agriculture and farming sector and to assist local economies that conserve resources that are environmentally conscious, using the least possible amounts of non-renewable resources. In the least developed countries, economic motives are regarded as the most important drivers of agritourism development that assist agriculturalists in coping with the economic risks associated with fluctuations in the marketplace and climate change [13].

2. Materials and Methods

This paper links together the concepts of agriculture and tourism. Conceptual papers are generally regarded as papers without data that focus on integration and proposing new relationships among different constructs. In this case, the focus is on an examination of the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits of agritourism in rural areas. It focuses on the Republic of Uzbekistan as a developing country where approximately 50% of the population lives in rural areas. This paper will attempt to link the research findings using several sources, including an iterative search of multiple literature databases such as the Web of Science, Scopus, Researchgate, and Google Scholar.

Several databases were accessed and searched using a predetermined set of keywords, which were modified to reflect their findings and to ensure their relevance to the research topic. A total of 38 research studies that were published between 2004 and 2024 were identified, retrieved, and analyzed using the following keywords: agriculture, agritourism, rural areas, economic benefits, sustainable benefits, educational agritourism, and Uzbekistan, to identify research gaps on the topic. This enabled a review of the agritourism literature and highlighted areas of interest to draw together the key findings of different researchers. Each of the published articles that were selected used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and each of the variables was scrutinized through an in-depth analysis.

3. Results

The scope of this paper begins with a section on the common definitions of agritourism, followed by a discussion of the economic benefits of agritourism in the least-developed countries, with an emphasis on the central Asian country of Uzbekistan.

3.1. Definitions of Agritourism

Categories such as farm tourism, farm-based tourism, agritourism, agricultural tourism, and rural tourism have been used interchangeably in the research literature over the years [13]. However, agritourism is not synonymous with rural tourism; rather, it is seen as a specific subset of rural tourism, which is a much broader concept [14].

One of the most inclusive definitions of agritourism was developed by the National Agricultural Law Center as “a form of commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or processing with tourism to attract visitors onto a farm, ranch, or other agricultural business for the purposes of entertaining and/or educating the visitors while generating income for the farm, ranch, or business owner” [15]. Agritourism includes the following four factors: it combines the essential elements of the tourism and agricultural industries; attracts members of the public to visit agricultural operations; is designed to increase farm income; and provides recreation, entertainment, and/or educational experiences for visitors [16].

Agritourism is seen as a sustainable activity that mainly concentrates on the economic benefits in the least developed countries; however, these can be further augmented in the more developed countries to include environmental and social benefits. Research studies have suggested that agritourism can be the right tool to balance the needs of tourists in rural communities, offering “real opportunities for economic and social development while mitigating the undesirable impacts on the environment” [17].

3.2. Agritourism in the Least Developing Countries

It has been well documented that agritourism is regarded as an attractive economic strategy because it allows farmers to generate additional income from existing farm assets (land, labor, and machinery) that may be underutilized or remain idle for significant periods of time to moderate seasonal fluctuations in farm cash flow and to expand on-farm employment opportunities for family members [18]. Farm-based tourism can increase the overall revenue and net income of farming communities [19]. Another economic benefit is that agritourism attracts tourists from the cities to rural areas as a stimulus for other local activities such as agrifood producers, festivals, crafts, restaurants, and shopping [20].

In less developing countries such as India and Pakistan, agritourism affords the main means of raising the standard of living of farmers from a basic subsistence level to a better, more sustainable lifestyle. Over the last few years, diminishing agricultural yields have resulted in many farmers being forced to adopt an alternative agritourism business to support their overall income from the land. Otherwise, they would be forced into a life of poverty. One of the more recent positive strategies to encourage the agritourism industry in India was initiated by the Agri Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) to train more than 500 farmers over the past four years under their Agri Tourism Training Program [21].

