

Income Inequality, Distributive Justice, and Sustainable Development: Implications for Niagara
Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark

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Abstract

The rising inequalities across the world, including in Canada, present a challenge to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Under the auspices of UNESCO, supporting the implementation of SDGs is one of the main missions of geoparks. It has been shown that geoparks can foster the implementation of SDG 10 (reducing inequalities), but there is a dearth of studies specifically exploring the means and channels through which a geopark can help reduce income inequality. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring income inequality in the Niagara region through the lens of distributive justice with a focus on the role of Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark (NPAGG) in reducing income inequality in Niagara. This study employs a qualitative research approach to collect data via 16 semi-structured interviews with the NPAGG board of directors, people who are advocating for poverty alleviation and reduction of inequalities in Niagara, and local tourism-related business owners. Thematic analysis was conducted on the collected data to explore the role of the NPAGG in addressing income inequality in the Niagara region. All the participants agreed that the income inequality in Niagara is unfair and needs to be addressed. The results of the thematic analysis show that in the pursuit of more equitable distribution in Niagara, the NPAGG can present economic benefits – with a direct yet incremental impact on income inequality – and societal benefits – with indirect yet necessary implications for addressing income inequality. There are two main limiting factors identified for the NPAGG’s role in battling income disparities: 1) it is not the primary objective of the NPAGG, and 2) the problem of income inequality is much bigger than the NPAGG. Moreover, inflation, negative environmental impacts, and dependence on tourism were identified as minor risks associated with the NPAGG development. Although the findings of this study

may not be generalized to other geoparks around the world, they offer understanding of what to expect from geoparks in addressing income disparities.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, income inequality, distributive justice, UNESCO, geoparks

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Abbreviations

ICSU – International Council for Science

IGGP – International Geosciences and Geoparks Programme

IMF – International Monetary Fund

ISSC – International Social Science Council

MDGs – Millennium Development Goals

NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations

NPAGG – Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

UGGp – UNESCO Global Geopark

UN – United Nations

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNWTO – United Nations World Tourism Organization

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Inequalities in income and wealth have been on the rise in many countries over the last few decades. According to Chancel et al. (2022), “the richest 10% of the global population currently takes 52% of global income, whereas the poorest half of the population earns 8.5% of it” (p. 10). In recent years, extreme income and wealth inequalities have become a universal issue and one of the main topics of discussion of the international agenda due to their undesirable impact on humans’ lives. Extreme economic inequalities perpetuate poverty (International Social Science Council [ISSC] et al., 2016; World Bank, 2020); they can negatively affect people’s health (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010, as cited in Chancel et al., 2018) and well-being (Bergh et al., 2016); as shown by several studies, inequalities have a negative effect on economic growth (Berg et al., 2018; Cingano, 2014; Dabla-Norris et al., 2015) and political participation (Gilens & Page, 2014; United Nations [UN], 2013); more unequal societies are strongly associated with higher levels of racism and discrimination against woman (Wilkinson, 2005, as cited in MacNaughton, 2017). Considering all its potential negative effects on people’s lives, many NGOs and influential scholars have been advocating for a firmer stance by countries on battling extreme inequality (Chancel et al., 2018).

In recent years, many countries have experienced a significant increase in income inequality, and Canada is not an exception. Over the last few decades, income inequality has risen quite sharply in Canada (Breau, 2015; Breau et al., 2020; Brzozowski, 2010). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) report, Canada ranks above the average in terms of equality of opportunity among other OECD nations. The report also indicates that social mobility in Canada, especially for children from lower-income families, has been falling at both the national and provincial levels, suggesting that

improvements are possible. The justification for action on inequality is that “income differences align quite well with equality of opportunity as measured by inter-generational earnings mobility” (Corak, 2013, as cited in OECD, 2021). In other words, income inequality will remain a persistent problem as long as children from poor families are more likely to remain in the bottom income quintile and vice versa. According to the World Inequality Database (n.d.), pre-tax national income for the top 10 percent of Canada’s population has been increasing since the mid-1990s. Meanwhile, pre-tax national income for the bottom 50 percent has seen a decrease over the same period. Moreover, in their article, Breau et al. (2020) mapped the values of regional inequality by comparing Gini coefficients, which is one measure of economic inequality within a country, across 284 census divisions in Canada. Their depiction of inequalities across regions showed that the inequality levels in the Niagara region were above average in 2016. On top of that, during the scourge of COVID-19, there has been a concentration of layoffs in low-wage jobs across Canada, leading to widened economic inequalities and exacerbating vulnerabilities among low-skilled workers, low-income households, Indigenous peoples, and racialised groups (OECD, 2021).

The question of inequality is an indispensable part of the sustainability discussion. As Doyle and Stiglitz (2014) put it, sustainable development “cannot be achieved while ignoring extreme disparities” (p. 11). The importance of inequality in the discussion of sustainability can be inferred from the most common and accepted definition of sustainable development by the Brundtland Commission Report, which defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). As the report states, one of the key concepts of this definition is the concept of needs, especially the

essential needs of the world's poor, which merits our overriding priority. Drawing on the Brundtland definition, Becker (2012) wrote that sustainability is not merely about the continuance of something, but also about certain fundamental relationships among human beings: the relationship between humans and their contemporaries, and, secondly, the relationship between the present and future generations. Becker's ethical relationship between humans and their contemporaries entails the ethical challenge of global relationships – how we can design and organize a good life for *ALL* people currently living on earth (Fennell, 2019). I have highlighted the word “all” to draw attention to the main idea of sustainability, that is, meeting the needs of all people and leaving no one behind, where it is imperative that we turn our attention to the world's current most comprehensive attempt for inclusive development, namely the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), whose slogan is “Leave no one behind” (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, n.d.).

Approximately one year before the adoption of the SDGs by the UN, Doyle and Stiglitz (2014) stressed that the predecessors of the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) lacked a vision of equitable development and that the post-MDG agenda needs to have reducing inequality as one of its central objectives. Indeed, inequality is one of the issues that took center stage in the SDGs (Kanbur, 2021). Kanbur noted that the SDGs have increasingly become the touchstone in the discourse on development and human well-being and that many research projects in social sciences are motivated by these global goals. However, there are also many areas of research, including economic research on inequality, “which do not explicitly evoke the SDGs and yet are doing research which is relevant to the SDGs” (Kanbur, 2021, p. 7). A more detailed discussion of the SDGs and their inclusion of inequalities will be in section 2.1 of the literature review.

Roughly two months after the SDGs were set up in 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) General Assembly approved the creation of the International Geosciences and Geoparks Programme (IGGP), which assumed the compromise to work towards the SDGs (Rosado-González et al., 2020a). Under the scope of the IGGP, the official label of UNESCO Global Geopark (UGGp) was developed in 2015 (Canesin et al., 2020). According to the UNESCO (n.d.), UGGps “are single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development,” which are established based on a bottom-up approach, involving all relevant local and regional stakeholders and authorities in the area. It is one of the geoparks’ missions to help achieve local sustainable development. Geoparks can provide opportunities for the development of sustainable tourism through training local people and providing them with tools to run their own business and support themselves (Westoby et al., 2021). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] et al., 2017) defines sustainable tourism as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (p. 12). Among the five pillars of sustainable tourism identified by UNWTO, one is about poverty reduction and reducing inequalities through strengthening pro-poor tourism initiatives and including disadvantaged groups in the tourism sector. Further discussion of sustainable tourism will follow in the literature review.

The reason why I am bringing justice to the discussion of income inequalities is that inequality is a matter of justice (ISSC et al., 2016; Lötter, 2016; UN, 2013). The topic of inequality and its assessment date back to antiquity, for example, “Book 5 of Aristotle’s

Nicomachean Ethics treats of distributive justice” (Kanbur, 2021, p. 4). In other words, inequality has been recognized as an issue of distributive justice, which is about a just distribution of resources, opportunities, duties, and rights (Platz, 2020). Discussion of distributive justice undoubtedly entails ethical and philosophical considerations. In this study, in order to fully understand the nature of inequality and justice in Niagara, I base my study on the work of John Rawls (1971), who is widely considered to be one of the most influential thinkers and philosophers on the topic of distributive justice. Jamal (2019) writes that within a liberal social contract tradition, Rawls’ justice as fairness is an ideal theory of justice, and it has had immense reach and influence on governing liberal pluralist societies and distributing their basic goods. Since Canada is widely considered as liberal pluralist society, Rawls’ principles bear relevance. When it comes to tourism, despite the profound prominence of Rawls’ theory, it has not been well-recognized in tourism studies. The tourism industry could in fact be the antithesis of Rawls’ ideals and beliefs because it is fraught with inequalities, racism, and corporate power (Fennell, 2006). As Jamal and Camargo (2014) put it, “[t]he principles that Rawls forwards offer good guidance for addressing distributive and procedural justice issues in tourism, and are especially helpful in relation to those most disadvantaged in the spaces of visitation” (p. 14). I will elaborate further on Rawls’ theory and its relevance to my study later in the discussion of literature and methodology.

There have been some studies examining the contribution of geoparks to economic development of local communities. For example, some researchers wrote about the potential of geoparks and geotourism in providing long-term improvement in rural development in Iceland (Ólafsdóttir & Dowling, 2014), innovative strategies applied in the UNESCO Araripe Global Geopark (Brazil) aiming at improving the local economy and business (Henriques et al., 2020),

and the proposed Chicamocha Canyon Geopark project in Colombia and the potential of geotourism for improving the living standard of local populations (Ríos et al., 2020). Several researchers noted the evidence of geoparks' positive economic impact on local communities. For example, Indonesian geoparks have caused an increase in domestic tourism “on a yearly basis leading to positive economic impacts on regional and community incomes” (Cahyadi & Newsome, 2021, p. 200); the establishment of Dong Van Karst Plateau Geopark in Vietnam has resulted in more than ten times increase in the number of visitors to the area between 2010 and 2019, hence leading to more revenue from tourism and improved infrastructure and socioeconomic development in the province (Lee & Jayakumar, 2021); Lesvos Geopark in Greece was formed in an area with few employment opportunities, but since its creation, it “has transformed western Lesvos attracting 90,000 visitors annually and employing 35 directly with hundreds of new jobs having been created indirectly” (Keever et al., 2010, p. 225). The existing literature is mainly focusing on overall economic benefits of geoparks. Few scholars have specifically noted the role of geoparks in addressing inequalities, for instance, in assessing the contributions of four Latin American geoparks (Araripe, Grutas del Palacio, Comarca Minera, and Mixteca Alta) to achieving the SDGs, Rosado-González et al. (2020b) found that local people in those geoparks consider the reduction of social inequalities and the promotion of decent work and economic growth as two of the main benefits of geopark development.

