

RESEARCH PROGRAM: Climate, environment and health (SG-CEH)

Policy Brief | Project SG-CEH-09

Building a Resilient Tourism Sector: An Analysis of Socioeconomic Inequality, Sustainability, and Climate Resilience in Jamaica's Airbnb Ecosystem

Country: Jamaica
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The challenge

Tourism is a central pillar of the Jamaican economy, but the rapid expansion of short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb has exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities, put pressure on the local housing market, and exposed communities and visitors to growing climate risks, such as hurricanes, floods, and environmental degradation. The lack of integrated regulation and resilience standards limits the sector's ability to contribute to sustainable development and the protection of community health and well-being.

What was done

- Geospatial analysis of 148 Airbnb properties, assessing their exposure to hurricanes and flooding, as well as their proximity to emergency services.
- Assessment of socioeconomic inequalities, comparing rental prices with local incomes using indicators such as the Gini index.
- Review of climate preparedness and adaptation measures at properties (infrastructure, emergency protocols, safety).
- Identification of environmental risks, including water quality and pressure on coastal ecosystems.
- Development of regulatory proposals and guidelines for more resilient and equitable tourism.

Main findings

- Airbnb properties are concentrated in areas highly vulnerable to climate-related risks, many of which lack adequate access to shelters or emergency services.
- The economic benefits of Airbnb are concentrated in higher-income neighborhoods, reinforcing regional inequalities.
- There is unequal disaster preparedness, with a lack of minimum safety and resilience standards.
- In areas with high tourist density, significant environmental risks have been identified, including water pollution and impacts on fragile ecosystems.

The approach

The project adopted an interdisciplinary and evidence-based approach, integrating geospatial analysis, socioeconomic assessment, and public policy review. It addressed the climate–environment–health–tourism nexus, with an emphasis on climate resilience, territorial equity, and sustainability, to generate policy recommendations aimed at strengthening tourism governance in vulnerable island contexts.

Impact and application

- Proposal for a regulatory framework to integrate Airbnb into tourism governance and risk management in Jamaica.
- Development of a comparative vulnerability index to prioritize public interventions.
- Recommendations for mandatory safety audits, accommodation registration, and alignment with national disaster management plans.
- Contributions to local reinvestment policies, incentivizing sustainable and resilient practices in the tourism sector.

Key lessons


- Resilient tourism requires integrating social equity, environmental sustainability, and climate risk management.
- Regulating digital platforms is key to preventing the widening of inequalities.
- Climate resilience in tourism must be addressed at the community level, not just at the individual property level.
- Geospatial data are strategic tools for informed and proactive tourism planning.

Key message


Regulating and guiding Airbnb's growth based on criteria of climate resilience, social equity, and environmental sustainability helps protect communities and visitors, reduce disaster risks, and ensure that tourism contributes to local well-being and climate change adaptation.

Publication

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