Several other studies have found that agritourism operations benefit the surrounding communities, with economic benefits providing the most significant contribution. This is because the increased traffic flow of tourists resulted in diversified streams of income for agricultural producers within the local economy. Agritourism farms can also serve as a stimulus for other local activities such as agrifood producers, crafts, restaurants, and shops. The combination of tourism, agriculture, and industry also stimulates the creation of parallel production based on wine production, improved infrastructure, and wine routes that have been based on European models. Wine trips, visits to vineyards and producers, tastings, and the purchase of wine from producers have also been found to be popular with tourists [22].

New business models have been developed with the aim of guaranteeing competitive advantages for farmers to improve their farm revenue streams so that they can take a more active role in the agrifood system and develop new consumer niche markets [23]. Therefore, agritourism has been found to minimize the negative effects of tourism and to serve the dual purpose of enhancing the well-being of financially distressed rural communities and contributing to sustainable tourism development [24]. Finally, it was found that agriculturally intensive tourism and environmentally friendly agritourism can help to improve domestic welfare and reduce the urban unemployment rate in a developing country [25].

3.3. Uzbekistan

The Republic of Uzbekistan is situated in Central Asia and became a republic in 1991 when it achieved independence from the Soviet Union. It is a dry, hot country surrounded by a total of five landlocked countries: Kazakhstan to the north, Kyrgyzstan to the northeast, Tajikistan to the southeast, Afghanistan to the south, and Turkmenistan to the southwest. Uzbekistan is best known for its historical and cultural attractions, of which 140 have been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List [26].

Its central location is at the crossroads of the Great Silk Road, which was a system of caravan routes established in ancient times that connected Asia with the Mediterranean and European worlds. Lonely Planet (n/d) described Uzbekistan as “the region’s cradle of culture for more than two millennia. Uzbekistan is the proud home to a spellbinding arsenal of architecture and ancient cities, all deeply infused with the bloody, fascinating history of the Silk Road. In terms of sights alone, Uzbekistan is Central Asia’s biggest draw and most impressive showstopper” [27].

Around 50% of the population resides in rural areas, and approximately 23% engage in agricultural activities as their main livelihood. Around 15% live in poverty [28], although rural poverty has gradually decreased from 13.7% in 2015 to 11.5% in 2020. Agriculture plays a major role in the economy of Uzbekistan, with a 1.7% annual growth rate, contributing 18% to the GDP and providing employment for around 15 million people, many of whom are underemployed [29]. There were 67,804 farms in 2016 (State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan), and the agricultural industry has been recognized as being important in reducing poverty and promoting rural development [30].

The main crop grown in Uzbekistan is cotton, followed by wheat, barley, rice, maize, potato, vegetables, and fruits. Cotton and grain production account for 82.2% of all cultivation areas. The bulk of the nation’s water resources are used for farming, which accounts for nearly 84% of the water use and contributes to high soil salinity. A total of 3.7 million people worked in the agricultural sector in 2017 (27.2% of the total number who are employed). However, the rights of farmers to use leased land are very limited and poorly protected. In recent years, Uzbekistan has become a major exporter of high-quality and competitive fruit and vegetable products [31].

In 2013, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan issued a Decree that supported “Additional measures to accelerate the development of services in rural areas in 2013–2016”. This aimed to promote the accelerated and balanced development of the service sector in rural areas, the expansion of access of rural populations to modern high-tech and market

services, the creation of new jobs, and the increase in the income of the population. This Decree placed emphasis on the development of rural tourism services based on ecological, health-improving, and sports tourism in rural areas, as well as the development of home-based guest houses [32].

The growth of tourism revenue has increased substantially between 2018 and 2020. In 1996, tourist revenue only amounted to USD 15 million, which was approximately 0.11% of gross national product, with the number of tourists totaling 173,000 visitors. By 2018, the country's growth in tourism had increased substantially, with revenue amounting to USD 1.31 billion, or 2.6% of GDP. In addition, the total number of tourists has also increased exponentially to 5.35 million. In 2019, Uzbekistan recorded a total of 6.75 million tourists [33].