Overall, it is expected that geopark development will foster the implementation of the SDGs in the host regions (Catana & Brilha, 2020; de Araújo Pereira, 2022; Lee & Jayakumar, 2021; UNESCO, 2017). Regarding income inequality, some researchers stated that geoparks have the potential to alleviate poverty, i.e., SDG 1 (e.g., Deng & Zou, 2022; Ngwira, 2015) and reduce inequalities, SDG 10 (e.g., de Araújo Pereira, 2022, Rosado-González et al., 2020a).

Although the potential of geoparks to contribute to the reduction of inequalities is acknowledged in the literature, there have not been studies specifically exploring the means and channels through which a geopark can help reduce income inequality. In Canada, there are five UGGps. But there is a paucity of research on Canadian geoparks' role in contributing to the socio-economic development of their host regions. This study aims to fill that gap and contribute to the literature by exploring the possible role of an aspiring geopark in reducing income inequality in the Niagara region of Canada. Because it is the mission of geoparks, including Niagara's aspiring Geopark, to support SDGs in the host region and the fact that income disparities in Niagara have been on the rise (Boggs et al., 2018), it can be justified that the geopark development in this region pays adequate attention to the issue of income inequality as in line with SDG 10. Also, by focusing on inequalities and justice issues within a geopark, I believe that this study can pave the way for more critical discussions of the societal processes in geoparks, which are overlooked in geopark studies, as criticized by Stoffelen (2020). I will return to this criticism more in the literature review.

The purpose of this study is to explore income inequality in the Niagara region through the lens of distributive justice with a focus on whether the Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark (NPAGG or Geopark henceforth) can contribute to the reduction of income inequalities in Niagara. More specifically, the questions that are being addressed are given below and can be categorized in the following ways:

- 1) How is income inequality perceived in Niagara? – this descriptive question is aimed at the first part of my purpose statement, that is, exploring income inequality in Niagara through the lens of distributive justice. Following Rawls' principles, it must be noted that

not all social and economic inequalities are unjust as long as “the system of rules (the basic structure) is just” (Platz, 2020, p. 66).

- 2) How can the NPAGG help improve the situation vis-à-vis inequalities in the Niagara region? What could local people, who are involved with advocacy of reduction of inequalities in the Niagara region, expect from the NPAGG in addressing income inequalities in the region? How can local tourism businesses benefit from partnering with the NPAGG? – With these questions, I aim address the second part of my statement, that is, analyzing whether the NPAGG can contribute to the reduction of income inequalities in Niagara.
- 3) What challenges might the NPAGG face in addressing income inequality? What could be risks associated with the establishment of the NPAGG? – the first question addresses the second part of my purpose statement, more specifically tied to the word “whether”, to explore if the NPAGG is truly capable of addressing economic disparities. The second question in this category is concerned with the potential risks, an important aspect of transformative actions towards sustainability, which “often involve trade-offs that disproportionately affect already marginalised or vulnerable groups” (Blythe et al., 2018).

The literature review to follow discusses the relevant past literature regarding the consideration of inequalities in the SDGs, the role of geoparks in sustainable development, especially in addressing socioeconomic problems (i.e., inequalities and poverty), and distributive justice. The methodology discusses the type of research method, data collection and analysis that was used in this research. The sections following the methodology present the results and discussion.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The inclusion of inequalities in Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015, 193 member countries of the United Nations unanimously voted for the adoption of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their associated 169 targets.

Figure 1 below illustrates all 17 SDGs. Most of the SDGs stem from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) operationalised between 2000 and 2015 and provide a global framework for economic, social, and environmental policy and action until 2030 (MacNaughton, 2017). There are some commendable aspects of the SDGs. The formulation process for these goals was participative and consultative and more attention was drawn to the connection between global goals and national targets (Vandemoortele, 2017). The SDGs were also commended in the sense that they are more comprehensive than their predecessors (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016), by addressing key systemic barriers, such as inequality, unsustainable consumption patterns, weak institutional capacity, and environmental degradation, which were neglected in the MDGs (International Council for Science [ICSU] & ISSC, 2015). Also, the language use in the SDGs manifests more concern for inclusivity, for example using words such as “inclusive”, “equitable”, “equal”, “by/for all”, and “in all its forms”, which were almost not used in the MDGs (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016). More inclusive language means that, unlike the MDGs, the SDGs are aimed at both developing and developed nations.

Despite all their positive aspects, the SDGs have their shortcomings that need to be noted. It is true that the SDGs are far more comprehensive than the MDGs, with the former having more goals (17 vs. 8), more targets (169 vs. 18) and indicators (232 vs. 48), but more does not necessarily mean better since many targets of SDGs are “too fuzzy and too woolly to qualify as targets” (Vandemoortele, 2017, p. 34). As Vandemoortele argues, many of those targets lack a



Figure 1. Sustainable Development Goals. From the Global Goals (www.globalgoals.org/resources). In the public domain.

numerical outcome, a well-defined concept, and a specific deadline, but instead they have vague language, such as “support and strengthen”, “progressively improve”, and “achieve higher levels of”. The report by ICSU and ISSC (2015) reviews the targets for the SDGs and concludes that of all the 169 targets, only 49 (29 %) are considered well-developed, 91 targets (54 %) need to be reformulated to be more specific, and 29 targets (17 %) require significant work as they are either redundant or ambiguous. Considering that most of the targets are not conceptually clear and do not have a numerical outcome and a deadline, we are left with fewer than 30 verifiable targets, which are not very different from the ones MDGs had, and it can therefore be said that the SDGs are not quite the transformative agenda as some may argue (Vandemoortele, 2017). Vandemoortele also argued that the SDGs start from the wrong premise, namely, eradicating poverty, and poverty is no longer regarded as the key global challenge by most scholars and

experts. Rather, the key global challenge today is extreme inequalities. The failure of the SDGs to acknowledge the significance of dealing with inequality “is not due to a technical mistake but driven by a political narrative that dodges, if not contests, the fact that extreme inequality is a defining challenge of our time” (Vandemoortele, 2017, p. 38). The reason for that failure lies in the fact that inequalities are politically sensitive issues that require substantially deeper structural changes to society than those of poverty (MacNaughton, 2017). It is because of the fear of having to address politically sensitive realities that extreme inequality is not acknowledged as the key global challenge. Yet addressing extreme inequality would automatically mean addressing extreme poverty.

As mentioned earlier, the SDGs raise an important issue of inequality. The SDGs have a separate goal dedicated to inequalities, namely SDG 10 – reduce inequality within and among countries (UN, n.d.). Also, “[o]ut of the 17 goals, 11 address forms of inequality, in terms of equality, equity and/or inclusion (Goals 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16 and 17)” (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016, p. 2145). As the global objective of reducing economic inequality, SDG 10 is the clearest statement we have ever had (Kanbur, 2021). Inequalities are covered far more comprehensively in the SDGs as compared to the MDGs. MacNaughton (2017) wrote that even though MDGs addressed the issue of gender inequality, they addressed neither horizontal inequalities (i.e., inequalities among various social, ethnic, linguistic, or other population groups in society) beyond gender issues nor vertical inequalities (namely, inequalities in income, wealth, political power, and social outcomes among individuals within and between countries). Vertical and horizontal inequalities are to some extent addressed within the SDGs, more specifically in SDG 10.

It is also noteworthy to look at some of the shortcomings of SDG 10. First of all, it ranks in the tenth position, suggesting that it is not quite a top priority (Vandemoortele, 2017). As the SDGs have the slogan “Leave no one behind” and acknowledge poverty as the primary challenge, poverty ranks in the first position. Second, as mentioned earlier, since the discussion on inequality entails political issues, inequality was not picked as the main challenge for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As such, some of the targets of SDG 10 fail to truly address inequality. For example, Target 10.1 states, “By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average” (UN, n.d.). This target essentially addresses poverty rather than inequality (MacNaughton, 2017; Vandemoortele, 2017). It is possible to satisfy Target 10.1 and still fail to address income inequality, for example, the bottom 40% of the population may see their income grow and the top 10% of earners stay intact while the middle shrinks (Chancel et al., 2018). Overall, the inclusion of SDG 10 as a stand-alone goal for reducing inequalities in the SDGs can be considered a success, despite its certain shortcomings, such as imprecise language, vulnerability to political wills, and a lack of a thematic body or set of institutions both at national and international levels (MacNaughton, 2017; Saiz & Donald, 2017).

2.2. UNESCO Global Geoparks and sustainable development

The implementation of the SDGs in host communities is one of the main missions of geoparks under UNESCO status. It has to be noted that the idea of geoparks is not a UNESCO program or initiative (Ngwira, 2015). The concept of geoparks “was developed to meet the increasing demand from Earth scientists and non-government organizations for a global framework to promote and protect geodiversity of outstanding value” (Eder & Patzak, 2004, as cited in Jones, 2008, p. 273). The philosophy behind the establishment of geoparks was first

introduced at the Digne Convention in 1991, but the idea of creating a network of geoparks came up in 1996, “in a discussion between G. Martini and N. Zouros at the 30th International Geological Congress held in Beijing during the symposium on the protection of the geological heritage” (Zouros, 2004, p. 165). It was only at beginning of the 2000s that UNESCO’s work with geoparks started, aiming to involve all local stakeholders in society to protect and conserve the geoheritage sites (Shekhar et al., 2019). In 2004, seventeen European and eight Chinese geoparks came together to form the Global Geoparks Network under the auspices of UNESCO (Jones, 2008, as cited in Han et al., 2018). Geoparks gained governmental recognition when 195 member states of UNESCO ratified the creation of the UGGp label. Today, there are 177 UGGps in 46 countries (UNESCO, n.d.).

There has recently been growing recognition of the role of UGGps in contributing to sustainable development. Indeed, one of the main benefits of UGGps is that they play a crucial role in achieving the SDGs (UNESCO, 2017). UGGps highlight the value of geological heritage, and they adopt a holistic approach that encompasses the natural and cultural (tangible and intangible) heritage of an area and helps develop a sustainable development strategy for the benefit of their communities (Zouros, 2016). Present and aspiring geoparks show how geology and culture are intertwined and “can potentially teach us best practice in sustainability and problem solving” (Turner, 2013, p. 254). Turner considers the establishment of a geopark as one of the best ways for achieving sustainable development and providing employment opportunities in rural and indigenous communities.

According to UNESCO (2017), SDGs 1 (no poverty), 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), 8 (decent work and economic growth), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), 12 (responsible consumption and production), 13 (climate action), and 17 (partnerships for the

goals) are particularly relevant for geoparks. Even though all these goals have a connection of a varying degree with income and wealth inequalities, SDG 10 is not explicitly mentioned in that list of relevant goals. But Rosado-González et al. (2020b) found that communities of the Latin American and the Caribbean UGGps consider one of the greatest benefits of UGGps to be SDG 10. In other research, Rosado-González et al. (2020a) identified “which of the SDGs targets were more compatible with the objectives of the UGGps” (p. 116). Those targets are the following: Targets 10.2 (empowering and promoting the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status), 10.3 (ensuring equal opportunity and reducing inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices, as well as promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard), 10.4 (adopting policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality), and 10.7 (facilitating orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies) (for all the targets, see UN, n.d.).

2.3. Poverty and inequality in tourism studies

In contributing to local sustainable development, tourism studies on geoparks need to pay adequate attention to poverty and inequality. The tourism industry has been purported to be a means for achieving sustainable development and poverty reduction (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019), which can happen through income generation, infrastructure development, and foreign exchange earnings (Geoffrey Deladem et al., 2020). There are studies documenting the positive role of tourism in alleviating poverty and improving living standards. For example, increasing tourism can assist in reducing poverty in small island developing states in Asia-Pacific, the Caribbean and Africa (Jiang et al., 2011). Similar results were reported in Kenya (Job & Paesler,

2013) and Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Croes, 2014). In explaining the relationship between tourism and poverty, Scheyvens and Hughes (2019) wrote that during the 1950s and 60s, tourism was seen as a modernization strategy that can help newly independent countries to create employment opportunities and earn foreign exchange, but “by the 1970s and 1980s many social scientists were arguing that poor people and poorer countries were typically excluded from or disadvantaged by what tourism can offer” (p. 1063). It has been noted that increased tourism can bring about income and thus help alleviate poverty. However, it is more complex for tourism to help solve more structural problems, including the distribution of income and opportunities.

Tourism has been accused of ignoring the needs of the poor and marginalized while providing opportunities for the privileged middle and upper classes to travel and enjoy leisure activities, as well as profiting particularly large companies and creating exclusive enclaves for the rich (Jamal & Camargo, 2014, Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). In their landmark book, Turner and Ash conclude, “tourism has proved remarkably ineffective as a promoter of equality and as an ally of the oppressed” (Turner & Ash, 1975, as cited in Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006, 1193). There have been some more studies showing that tourism exacerbated income inequality and negatively affected the living standards of the poor. Examples can be from Turkey (Tosun et al., 2003), Kenya (Manyara & Jones, 2007), Peru (Llorca-Rodríguez et al., 2017), Spain (Carrascal Incera & Fernández, 2015), Thailand (Wattanakuljarus & Coxhead, 2008), and the USA (Lee, 2009). In examining the impact of tourism on income inequality in a panel of 49 developing economies across the world between 1991 and 2012, Alam and Paramati (2016) found that tourism increases income inequality significantly in developing countries. Notwithstanding the negative impact of tourism on the distribution of income, the authors also added that if the current tourism level doubles, then it can help reduce income inequality.

Many scholars have tried to include sustainability and justice issues in tourism research in various forms; for example, alternative tourism (see, e.g., Cohen, 1987), accessible tourism (see, e.g., Darcy, & Dickson, 2009), community-based tourism (see, e.g., Okazaki, 2008), pro-poor tourism (see, e.g., Ashley & Roe, 2002), and responsible tourism (see, e.g., Goodwin & Francis, 2003). Highlighting the importance of inclusion in tourism, especially in achieving SDGs, Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) present the concept of inclusive tourism, which they defined as “[t]ransformative tourism in which marginalized groups are engaged in ethical production or consumption of tourism and the sharing of its benefits” (p. 592). Scheyvens and Biddulph clarify that “transformative” could mean addressing inequality and that marginalized groups could include the destitute, ethnic minorities, and people who lack power and/or voice. It was added that the concept of inclusive tourism has the potential to provide a source of critical and innovative thinking, which can guide tourism towards sustainable development.

In the foreword of his book, Weaver (2006) clarified that all types of tourism must fulfill one condition, namely sustainable tourism. In this sense, tourism development in geoparks is expected to be in line with sustainable tourism. In the next section, I briefly talk about sustainable tourism and its manifestation in geoparks.

2.4. Sustainable tourism and geotourism as its manifestation in geoparks

Sustainability has been widely recognized as a promising vehicle for addressing the problems of negative impacts of tourism and maintaining the long-term viability of it (Liu, 2003). The term sustainable tourism emerged from a broader discourse on sustainable development, and “it may be regarded most basically as the application of the sustainable development idea to the tourism sector” (Weaver, 2006, p. 10). It has increasingly become a popular subject in tourism studies and research, with countless sources that have emerged in the

form of books (e.g., Edgell, 2006; Harris et al., 2012; McCool & Bosak, 2015; Weaver, 2015, as cited in Fennell & Cooper, 2020). The goals of sustainable tourism include developing “a greater awareness and understanding of the significant contributions that tourism can make to the environment, people, and the economy; to promote equity in development; to improve the quality of life of the host community ...” (Inskeep, 1991, as cited in Ngwira, 2015, p.30)

Geotourism is a newly emerging form of sustainable tourism (Dowling, 2013; Dowling, 2015a, as cited in Dowling & Pforr, 2021; Farsani et al., 2011; Shahhoseini et al., 2017). Ólafsdóttir and Dowling (2014) note that geotourism and geoparks are two of the most recent concepts within the field of tourism. The concept of geotourism “was developed and promoted from the early 1990s onwards” (Hose, 1995, as cited in Ngwira, 2015, 26). Along with conservation and education, geotourism is one of the main ways a geopark can contribute to the sustainable development of communities (UNESCO, 2006b, as cited in Farsani et al., 2011), and it can be defined as “tourism that sustains, or even enhances, the geographical character of a place, such as its culture, environment, heritage, and the wellbeing of its residents” (Farsani et al. 2012, p. 31). In other words, geotourism offers the potential to sustain and enhance “locations’ distinctive character, seeks to recognise and protect natural structures and contributes to local and regional development through specificities emerging from geological features” (Dowling & Newsome, 2006, as cited in Galvão et al., 2022, p. 2).

Many researchers have written about geotourism in the context of geoparks and its benefits for local sustainable development, such as generation of employment opportunities (see, e.g., Henriques et al., 2020; Ngwira, 2015; Sagala et al., 2018). If managed sustainably, geotourism can bring about long-term improvement in rural development (Han et al., 2018; Ólafsdóttir & Dowling, 2014). The establishment of geoparks, along with the development of

geotourism, can lead to an increase in job opportunities in rural areas, and hence a reduction in the rate of migration and unemployment (Farsani et al., 2011; Farsani et al. 2012; Khoshraftar & Farsani 2022; Shekhar et al., 2019). Some studies report geopark initiatives to alleviate poverty, for example, in Vietnam (Lee & Jayakumar, 2021) and China (Wu et al., 2021). Although geoparks are mostly established in rural regions attracting tourists to niche tourism areas, there is a potential for geoparks to bring large-scale benefits. For example, since the establishment of the Huanggang Dabieshan UNESCO Global Geopark (DBGG) in China in 2012, the number of people struggling with poverty in the geopark reduced by 80% (Deng & Zou, 2022). The DBGG development led to the establishment of more than 300 hotels and more than 200 farm stays, as well as sales enterprises, in the area, all of which employ more than 80,000 people.

In the literature, there has been a growing interest in geoparks and their role in achieving sustainable development, for example, by supporting inclusive education in geoparks (Catana & Brilha, 2020; Fernandes et al., 2021; Henriques et al., 2019; Silva & Sá, 2018) or encouraging community involvement (i.e., participation of locals) in geopark management (Cai et al., 2019; Canesin et al., 2020; Ferraro et al., 2020; Zouros, 2016). Despite this growing interest in geoparks, few have mentioned the potential of geoparks and geotourism in addressing socio-economic inequalities (de Castro et al. 2022; de Araújo Pereira, 2022; Rosado-González et al., 2020a; Rosado-González et al., 2020b). These issues of inequalities and justice (i.e., structural problems) merit more attention in the literature on geoparks because they can hamper an equitable distribution of geotourism benefits in local communities.

In a recently published article, Stoffelen (2020) criticized the geopark literature on the grounds that it has paid limited attention to the societal role of geoparks. Rather, geopark studies focused on replicating descriptive case studies with generic and self-confirmatory conclusions.

He added that the existing literature reflects the simplistic character of general calls that “[w]hen geotourists move to geoparks, the money moves in the same direction” (Farsani et al., 2011, p. 68). This “taken-for-granted attitude in most geopark studies that a high tourism potential of an area leads, almost automatically, to regional community benefits does not match the scholarship on sustainable regional development implications of tourism development” (Stoffelen, 2020, p.102). He explains that these simplistic conclusions are due to the dominance of geoscientific orientations in the literature, which have been analytically positioned separately from the sphere of society.

2.5. Distributive justice in addressing inequalities

Justice is a vital component of sustainability (see, e.g., Becker, 2012; Jamal & Camargo, 2014; Keitsch, 2018; Metzger & Curren, 2017; Oermann & Weinert, 2016). Justice is a virtue, which involves “a sense of fairness, the ideas of retribution, dignity and rehabilitation; it involves other virtues such as a sense of deservingness and compassion; as well as the emotions of righteous indignation and anger” (Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2016, p. 1217). Whether inequality is unjust and what kind of equality of opportunity we should seek are questions that distributive justice is trying to answer (Platz, 2020). There have been many prominent thinkers on distributive justice, including Robert Nozick, Friedrich von Hayek, and Gerald Cohen. However, the most influential treatise on the topic is John Rawls’ (1971) *A Theory of Justice*.

The main premise behind Rawls’ work is the construction of an original position where people are free from bias and asked to choose a society where social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged in securing fair equality of opportunity. By adopting the ideas developed by philosophers like Rawls, we can see that what appears to be a mostly economic problem of fair use of resources becomes an ethical

dilemma that cannot be solved with only the expertise of financial institutions, such as the IMF or the World Bank (Oermann & Weinert, 2016). Also, Rawls' theory formalised the issue of intergenerational justice. A natural way of broadening Rawlsian ideas "so that it might encompass the intergenerational dimension too, is to extend the veil of ignorance so that participants in the original position shall lack knowledge, not only concerning their social position, but also about the generation to which they belong" (Attas, 2009, p. 189). Indeed, Rawls's work was a key influence on the Brundtland report and continues to be influential (Taylor, 2013). The next section contains a brief description of Rawls' theory of justice.

2.6. A Theory of Justice by John Rawls

For many, John Rawls' (1971) book, *A Theory of Justice* is probably the most influential book of political theory of the twentieth century (Bix, 2012). Rawls considers justice as "the structural rules of society, within which people who (inevitably) have different sets of values and goals in life can coexist, cooperate, and, to some extent, compete" (Bix, 2012, p. 109). In the preface of the revised edition of his book, Rawls (1999) wrote, "I wanted to work out a conception of justice that provides a reasonably systematic alternative to utilitarianism" (p. xi). The reason why he wanted to come up with an alternative to utilitarianism is that, as he argued, utilitarianism fails to provide a satisfactory account of the basic rights and liberties of citizens as free and equal persons.