4. Discussion

This section begins with a discussion of the importance of developing agritourism in Uzbekistan. It concentrates on an examination of the importance of its economic benefits that help to support the raising of subsistence living standards of farming agricultural products in a developing country. The next section emphasizes the importance of developing the environmental and socio-cultural benefits of agritourism to guarantee the long-term sustainability of tourism. Finally, a case study of the Uzum Fermer Winery was used to show how an agritourism business can successfully provide a range of sustainable tourism practices and products to attract and satisfy both international and domestic tourists.

4.1. Economic Benefits of Agritourism in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is a developing country that has been described as having great potential for the development of agritourism in its rural areas because of the diversified resources and increasing government investment in the growth of this sector, as well as support by USAID. USAID is supporting private sector-led growth in Uzbekistan's agriculture sector by introducing new value-added technologies and management practices across the entire value chain for targeted agricultural commodities [34].

It has been emphasized that agritourism can provide the opportunity for tourists to enjoy the rural landscape, amenities, and lifestyle, to become acquainted with local life traditions, and to engage with local people in undertaking traditional farming activities [29]. In some cases, tourists may be provided with the opportunity to work side by side with the farmer on rural activities. This allows tourists to enjoy an environmentally friendly environment and to be exposed to local traditions and cultures. In addition, other rural tourism services, such as horseback riding and bicycle riding, are also attractive for rural tourists.

In the initial stage of development, agritourism has mainly provided economic benefits for rural farmers in Uzbekistan, who are looking for alternative means of income because of their low subsistence living standards and, in some cases, high poverty levels caused by fluctuations in the agricultural marketplace. This is due to its impoverished soil, hydrogeological instability, and loss of agricultural traditions caused by large numbers of people emigrating from rural areas to the major cities. However, one of the main barriers that restricts its growth in Central Asia is that most rural residents do not have the knowledge and business skills necessary to successfully implement sustainable agritourism practices.

This lack of knowledge about agritourism was found to be a major finding in a study conducted from a questionnaire survey of 110 farmers in 14 districts in the Samarkand region of Uzbekistan [35]. The results showed that only 12% of farmers were familiar with the concept of agritourism, 47% of farmers had heard of it, and 41% did not know anything about it. However, although 36% of farmers surveyed stated that they were interested in engaging in agritourism activities, most stated that they were facing a poor socioeconomic situation and a lack of knowledge about how to begin. The researchers concluded that this was because there was a lack of scientific literature available on the development of agritourism in Uzbekistan.

4.2. Environmental Benefits of Agritourism in Uzbekistan

In a more advanced stage of development, agrotourism has been described as a sustainable tourism strategy that seeks to increase environmental awareness and assist the well-being of surrounding communities [36], as well as decrease the adverse environmental impacts [14]. This can include tourists staying in overnight accommodation on farms, as well as farm tours for those who are seeking a ‘back to nature’ escape and to have memorable interactions with local cultures and traditions. In most European countries, agritourism includes all core tourism activities that take place in the countryside as a supplement to farm business. It can also be designated as a type of ecotourism because it is seen as the act of taking a journey to natural areas that are relatively undisturbed [37].

In Uzbekistan, the adoption of sustainable farming practices such as water-efficient irrigation methods and organic farming can help to mitigate environmental impacts and enhance the sustainability of agritourism. This approach can also help to protect Uzbekistan’s natural landscapes while at the same time offering educational experiences to visitors about sustainable agriculture and conservation [38]. The essence of agritourism in Uzbekistan lies in tourists visiting rural areas for the purpose of recreation and conducting cultural and leisure activities in ecologically ‘clean’ areas [39].

As a result, an agritourism farm needs to concentrate on making its production more ecologically and environmentally ‘clean’ because this is more likely to attract tourists. However, modern techniques used in farm production are not always seen as an attraction for most agritourists, whereas traditional and indigenous methods of agricultural production are found to be of greater importance [40]. Overall, the environmental dimension has not been well covered in the agritourism literature, both in mono- and multi-perspective studies, and should be addressed much more by scholars in the future [19].