For Rawls, justice begins with the idea of a democratic society, in which the benefits and burdens of society ought to be distributed in a manner that is fair to all citizens (Platz, 2020); as this idea leads us to the notion of fairness, Rawls "gives the name *justice as fairness* to his theory of justice" (p. 63). Fairness does not necessarily mean equality but rather equal standing among the parties to the cooperation, whose rules are equally acceptable to all.

How do we then attain the rules of cooperation that are equally accepted by everyone?

Rawls' answer to this question is the *original position*. The original position is a thought experiment: "a hypothetical discussion among hypothetical citizens within a community" (Bix, 2012, p. 111). In this discussion, people are asked to imagine themselves behind a veil of ignorance, which shields them from their particular interests and the information about their positions (e.g., their race, gender, social status, etc.) in society. People's different positions in life make them have differing self-interests, which will often bias their thinking, tempting them into favoring unfair terms of social cooperation that make them better off at the expense of others. If no one knew which race or gender they belong to, who would choose to discriminate based on those characteristics? In the original position, the parties are assumed to have a thin theory of the good, what Rawls calls primary goods, which are liberties, opportunities, wealth, income, and social bases of self-respect (Wolff, 2006). These primary goods are desirable; therefore, the parties in the original position want to have more of these primary goods.

The original position is fair because "it removes all sources of unfairness – in the original position the parties are equal to the point where they have exactly the same knowledge and interest and so cannot try to influence the principles in any way that would advantage any particular members of society" (Platz, 2020, p. 68). The fairness of this situation then translates into the fairness of the outcome. Therefore, for Rawls, looking directly at the distribution of the benefits and burdens is not sufficient to tell whether it is fair. Fairness is about the rules of the game by which the distribution is created. This directs us to the notion of pure procedural justice, which Rawls uses as a basis of his theory.

According to Rawls, the resulting principles that we would choose in the original position are the following:

“First Principle

Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Second Principle

Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:

(a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and

(b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity” (Rawls, 1971, p. 302).

The first principle is the Liberty Principle, 2(a) is the Difference Principle, and 2(b) is the Fair Opportunity Principle (Wolff, 2006). Rawls also adds that there is a lexical priority between these principles in the sense that the first principle takes precedence over the second principle, as does 2(b) over 2(a). Table 1, reprinted from Platz (2020), summarizes the principles of justice, their roles, as well as the primary goods they govern.

Since this thesis is focusing on the distribution of income and wealth, we should look at the Difference Principle and the Fair Opportunity Principle more in detail. These two principles work hand in hand to ensure that the distribution of income, wealth, and opportunities resulting from economic cooperation in society is fair. As per the Difference Principle, Rawls (1971) writes, while “the distribution of wealth and income need not be equal, it must be to everyone’s advantage, [...] Injustice, then, is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all” (pp. 61–62). For Rawls, the negotiators in the original position are cautious in a sense that they would not

Table 1. The principles of justice and the primary goods.

<i>Primary goods</i>	<i>Principle</i>	<i>Role of principle(s)</i>
1. Basic rights, including freedom of movement and occupation	First principle: equal basic rights	To enable each citizen to participate in social cooperation as a free and equal person
2. Opportunities for access to powers, prerogatives, positions, and offices	Democratic equality, part 1: fair equality of opportunity	To secure a fair distribution of the burdens of cooperation
3. Income and wealth	Democratic equality, part 2: the difference principle	To secure a fair distribution of the benefits of cooperation

Note. From *Theories of distributive justice: Who gets what and why* by Platz (2020).

want to create substantial inequalities as they may end up at the bottom of the scale (Bix, 2012); the only reason they could accept “anything other than an equal share is if the inequalities that would be allowed would result in each and every person doing even better than they would have done in an equal-sharing system” (pp. 113–114). We allow inequalities because they can create competitive incentives that increase people’s productivity, which in turn can benefit us all. For example, the hard work of the highly productive can benefit everyone “either directly through new job and consumption opportunities, or indirectly through raised tax revenues” (Wolff, 2006, p. 158). So, the departure from equality is allowed because it can make the least-off better off.

The Fair Opportunity Principle is aimed at governing the arbitrary effects of natural lottery (e.g., natural talents) and social lottery (e.g., being born in a wealthy family) so that the resulting inequalities from this arbitrariness benefit the worst-off. We must note that “Rawls sees no unfairness in our different natural and social circumstances as such. The facts that some are born more talented than others and that some are born into more resourceful families are neither

just nor unjust – they’re just facts that we have to deal with” (Platz, 2020, p. 77). How we deal with these facts is what makes it fair or unfair. We should try to set the rules of the game and build our institutions in a way that will minimize the effects of the social lottery so that those with equal talents have equal chances of success.

2.7. Some of the criticisms of Rawls’ ideas

It is also important to look at some of the criticisms of John Rawls’ work. First of all, some may argue that the idea of the original position is far removed from reality and thus cannot happen. But the argument that “the original position is hypothetical, imaginary, and impossible is not an objection to it” (Platz, 2020, p. 68). The idea of ignorance that comes with the original position was acknowledged by some other philosophers and scholars. This type of method, that is, pretended ignorance was used by Socrates way before Rawls (Fennell, 2006). Nobel Prize winner economist, John Harsanyi (1975) also utilized the concept of the original position at about the same time with Rawls in the 1950s and added that it “is a potentially very powerful analytical tool for clarifying the concept of justice and other aspects of morality” (pp. 594–595). Despite his agreement with Rawls on the use of the original position, Harsanyi (1975) criticized Rawls’ maximin principle (i.e., a high tendency for risk aversion, as the Difference Principle suggests) since it can lead to paradoxical implications and a highly irrational conclusion of infinite levels of risk-aversion.

When it comes to human nature, one can put forth the criticism that “why would individuals want to place themselves at the same level as others (“equal”) and, concomitantly, be free from their special privileges in deciding on their fundamental social principles?” (Beatty, 1983, p. 486). Historically, those who chose to divest themselves of their privileges to take their equal place beside others were often regarded as saints and/or madmen. Beatty (1983) believes

that the Rawlsian response to this question would be that “if the principles governing the social system which forms one’s aims and desires are not freely chosen, then one cannot even properly speak of one’s own self or one’s own nature” (p. 489). So, people as self-interested rational beings are ready to see themselves as equal to others and to bargain in the original position because they do not know who they will turn out to be when the veil of ignorance is lifted.

Another criticism of Rawls comes from communitarianism. The criticism goes that the primary goods that parties would desire in the original position are not neutral as Rawls argued. Rather, they are “particularly suitable for life in modern capitalist economies, built on profit, wages, and exchange” (Wolff, 2006, p. 170). There surely have to be non-commercial and more communal alternatives. For Sandel and other communitarians, it seems rather “unwise, and likely distorting, to view individuals separate from the families, communities and other attachments which shape individuals long before those individuals can make mature, informed and autonomous choices” (Bix, 2012, p. 118). So, it was argued that Rawls’ original position is biased in favor of liberal values.

Another criticism of Rawls’ ideas, especially the Difference Principle, is from Libertarianism, more specifically from Robert Nozick. According to Nozick, any sort of patterned distribution “... (e.g. justice requires that everyone to have an equal amount, or that the distribution of goods be according to need, merit, intelligence, ability, effort, etc.) will be vulnerable: it will likely be regularly and continually disrupted by the voluntary independent choices of individuals” (Bix, 2012, p. 116). Nozick gives the example of voluntary payments made by fans to their favorite athletes (e.g., you pay for tickets to go and watch Ronaldo play). These kinds of voluntary transactions (e.g., gifts, gambles, etc.) can disrupt the just pattern of distribution agreed upon in the original position, but as Nozick argues, interfering in these

voluntary transactions to maintain the pattern would mean interfering in people's liberties. However, instead of banning certain transactions, one can follow a more civilized way of maintaining the pattern, that is, through taxation. But Nozick has anticipated this response and argues that taxation is on a par with forced labor, and it is a theft of your time, i.e., equal to slavery (Wolff, 2006). There could be a more comprehensive discussion of Rawls' potential responses to Nozick, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore income inequality in Niagara, as well as whether and how the Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark (NPAGG) can help achieve the reduction of income inequality in the region. In the context of geoparks and geotourism, many researchers used qualitative research methods (see, e.g., Henriques et al., 2020; Özgeriş & Karahan, 2020). Conducting qualitative research helps develop a better understanding of the processes by which events and actions take place (Maxwell, 2009). In other words, I aim to see the process through which the NPAGG can contribute to tackling income inequality. The research site of this study is the NPAGG, which includes all the twelve municipalities of the Niagara region (discussed in more detail below).

Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) offer suggestions on why and how researchers can locate their research in a paradigm. There are four essential elements of a research paradigm: epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). As the authors move on to explain, research paradigms can be grouped into four taxonomies: Positivist, Interpretivist, Critical, or Pragmatic paradigms. This study follows the Interpretivist (also known as Constructivist) research paradigm. As Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) explain, this paradigm assumes (1) a subjectivist epistemology – meaning that researchers make meaning of their data, and they do so with their own thinking and their interactions with subjects of their research, (2) a relativist ontology – which entails a belief that the topic being studied has multiple realities, and through their interactions with participants, as well as among participants, researchers can explore those different realities, (3) a naturalist methodology – meaning that researchers act as participant observers while collecting data via interviews, text messages, etc., and (4) a balanced axiology – assuming that researchers' values and beliefs will be reflected in

their research (see pp. 33–34, for more). As I explain more in detail below, in this study, I collected the data through interviews and analyzed them by deriving key themes, the process of which was affected by my own thinking and my interaction with the participants.

3.1. Study area: The Niagara region

This study was conducted in the NPAGG, which covers the whole Niagara region, located in southern Ontario, Canada, between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. As a non-regulatory, non-profit entity, the NPAGG aims to benefit all Niagara residents, educational institutions and business operators by fostering hyper-local tourism. The region covers a total area of 1,852 km² (Niagara Region, n.d.) and has a population of about 448,000, as per the 2016 Census by Statistics Canada. The region is “surrounded to the north by Lake Ontario, to the east by the Niagara River, to the south by Lake Erie, and to the west by Haldimand County and the City of Hamilton” (Fullerton & Brouder, 2019, p. 43). As a municipal government, Niagara encompasses the twelve urban and rural municipalities, which are the following: Fort Erie, Grimsby, Lincoln, Niagara Falls, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Pelham, Port Colborne, St. Catharines, Thorold, Wainfleet, Welland, and West Lincoln (see Figure 2 below).

Along with agriculture and manufacturing, tourism has historically been one of the region’s three economic pillars (Brouder & Fullerton, 2016). Thanks to its iconic falls, Niagara has long been a world-famous destination, as well as a meeting place for Indigenous peoples dating back 12,000 years (Phillips, 2019). As the region attracts a lot of people, tourism has become one of the priority sectors in its economic development. In 2017, Niagara was a destination for about thirteen million visitors with total tourism expenditures of \$2.4 billion, and in 2018, tourism in the Niagara region supported almost 40,000 jobs and over 2,800 businesses



Figure 2. Niagara Region's 12 Municipalities. From *About Niagara* by Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Geopark (<https://www.niagarageopark.com/about-niagara>). In the public domain.

across a variety of industries, such as transportation services, accommodation and hospitality, food service, arts, entertainment, and recreation (Niagara Economic Development, 2019).

The Niagara region is primarily a summer mass tourism destination, but in recent years it has also been trying to diversify its seasonal offerings and promote a new sustainable tourism path (Brouder, 2017). Like in Niagara, sustainable tourism development in Canada overall is still nascent. As de Lange and Dodds (2017) wrote, there is no sufficient literature to tell us how sustainable the tourism industry has become in Canada. Drawing on their three roundtable discussions (in Canada, Jamaica, and Guyana) of the Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Trends in 2002 and 2003, Jayawardena et al. (2008) suggest strategies for the Niagara region to enhance

its competitiveness to support sustainable tourism, which are the following: prioritizing human resource development (e.g., through training) in tourism; developing innovative, robust consumer-focused products and services; developing marketing strategies to market attract a wider network of global travelers; and creating stronger leadership structures and industry champions. Although Jayawardena et al. (2008) claim to outline strategies for sustainable tourism development, they gave a dearth of attention to the vital sustainability issues like justice and equitable development in Niagara.

Brouder and Fullerton (2016) wrote about the concept of co-evolution and its importance for long-term, sustainable tourism development in Niagara. They concluded that there are several co-evolving tourism paths in the Niagara region, all of which are an important part of the local tourism development mix. They added that “[t]he inertia of the dominant tourism (and non-tourism) institutions is beginning to be changed by the new developments, ultimately leading to a more sustainable regional economic portfolio for Niagara” (Brouder & Fullerton, 2016, p. 162). Drawing on this study in Niagara, Brouder (2017) noted the importance of engaging local grassroots stakeholders for sustainability gains in tourism.

Fullerton and Brouder (2019) wrote, “[o]ne of the most fundamental tourism development challenges facing some communities in Niagara is the frequent lack of respect that tourism receives as a legitimate economic development activity” (p. 52). On top of that, the thinking that Niagara Falls “is Niagara” and a bias in favor of Niagara Falls by organizations, such as Niagara’s regional tourism organization (RTO), have served as barriers to tourism development across the rural fringe of Niagara. But the authors argued that tourism is one of the legitimate ways of diversifying the economic portfolio of Niagara in the years ahead. What is needed is a more coordinated effort to draw the benefits to all the regional stakeholders.

Precarious employment in Niagara

Consistent with the overall situation in Canada, income inequality exists in Niagara. Thousands of manufacturing jobs were lost since the 1970s due either to their outright closure or their relocation to other countries like the US or Mexico (Fullerton, 2013, as cited in Brouder & Fullerton, 2016) and this loss has paved the way to an increase in low-paid service, short-term, contract, or temporary work, which do not offer a secure position in the labor market (Boggs et al., 2018). As stated above, the tourism industry provided a lot of jobs and supported businesses but focusing on low-paying and short-term service jobs in trying to fill the gap left after the loss of factory jobs can exacerbate income inequality. In 2016, as per a table by Statistics Canada showing the labor force characteristics of employment and unemployment rates, Niagara ranked in the top three highest unemployment rates and the highest in Ontario for major metropolitan areas (Boggs et al., 2018). The financial hardships experienced by adults are usually something they pass down to their children. There are over 15,000 children in Niagara living in poverty, with many experiencing some form of homelessness or housing insecurity (United Way Niagara, n.d.). It is necessary to work together as a community to break this cycle for a better future of Niagara.

3.2. Sampling

In order to better understand and explore the prospects of geoparks in their studies, some researchers collected data from people who are involved with the activities in geoparks, such as government representatives responsible for local economic development, persons in charge of hotels or restaurants, representatives of local companies, local scholars, guides, etc. (see, e.g., Cahyadi & Newsome, 2021; Rosado-González et al., 2020a; Rosado-González et al., 2020b; Rosyidie et al., 2018; Sagala et al., 2018). This study employs a similar type of method.

Considering the lack of research specifically focused on income inequality in the context of geoparks, this study includes participants who are involved in poverty alleviation and reduction of inequalities in the Niagara region. The members of the board of directors of the NPAGG were also included to understand their thoughts on how to enhance the role of the Geopark in the reduction of inequalities in Niagara. As the literature suggests, a geopark can improve the economic situation of an area through tourism. Therefore, this study also focused on people who are local business owners related to the tourism industry.

The website of the NPAGG (<https://www.niagarageopark.com>) provides information on eleven members of the board of directors, which was used to contact them. The respondents who are interested in tackling inequalities through advocacy in Niagara were chosen based on a snowball sampling method with the help of the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network and the Geopark board members. Among other contacted organizations, the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network was the first to respond and offer help in finding participants. The participants from local businesses were also chosen by means of snowball sampling. The snowball sampling method “is arguably the most widely employed method of sampling in qualitative research in various disciplines across the social sciences” (Noy, 2008, p. 330) It is also a useful method to reach difficult-to-access or hidden populations (Tracy, 2019). Despite its certain disadvantages, such as the non-random nature of respondent selection, snowball sampling is a low-cost and relatively efficient method to collect data very quickly (Johnson, 2014). Considering the restrictions caused by COVID-19, snowball sampling was useful for this study in helping collect rich qualitative data in an efficient way.

3.3. Data collection

To collect rich qualitative data, I opted for semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Overall, thirty interviews with an equal number of respondents from the NPAGG, the advocacy group, and local businesses were planned to be conducted. The reason why I chose interviews for data collection is that a thoroughly conducted interview provides “much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys” (Boyce & Neale, 2006, p. 3). However, only 16 interviews were conducted involving participants residing in the Niagara region over a timeframe of about two months, from April 18 to June 20, 2022. The reason why the number of participants is not thirty is because of a lack of response, availability, and in some cases a lack of expertise as claimed by contacted people. Ten members of the NPAGG’s board of directors were contacted for an interview; nine board members participated in this study while one member did not respond. Some potential participants, who learned about the study from the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network, initially showed their interest via email but did not respond when further details about the study were provided to them. Some local businesses cited their lack of expertise and time availability as reasons for declining to participate in this study.

In accordance with the participants’ discretion, eleven interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams, three were conducted over Zoom, and two were conducted over a phone call. All the participants were asked for permission for video or audio recording. The interviews lasted between 23 and 128 minutes (with the mean being 58 minutes), depending on the participants’ available time, their interest and engagement with the questions. Given that all the participants are residing in the Niagara region, every interview started with general questions pertaining to their perspectives on income inequality in Niagara. Then, each group of participants

Table 2. The interview participants.

	Role	Sex	Participant type
1	Geopark board member	Male	G ₁
2	Geopark board member	Male	G ₂
3	Geopark board member	Male	G ₃
4	Geopark board member	Female	G ₄
5	Geopark board member	Male	G ₅
6	Geopark board member	Female	G ₆
7	Geopark board member	Male	G ₇
8	Geopark board member	Male	G ₈
9	Geopark board member	Male	G ₉
10	Homelessness prevention worker	Female	A ₁
11	Job developer	Female	A ₂
12	Former social service worker	Female	A ₃
13	Poverty reduction advocate	Female	A ₄
14	Neighbourhood organizer	Male	A ₅
15	Tourism service provider	Male	B ₁
16	Indigenous artist	Female	B ₂

received questions that are relevant to their experiences with the NPAGG (see Appendix A on page 120 for the interview guide). The interviewees who did not know much about the concept of a geopark were also provided brief information on geoparks and their mission of promoting sustainable tourism activities in their host regions. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, and each participant was provided with an informed consent form stating the privacy and confidentiality of their responses. Table 2 lists the participants of this study and indicates their roles and sex, as well as the participant type. Nine interviewees were the Geopark board members, of whom two were females and seven are males. For ease of use for later discussions, the Geopark board members are classified as G₁₋₉ for the participant type. The next five participants are the local people who are advocating for poverty reduction in Niagara. They are classified as A₁₋₅, and one of them is a male and the other four are females. Last, two interviewees are local business owners, who are connected with the NPAGG. One of them is a male while the other is a female, and they are classified as B₁₋₂ for the participant type. For each

participant, the order of the interviewees is chronologically arranged; for example, Participant G₂ was interviewed before Participant G₃.

3.4. Data analysis

John Rawls's (1971) *A Theory of Justice* serves as a sensitizing concept for me in this study. Sensitizing concepts serve as jumping-off points or lenses for a qualitative study, and they "serve as background ideas that offer frameworks through which researchers see, organize, and experience the emerging data" (Tracy, 2019, p. 29). The use of Rawls' theory as a sensitizing concept in my study is like the research by Jamal and Camargo (2014) on justice in sustainable tourism in Quintana Roo, Mexico, whereby they drew upon their previous study in 2009, in which they used Rawls' theory of justice as a sensitizing concept to guide data gathering and interpretation.

Data analysis is based on thematic analysis, which "is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The reason why I chose thematic analysis is that it is a very useful method for an early career researcher, providing a highly flexible approach that can help build a rich and detailed account of data (Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Apart from its flexibility, thematic analysis also allows a researcher to produce reports that can be suited to informing policy development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is a particularly relevant advantage of thematic analysis as my final report can provide useful findings for the development of the aspiring Geopark in Niagara.

As per the step-by-step guide by Braun and Clarke (2006), the phases of my thematic analysis entail the following steps: (1) familiarizing myself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6)

producing the report. When deciding on what counts as a theme, I did not focus on the number of instances since more instances may not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial than the others. Rather, I focused on the “keyness” of a theme, as Braun and Clarke (2006) call it, which “is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (p. 82). During the phases of (1) and (2), I had fifty codes (see Table 3 on page 61) because I was following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) “key advice for this phase [...] code for as many potential themes/patterns as possible (time permitting) – you never know what might be interesting later” (p. 89). In phase (3), the candidate themes were formed out of those fifty codes by combining some while dropping unnecessary ones. Later during the phases of (4) and (5), the number of potential themes decreased drastically after the refinement (more details in section 4.2.). The thematic analysis performed in this paper is data-driven, meaning that it is not restricted by the boundaries of pre-existing theories. I used NVivo 12 Plus, a qualitative data analysis software, for coding and generating themes.