4.3. Socio-Cultural Benefits of Agritourism in Uzbekistan

Several researchers have emphasized the existence of non-monetary benefits of agritourism, such as for education and entertainment [14]. Agritourism can be used as an ‘incredible educational tool’, as the agritourism farm is based on two educational principles: direct experience and observation. Educational agritourism promotes a farm-stay experience that attracts tourists and students for educational purposes, either for fun or for active involvement in farm activities in a rural environment. This involves visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural, or agribusiness operation to enjoy, be educated from experience, or simply become actively involved in the core activities of the farm or operation [9]. In this sense, agritourism is seen as tourism that allows guests to stay in accommodation on a working farm and to participate in its farming operations. This trend reflects a shift towards slow travel and immersive experiences as a number of tourists are seeking ‘back to nature’ and memorable interactions with local cultures [41].

Baymuradova [42] discussed what were the main driving forces for tourists when choosing an agritourism farm experience in Uzbekistan: the need to restore health, eating “environmentally friendly” products, and gaining an understanding of a different way of living. Furthermore, agritourism provides the opportunity to “live for several days in a real atmosphere of an Uzbek home, feeling all the charm of a simple life, plunging into the ancient culture, and touching the land with centuries-old traditions” (p. 84). The main areas where rural tourism has already been well developed in Uzbekistan were the Jizzakh and Navoi regions and the Nurata Biological Reserve, which is on the northern slopes of the Nurata Ridge, where guest houses have been established in villages such as Old Forish, Ukhum, Hayot, and Majrum. Here, guests can be taught horseback riding, milking a cow, mowing hay, churning butter, spinning yarn, picking cotton, embroidery, and other practical skills.

Educational activities in rural areas can also offer opportunities for learning agricultural techniques in the production (crops, fruits, and vegetables) and manufacturing of agricultural products, while rural cultural heritage is also a substantial component of agritourism [42]. Agritourism can also be created by displaying traditional agricul-

tural implements, techniques, and technologies. These attractions might include old farm machinery and equipment, seeds of traditional crop varieties, old farm buildings, and photographs of old and traditional farming techniques and systems. Further suggestions for the development of socio-cultural activities include gardening, feeding livestock, fishing, apiculture, wine or beer production, master classes on baking bread in the oven, and organizing summer schools for children in villages. Thus, educational agritourism can be seen as a strategic alternative to mass tourism as it provides first-hand experiences of how agricultural products are produced and marketed, raising awareness about healthy food and developing nutritious dietary habits.

4.4. A Case Study of Uzum Fermer Winery

Uzum Fermer Winery is an example of a successful agritourism business in Uzbekistan. Situated on the outskirts of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Uzum Fermer was established by Rashid and Zimfira Akhunov in 2008 and has grown from one hectare into a 21-hectare estate over the years. It includes vineyards, an exotic garden, a terraced restaurant with views of the mountains, a mini-hotel, and modern wineries that blend traditional viticulture with innovative tourism services.

The winery offers a comprehensive tourism experience that combines guided tours, wine tastings, and luxurious accommodations. These tours provide an overview of the farm's history, a walk through the exotic garden, and an exploration of the vineyards and winery. In the vineyards, guests are introduced to the eight methods of grape cultivation and shown the various grape varieties grown on the farm. The on-site mini-hotel offers ten rooms, each with views of the mountains and vineyards.

Uzum Fermer offers a variety of recreational facilities that include overnight accommodation for tourists and a fishing pond where visitors can catch local fish species. A workout area is available for guests who wish to maintain their fitness routine during their stay. Additionally, the farm organizes masterclasses in various activities, such as cooking classes using farm-fresh ingredients, grape harvesting, and wine production techniques. These hands-on sessions provide insights into traditional farming practices and modern agricultural innovations [43].

To summarize, Uzum Fermer Winery fulfills all the requirements of a successful sustainable tourism business that can provide a blueprint for other farmers to implement for their farms.