In studying geoparks and geotourism, several researchers used thematic analysis, and I give a brief description of them in this paragraph. In exploring geotourism experience of visitors to Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines, Aquino et al. (2018) used semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from twelve participants, and they employed thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), which was aided by NVivo 10, resulting in the generation of eleven themes, which, for example, included themes like “novel experiences”, “hedonism and physical stimulation”, and “solidarity with the local people”. The study by Dousin et al. (2022) aimed to explore the implications of the development of Kinabalu Geopark (Malaysia) to the community’s well-being by conducting fifteen in-depth and semi-structured interviews. Their study’s

“occurrence was conceptualized using theoretical thematic analysis by finding and exploring patterns of meaning in a data set as well as defining, which themes were significant (Braun & Clarke, 2006; as cited in Dousin et al., 2022, p. 7). Similar methods have been employed by several other researchers; for example, for their mixed method study in the Langkawi (Malaysia) and Jeju (Republic of Korea) UNESCO Global Geoparks, Mustafa et al. (2021) used thematic analysis for the qualitative data analysis. Aiming to introduce Mahneshan as a new geotourism destination in Iran, Khoshraftar and Farsani (2022) conducted semi-structured interviews and analyzed the ensuing data by thematic method. Although Azman et al. (2011) did not specifically name their data analysis method in their qualitative study on the Langkawi Global Geopark, the authors explained that they “attempted to derive the important themes and key ideas obtained from the interviews as well as focus group discussions” (p. 269). There have been studies on the evolution of tourism in Niagara that feature thematic analysis, and they are the following: In exploring tourism development paths in Niagara, Brouder and Fullerton (2015) employed thematic analysis on the data they collected via semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Building on their previous work, Brouder and Fullerton (2016) again opted for thematic analysis, and a similar method was employed by them in their later work (Fullerton & Brouder, 2019). Considering that there have been qualitative studies with thematic analysis on tourism, geotourism, and geoparks, I too decided to employ thematic analysis in exploring the role of the NPAGG in addressing income inequality in the Niagara region. I believe that this method let me gather a rich account of thoughts and ideas put forward by the participants.

3.5. Limitations

There are some limitations of this study that need to be mentioned. First, COVID-19 presented a few challenges. Due to the restrictions, interviews could not be conducted in person

but rather had to be online. Even though conducting interviews online (i.e., via Microsoft Teams or Zoom) presents some benefits, such as a time-saving data collection process, it can also create challenges, such as building rapport (Heiselberg & Stępińska, 2022) and missing subtle nuances including body language and facial expressions (Olliffe et al., 2021). Face-to-face interviews for data collection could have provided more elaborate results with a deeper understanding of participants' ideas and feelings regarding income inequality and the potential role of the NPAGG. Moreover, since some participants had never heard of geoparks before participating in this study, they did not know much what to expect from the NPAGG. For that reason, there were no specific questions in the interview guide on how the NPAGG can help tourism, but rather general questions about the role of the NPAGG in helping alleviate income inequality.

Positionality

As I have mentioned earlier, I adopted the Interpretivist research paradigm in this study, which presents personal bias to the findings. Some may consider personal bias a limitation to the study. However, it has to be noted that our “own biases shape the research process, serving as checkpoints along the way” (Bourke, 2014, p. 1). Also, as in line with the Interpretivist research paradigm, a researcher's beliefs, social and cultural background are important elements that can affect the research process. All researchers are differently positioned, and their subjectivity influence their research. The concept of positionality reminds us that “we are differently situated by our social, intellectual, and spatial locations, by our intellectual history, and our lived experience, all of which shape our understandings of the world and the knowledge we produce” (Qin, 2016, p. 1). It also reminds us of the disclosure of our positionality in research process.

I am a heterosexual man from Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet country located in South Caucasus at the intersection of Asia and Europe. Living in a developing post-Soviet country has

affected the way I think about the importance of justice issues. Like some other countries in the post-Soviet space, Azerbaijan has also experienced a violent internal conflict, which is still ongoing to this day. As my hometown is geographically close to war-torn areas, I have known and studied together at school with many children from internally displaced families. Also, the country's budget mainly allocated for the military, especially during the 1990s and early 2000s. The ensuing inadequate funding for social services for poor people has always bothered me and made me think how unfair it is for those people. During my undergraduate years, I worked in the tourism industry in the capital city. During that time, I realized that how tourism is far from the sustainability and ethical issues. This has led to my interest in studying justice issues in tourism and how to address them. As someone who developed interest in justice issues since my teenage years, my positionality is an important element of this research process.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Section 4.1. below summarizes participants' perspectives on income inequality in Niagara and whether that inequality needs to be addressed. Sections 4.2. and 4.3. present the results of the thematic analysis. Section 4.2. presents the analysis of the views of the NPAGG members, the advocacy group, and local business owners on the role of the NPAGG in addressing income inequality. After that, section 4.3. includes the limitations and risks that the participants associated with the role of the NPAGG in addressing income inequality.

The reason why the thematic analysis was conducted for sections 4.2. and 4.3. but not for section 4.1. is that section 4.1. presents the descriptive data. As I noted in the introduction of this thesis, one of the questions that this study aims to answer – how is income inequality perceived in Niagara? – is a descriptive one. The relevance of this question, hence section 4.1., for this study is twofold. First, this study is exploring inequalities through the lens of John Rawls' (1971) principles; therefore, it is necessary to know whether income inequality in Niagara is considered unfair. Rawls' theory is based on procedural justice. It means that by looking at a certain outcome (i.e., a distribution of wealth and income in society) without considering the process that led to it, one cannot arrive at a conclusion that the situation is an unfair one. That is why I decided to focus on people's perspectives to find out the (un)fairness of income inequality in Niagara. Second, there are not many studies documenting people's experiences regarding inequality and poverty in Niagara. I believe that this study can fill that gap.

4.1. Income inequality in Niagara

All the participants were asked to provide their perspectives on income inequality in Niagara and how income inequality is noticeable in the region. Each interviewee showed their concerns with the existing level of income inequality in the region. One Geopark board member

said that income inequality is not one of the main things he is thinking about, but he observes its effects while driving around:

“To be honest, income inequality is probably not something that I think about on a day-to-day basis. ... [but] anyone who drives through and around the city can see it happening ... you know, by a stop light and there’s somebody asking for money with a sign on the side of the road. I mean, there are several locations that you know those happen like a daily occurrence.” (Participant G₁)

Ten participants said that the homelessness issue Niagara faces is a clear manifestation of a high level of income inequality in the region. Participant B₂ remarked that even though she has been living in Niagara since September 2021, she has seen a lot of poverty and homelessness around. She also holds that rich people in Niagara do not care as much about the poor as in other places she had lived:

“There’s homeless people [around]. ... and I say that because they sleep in our apartment building in the hallway, and I don’t call on them. I don’t say anything. I let them because there’s nowhere else to go, you know. ... I don’t know how to make people care because that’s what it is. They don’t care. It’s like they’re in their own little bubbles and their own little worlds. And as long as they’re doing okay, then it’s okay. Life’s good. ... Niagara Region is a very rich place, so if we could get those rich people to care ...” (Participant B₂)

Only one interviewee claimed that from his experience, Niagara has a lower rate of homelessness compared to other places in Canada:

“I believe from my experience living across the country and traveling lots of places ... I would say that there is a lower homelessness rate in the Niagara region than in other areas of Canada. But that is my opinion. I don’t have empirical data on that.” (Participant G7)

The point that Participant B₂ mentioned about people ignoring the poor was also highlighted by two other respondents from the advocacy group:

“In St. Catharines too, we try to push people who are poor into certain neighborhoods and ignore them, and Queenston has been one of those neighborhoods, and Western Hills is one of those neighborhoods. ... [we] push people into different parts of our city and just to try to ignore them and pretend like addiction and mental health and inequality doesn’t exist.” (Participant A5)

“... I find that people with higher incomes, the higher their income the less and less conscience they are of poor people, their lives, and their reality. I just find people who have a lot of money just don’t even understand what it’s like not to have money.” (Participant A4)

Another important point the participants put forward is that income inequality and poverty in Niagara have become more visible in the last few years. Three participants from the advocacy group and one from the local businesses specifically highlighted that poverty and homelessness in Niagara have become worse and more noticeable than ever before:

“I’ve lived in [Niagara] Falls for my whole life. ... you used to kind of see people, you know, once in a while in downtown, and it was pretty obvious ... that they were homeless. I see them all over the city now, and groups of them in

downtown, ... like you never saw that before. Well, I didn't anyways. ... Shelters are full all the time. ... ten years ago, you were able to get somebody into a shelter, [which] were, I'd say, at 80% capacity most days, but now it's over 100% capacity most days." (Participant A₁)

As a local, Participant B₁ stated that the gap between the rich and the poor has been on the rise in Niagara as he cited his personal life experiences growing up in the region and his professional life experiences, which have exposed him to all the different municipalities and all the different demographics within Niagara:

"I believe there's now a bigger gap that we see a lot more, you know, poverty in Niagara, homelessness, and people struggling to get by paycheck to paycheck. And I know these people personally." (Participant B₁)

As described by seven participants, the Niagara region used to be a more prosperous place with manufacturing jobs, which were offering stable employment with benefits. Once these companies left the region, a lot of people lost their jobs. The replacement of those manufacturing jobs came in the form of the service industry (i.e., tourism and hospitality), which has been precarious employment:

"This city when I was in school at Brock 30 plus years ago was a very prosperous city in the sense that we had GM, and it had good paying jobs, and it provided a lot of security, and a lot of middle-class jobs. So, the replacement of those jobs has never really occurred, and it's been difficult for it to kind of go back to its glory days, this region." (Participant A₂)

“I mean, the biggest problem I think is that Niagara historically has been a major manufacturing area over the 1980s, 90s and early 2000s. A great many of those jobs were lost and factories closed, ... tens of thousands of people lost their jobs throughout that time.” (Participant G₃)

The fact that the poor in Niagara experience mental issues and drug addiction was indicated in the narratives of seven interviewees. One Geopark board member described the profound manifestation of drug addiction especially of the homeless in Niagara:

“On more than a few occasions, I have been in the downtown core of St. Catharines and Welland, and have had to call the police on people overdosing with opioid drugs.” (Participant G₄)

The existing number of people struggling with mental health problems in Niagara might be an indication of a lack of support and resources for these people. One participant strongly shared her opinion on the limited availability of resources for people suffering from mental issues and trauma:

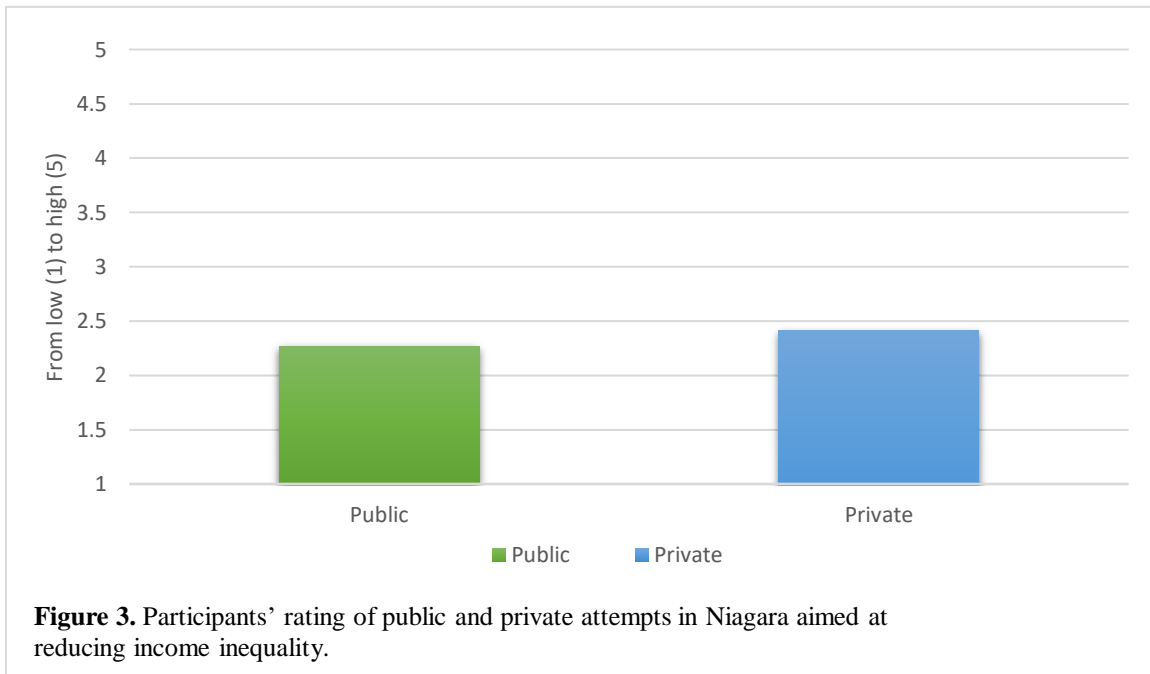
“The clients ... I’ve been seeing for years ... have got significant amounts of trauma since they were children. ... It is very difficult for them to function [while] carrying all that emotional, essentially baggage around ... and there’s very little support for them to access to get better. ... I [can] go and see a [private] therapist. I’m very fortunate. I’m very privileged that way. I have access to benefits. They don’t have the same access. I mean, there’s some free clinics, but oftentimes there’s huge wait lists, right? And again, it goes back to just not having enough resources available for people.” (Participant A₁)

The lack of resources available for poor people is also emphasized by another respondent:

“... that houseless aspect of the community is still very challenging. We don't have really good social services for people who are in a hopeless situation. And addiction adds to the complexity of that.” (Participant G₄)

The lack of available resources and support for people living in a state of utter destitution manifests itself in the interviewees' discontentment with the current situation. All the interviewees were asked on a scale of one to five (one being the lowest, and five being the highest) how they would rate public and private attempts in Niagara aiming to reduce income inequality. By public attempts, I mean the attention and support given by the government, while private attempts stand for the efforts devoted by private companies (e.g., giving back to the community). Only one interviewee said that while he thinks there is a need to be done more to reduce income inequality, he cannot rate either of those attempts. In addition, three participants did not rate the private attempts. As a result, there are fifteen ratings for public attempts and twelve ratings for private attempts. For both attempts, the ratings fell within the range of 1 and 3.5. Figure 3 below illustrates the average of those ratings. As the rating for both public and private efforts are below 2.5, it suggests that the participants think that more needs to be done to alleviate income inequality and poverty:

“I think the private sector is probably the worst. ... Government doesn't really do anything anymore, ... they clearly answer to the loudest voice which is businesses.” (Participant A₃)



As per one respondent, the individuals who are involved in helping the poor are dedicated to help, but the government is unwilling to do more:

“To me, people who work in social programs and are trying to help the poor are very dedicated and they really do try. So, I was going to give those people a [rating of] four, but if you’re talking about government programs ... the government just seems so unwilling that I would only give them a two.”

(Participant A₄)

Next, the participants were asked how they think ethnicity, gender, social background, and urban or rural lifestyles play a role in the income inequality pattern of the Niagara region. Eleven participants argued that people of color and newcomers to the region experience more barriers in employment opportunities and are more likely to be at the lower end of the income spectrum:

“Niagara is a very parochial society, and I don’t see a lot of diversity on boards or in higher positions. ... I think you need to look at that, and I don’t see a lot of ethnicities.” (Participant A₃)

As a job developer, Participant A₂ works with newcomers to Canada to assess their needs and get them connected to the workforce as quickly as possible, or get them retrained if needed, or get their qualifications. She shares that sometimes the existing job regulations could be overwhelming for new immigrants:

“A lot of our professions are regulated and [newcomers] need to have certain qualifications to be able to do it, and those qualifications are not very flexible. So, if you’re coming in from another country, say, with being a lawyer; there’s a long process to become a lawyer, a doctor, a nurse. Any of those main kinds of traditional professions are very difficult. But then when you come into, like, the IT world or computer world, those are, you would think, very transferable and universal. But you know, people don’t really open up to people from different countries with that. I haven’t found that.” (Participant A₂)

However, the other five participants of this study did not see ethnicity as one of the main determinants of the income inequality pattern in the region. Participant B₁ considers Niagara to be a welcoming place that offers opportunities for everyone:

“... speaking for Canada and Ontario, Niagara might be actually one of the better places, given that there are so many opportunities and the diverse industries here ... newcomers to Canada, who may have just arrived recently and barely speak any English or French. I think there are a lot of opportunities

here and I would also like to think that Niagara region is actually a welcoming place compared to maybe other areas of Ontario, let alone Canada. ... I'm proud to say that Niagara is an inclusive place.” (Participant B₁)

In terms of gender, one interviewee said that he does not know much about the issue, and another did not answer the question. While only two interviewees said that gender does not play a role in the income inequality pattern in Niagara, twelve interviewees stated that women and the members of the LGBTQ community earn less than men, and they mostly hold lower-paying positions, especially in the tourism industry:

“Well, I mean from my understanding, a lot more women than men work in the tourism industry, which may explain some disparities in income between men and women.” (Participant G₃)

“... it's a struggle for them [women and the LGBTQ members] ... So, for gender, it's still a man's world in Niagara, still the old boys club, and they're all white.” (Participant A₃)

Another cited expensive childcare as one of aspects of economic hardships women face:

“I was talking to a colleague the other day. She's paying for two children \$2,000 a month. All she's doing at that point is just maintaining her spot in her workplace till the kids are old enough to be in school. So, like, there's this four-or five-year period where the woman's wage is just being used to keep her spot in the workforce. It's not really bringing any income into the house because they're paying it, most of it, out into childcare. So, it's a very difficult time for a woman.” (Participant A₂)

Eleven interviewees considered one's social background as one of the main factors affecting their life prospects. Three interviewees shared their opinions on how the level of nepotism in Niagara holds back some people coming from poor families:

"I mean the barriers ... I would describe those insurmountable like in many cases. It's only the exception that climb out of poverty really. ... [Nepotism] is definitely a part of it for sure. I mean, like the biggest example right now that's in the news is IceDogs. ... IceDogs, the hockey team here in St. Catharines, at the Meridian Centre, [which] is up for sale; the coach and the manager of the hockey team are the two sons of the owners of the hockey team. They got in trouble ... so much trouble that the league suspended the hockey team for two years, and now the parents are forced to sell the team. I mean, like, if you're talking about nepotism in St. Catharines, like, that's the shining example ..."

(Participant A₅)

When it comes to urban and rural division, participants said that income inequality exists in both settings. In the context of rural space, one Geopark board member shared her insights and observations on how young people who want to start a life in farming may face financial barriers:

"I live in Pelham and ... [it] has become a space where people who have a large amount of wealth will come and buy farm properties and convert them into estates where they no longer farm the property. ... And then there are the actual farmers who are trying to make a living and it's very challenging for them, ... [especially] for youth who want to get into farming to be able to afford land." (Participant G₄)

Some participants pointed out the difficulty migrant laborers face working on the agricultural farms in the rural settings in Niagara:

“... migrant laborers ... So, these are people who are here for part of the year to work in the fields, and you don’t have to look that far to find resources that suggest that they’re not, you know, it’s not a great life for these folks.”

(Participant G₂)

“... many of the farm workers who are the workhorses behind our agricultural production are even low paid. They’re often foreign workers, and I don’t want to say the word exploited ... but there have been multiple scandals of foreign trained farm workers being abused, and the COVID situation highlighted a lot of that.” (Participant G₄)

All the participants were asked their opinion on whether there is a need to address income inequality in Niagara. I also asked them to provide justification for their answers on why they think that income inequality in Niagara should be tackled. One of the geopark members specifically highlighted that sustainability for Niagara cannot be achieved without dealing with the existing inequalities:

“I don’t believe that you can have sustainability until you have social equity.

In other words, equity first.” (Participant G₅)

One of the main reasons cited by the participants in furtherance of addressing income inequality in Niagara is the fact that there are many people who are living in a state of utter destitution and cannot even meet their basic needs:

“I don’t think it’s particularly fair if people aren’t having their most basic needs met. ... We as a society have an obligation to try to help those people as much as possible. So, I think it’s just, you know, a matter of fairness as Canadians that we need to concern ourselves with everyone.” (Participant G₃)

“... just last week they had an article in the paper. Some lady was thinking of opting out for ... assisted death program. In Ontario, if you’re in a situation that your life is so bad that you can’t get out of it, you can go to the doctor and have assisted suicide. ... this lady was saying she actually could not find proper housing for herself, and therefore she was willing to go for assisted death. How desperate is that?” (Participant A₄)

Eight participants specifically highlighted that in the last few years the housing prices in Niagara have skyrocketed, thereby making a basic right of housing unattainable for the poor and exacerbating income inequality:

“... housing is supposed to be a right ... I don’t know what the percentage of the population are now homeless including families. Their human right of having housing is not being recognized.” (Participant A₃)

Another argument for tackling income inequality put forth by participants is the effect of a social lottery, in other words, the arbitrariness of having rich parents:

“Yeah, you deserve what you get. That’s the idea that people think that we don’t need to address income inequality. And I just don’t think that that’s the case. Once you start learning the stories of people who are struggling with addiction and mental health, you realize that they’re just like you. If your situation was a

little bit different, that's where you'd be. Much of what you have you didn't earn, you received it from others. I mean, the same with people who are in less fortunate situations." (Participant A₅)

Participant G₉ stated that everyone needs to be helped but we should prioritize helping kids out of poverty, guiding them to make right choices:

"... the ones that we know had no role to play in this circumstance are kids. There's just absolutely no doubt that you can't expect a two-year-old, a three-year-old, or a ten-year-old to figure out on their own that this is not how life needs to be. So, like I said, they lost. They didn't win the birth lottery. ... We should be trying to help children and get them out of the poverty cycle. ... it's not too late for the kids. So, that's where we should be concentrating our efforts." (Participant G₉)

As all sixteen interviewees stated that there is a need to alleviate the effects of uneven distribution of income in the region, it suggests that people consider the level of income inequality in Niagara unfair.