Economically—the winery opened in 2008 and has grown from 1 hectare to 21 hectares and has diversified its agricultural products to attract tourists, which includes vineyards, an exotic garden, a mini-hotel, and modern wineries.

Environmentally—the winery uses sustainable processes to cultivate over 100 varieties of table grapes. The vineyard employs eight globally recognized methods of grape cultivation to ensure the highest quality yield and showcase a variety of innovative and sustainable agricultural practices.

Socio-cultural—the winery includes guided tours that provide an overview of the farm's history, a walk through the exotic garden, and an exploration of the vineyards and winery. Educationally, guests are introduced to the eight methods of grape cultivation and shown the various grape varieties grown on the farm. It also organizes masterclasses in cooking using farm-fresh ingredients, grape harvesting, and wine production techniques. It also boasts a 10-room hotel that provides overnight accommodation, a fishing pond, and a workout room for fitness and health activities.

5. Conclusions

Research is now strongly supporting the need to promote agritourism as a sustainable strategy as it promotes the conservation of a rural environment. These sustainable principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee the long-term sustainability of tourism.

Agritourism is seen as a new way of generating income and adding value, especially in developing countries such as Uzbekistan. However, in many of the developing countries, pioneering studies have mainly concentrated on the economic benefits of agritourism for rural economies with little consideration for the environmental and socio-cultural benefits. The economic benefits relate to the generation of revenue for farmers to supplement their income, as well as providing an alternative way of selling and promoting the farm's products and services. The positive influence of agritourism on farm family income has also been researched in terms of its contribution to the local community via sales taxes, local employment, and the stimulation provided for local businesses such as restaurants and shops in the surrounding rural areas.

This emphasis on the economic benefits is because in developing countries such as Uzbekistan, agritourism is still in its initial phase of development, and as a result, there has been a lack of scientific literature on the development of sustainable practices. In the past, the focus has been on more pressing issues such as peace and food security [14]. Evidence from empirical studies also suggests that there are limitations and barriers to agritourism development in many of the emerging countries, such as Uzbekistan, including the fragmentation of tourism promotion efforts among farmers and destination management organizations [40], a lack of entrepreneurial farsightedness among farmers [44], and a lack of financial resources [45]. Many also lack the fundamental business competencies required for success, such as creating and evaluating a business strategy, networking and utilizing contacts, and recognizing and realizing opportunities. These findings support the need for farmers to become more entrepreneurial in their business activities, including adopting business plans for leisure farms, seeking professional advice, and participating in regional and larger-scale tourism marketing initiatives.

However, several exemplary case studies of successful agritourism farms are now emerging, such as Uzum Fermer Winery near Tashkent in Uzbekistan, which has grown in 16 years from a small 1-hectare farm to a large 21-hectare property. It now provides a diversity of sustainable agricultural practices and products to attract and satisfy both international and domestic tourists.

Implications for Future Research

Agritourism, as a special interest area of research, has become a popular topic as tourism researchers are promoting the importance of studies on sustainable tourism in rural areas. Because this is a new area of economic development, only a small number of studies have focused on agritourism in Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, and because of this, there is a need for more quantitative and qualitative research studies that can gather primary data from key stakeholders such as farmers and tourists.

There is a need to demonstrate new and innovative programs that can help to raise the standard of living of farmers in less developed countries. A range of case study reports also need to be published that promote exemplary examples of successful agritourism businesses in Uzbekistan, such as the Uzum Fermer Winery, as described in this paper. These case studies should emphasize the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits of agritourism in rural areas to provide an initial starting point for farmers to determine how to begin the process of agritourism as a profitable rural farm business.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.U.A.; Methodology, I.P.; formal analysis, I.P.; investigation, M.U.A. and I.P.; writing—original draft preparation, I.P.; writing—review and editing, I.P.; visualization, M.U.A.; supervision, I.P.; project administration, I.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This was not required as it was a conceptual paper.

Informed Consent Statement: This was not required as it did not required the collection of primary data.

Data Availability Statement: No primary data was collected.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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