4.2. Thematic Analysis: the role of the Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Geopark

Table 3 presents the initial codes that I generated while reading and trying to familiarize myself with the data. These codes were generated to capture the main ideas presented by the interviewees. The candidate themes were formed from these codes and later went through the refinement process, through which I decided to drop a few and collapse some into one another.

Table 3. The initial codes.			
1	Accessible to all	18	Geopark unique but can still look at others
2	Advocating for accessible transportation	19	Geopark distributing funds
3	Altruistic entity	20	Geopark itself has two employees
4	Any plan developed or being developed	21	Get people on board
5	Attribution to geopark may be hard	22	Highlighting indigenous heritage via education
6	Bottom-up approach	23	Housing price increase might be a risk
7	Building community of practice	24	Learn from other geoparks
8	Building connections	25	May lack resources
9	Can geopark become a leader	26	Membership discount cards for locals
10	Challenge – it's non regulatory	27	Might be unequal distribution
11	Challenge – fighting for funds	28	NPAGG has more academia present in it
12	Challenge – inequality not primary factor	29	Niagara is different from other geoparks
13	Create entrepreneurial opportunity	30	Not many risks or challenges
14	Educating newcomers in the region	31	Not shy away from looking at problems
15	Educating stakeholders about inequality and poverty	32	Offering basic opportunity
16	Encourage fair partnership	33	Other geoparks not much written about justice issues
17	Encourage partners to be living wage employers	34	Perceived benefits
35	Politically has no say	36	Prices may go up in some areas
37	Promoting areas other than Falls	38	Promoting stories that people have
39	Promoting what is good about Niagara	40	Providing authentic experience
41	Raise awareness about SDGs	42	Risk of being dependent on tourism jobs
43	Shining light on who is trying to do better	44	Support from locals (Niagara Falls)
45	Support research	46	The problem is bigger than geopark
47	Trying to get people stay longer in the area	48	UNESCO criteria
49	Why connected with geopark	50	Wicked problem

The resulting 11 themes are presented in the form of a thematic map in Figure 4 below. These themes are categorized into three dimensions that pertain to the issues this paper aims to explore, which are as follows: how the NPAGG can help, the expectations of the advocacy group, and how locals can benefit. The themes are also divided into two groups based on their benefits to addressing income inequality: economic and societal benefits, which are discussed below in section 5.2.

4.2.1. Mutual themes from all three participant groups

There are two main themes that were evident in the responses of all three interviewee groups: “economic opportunity” and “something to be proud”. Since these two themes were evident in the responses of all three participant groups, it is safe to assume that these themes are what the NPAGG board thinks they can do and the expectations of the advocacy group and local businesses. The income distribution has a direct connection with the theme “economic opportunity” while the link to the theme “something to be proud” is a subtle one. They are discussed more in detail below.

Economic opportunity. One of the ways the NPAGG can support local people is by creating economic opportunities. In this theme, three participants commented that the Geopark can provide a basic opportunity for struggling people and give them a hand:

“We want to provide opportunities to ... lift people up in terms of what they can do. ... just a basic example ... [a person] with a sign asking for money ... maybe they speak Spanish fluently. ... I’m not going to say we’re going to hire the guy full time ... [let’s say] we have four brochures that we would want to translate into Spanish. We’ll pay you a living wage for those four hours that you’re doing

that, and maybe that helps out a little bit. ... They're given a purpose to do something, and if we can keep providing them purposes ...” (Participant G₁)

Lifting struggling people up by offering them opportunities is what some NPAGG members think they can do. The comments of some participants from the advocacy group and local businesses also illustrate that it would be their expectation from the NPAGG to offer opportunities to people living in destitution:

“Well, my expectation would be that it would encourage everybody, especially the ones that are impoverished to come and to experience the opportunity to see what kind of jobs are available because a lot of times when you're impoverished and you're a child from an impoverished home, you don't know what's out there, you only know what you see. You don't see that there's hope for other things ... you [try to] give them opportunities that they wouldn't get normally.”
(Participant A₂)

In terms of tourism opportunities, as two Geopark board members highlighted, another way the NPAGG can create more economic opportunities is by presenting visitors with other reasons to stay a couple of more days. They want to introduce more options for tourists so that they do not just visit Niagara Falls but also other areas in the region:

“We don't want to see any more loss from one region to go to another. The Geopark isn't about that. We want to bring people here for other reasons, for a broader purpose. We want people to come and stay for multiple days; spend a day in the west end of Niagara and then head east and spend your time in Falls or Niagara-on-the-Lake. We want to provide opportunities for lower

income families to attend, not just those that have the big bucks to blow on an exclusive getaway weekend.” (Participant G₆)

“We are trying to highlight the existing features in our region through which tourists might stay a day longer, or different tourists might come and then enjoy other tourism businesses.” (Participant G₇)

It was also suggested that to create economic opportunities the NPAGG should focus on promoting the businesses that have potential but not resources to get exposure as much as other big companies. This point was highlighted by Participant B₁ as his perceived benefit from connecting with the NPAGG:

“The Geopark, I think, would have to look at small and growing businesses that they see have a lot of potential, but maybe have not had the exposure or can’t afford the exposure that the other successful large businesses and establishments in the area already have. ... My perceived benefit is that ... the Geopark is going to open up a whole new opportunity for people who want that more local, authentic, and genuine kind of small-scale experience. Therefore, business owners like myself will obviously benefit from it financially from a business standpoint, but it will bring a net greater number of people to Niagara I believe.” (Participant B₁)

A very interesting suggestion was put forward by Participant G₆, who thinks that the NPAGG should play a role in assisting the municipalities with few resources to get funding from the government. In other words, if the funding came through the NPAGG, then the distribution of those funds could be more equitable:

“If funding can come through a singular body like Geopark that can then be deployed in a way that is equitable across the region. I think that that’s a good thing. One of the issues that we see in the funding and granting process is that you apply through your municipality and the municipalities receive funding from the province based on their population and based on their income generation, that sort of thing. Whereas that’s not always representative of the assets that could be supported or marketed better to generate more tourism in those lower income, smaller communities and settings. So, I think the Geopark is a really beautiful model to start to stream like that and be more equitable in the distribution of funds, but also in the marketing. ... having those funds dispersed in a way that is equitable. I think we haven’t paid enough attention to some of these smaller areas, regional settings, and municipalities that have a whole lot to offer and simply haven’t had the opportunity, the support, the funding ...” (Participant G₆)

Something to be proud. In this theme, it is said that the NPAGG can make people feel connected and be a part of something special. As they become connected via the Geopark, they can contribute by doing and creating things that they feel passionate about and proud of. It was suggested that the Geopark especially needs to make people struggling with mental health feel included:

“People want to do things. They want to have responsibilities. They want to feel included and contribute. But by the time you’re homeless and struggling with mental health or substance use, you don’t feel part of [something]. The Geopark could very much help people feel part of something no matter what your

situation is. ... whether it's just people going in making gardens or cleaning up or just being employed to do something because I'd like to say that most of the population that we see that are homeless could actually wish ... [to feel] that they were contributing, then they would be big-time involved in it. It's something to look forward to. It's hope.” (Participant A₃)

Another interviewee said that the NPAGG could be a helping tool to inspire people to follow and do the things they are passionate about:

“[Geopark] could be a helping tool. I don't think it's the fix-all situation, but it would certainly help just to kind of inspire people that there are more opportunities out there, and Niagara is diverse, and that there are opportunities for somebody to go and find a job, something local and meaningful and something that you're passionate about.” (Participant B₁)

The feeling of pride and belonging can lead to the development of stories within the Geopark.

The next excerpt highlights the importance of including local people's stories in promoting the NPAGG:

“[Someone] has a skill making jam or a skill doing something ... giving them a space or location where they can practice their skills, whether it's a community kitchen ... somebody donates two hours or three hours of their time ... to bake 12 pies, for example, and then maybe they get sold at the farmers' market. ... a real skill, it could be cooking, making handicrafts or jewelry or anything ... that people could take pride in doing that represents them in their community.

Everybody in the Geopark has a story to tell. It's the stories that make the Geopark. It's the culture that makes the Geopark.” (Participant G₁)

Apart from engendering pride among the local people, storytelling in geoparks also makes visitors value the geoheritage and cultural heritage of the host region.

4.2.2. Mutual themes from the Geopark board members and the advocacy group

There are four themes that are included in both “how the NPAGG can help” and “expectations of the advocacy group” categories. These themes were present in the narratives of the NPAGG board members and the advocacy group. They are the following: “transportation”, “get everyone on board”, “shining a spotlight”, and “raise awareness”.

Transportation. The importance of transportation for the poor, as well as for the visitors, is emphasized in this theme. Three NPAGG board members have highlighted the problem of public transportation in Niagara and that the Geopark should advocate for its betterment. One Geopark board member made it clear that the NPAGG should not neglect the problem of transportation:

“In every setting that I have worked in, transportation was the most significant barrier to access. [Shouldn't] forget transportation.” (Participant G₅).

Participant G₆ shared that she thinks the NPAGG alone may not solve the transportation problem altogether, but there is an opportunity for them to be actively advocating for its improvement and supporting partnerships among transport service providers:

“So, do I think the Geopark can solve the transportation issue? No, I think that's a regional and municipal issue. I think that we can advocate and support. We can bring together tourism operators that operate transit services. ... We've

got a wonderful regional airport. A lot of people don't know about it, how many flights and routes are coming in through here. A lot of international visitors will fly into Buffalo or fly into Toronto. Can we work with Hamilton International Airport to bring in more visitation? Hamilton is right on the edge of our Geopark boundaries. So, there's some really great opportunities that way."

(Participant G₆).

Active transportation was another key idea that was suggested in this theme. Participant A₅ talked earnestly about the need for the NPAGG to advocate for active transportation and public transportation overall:

"There's a big opportunity for the Geopark to help with transportation, advocating for active transportation or alternative transportation. ... I've really been impressed with the amount of biking that you're seeing in Niagara-on-the-Lake ... that's a rural area. Like, why is that not happening here in St. Catharines. I mean the Geopark has potential to help with that for sure. ... [with tourism] there is greater justification for active transportation ... and public transportation. ... By promoting transportation, I think you're helping with distributing the benefits of [tourism] a little bit because everyone benefits from that. ... Improving that, you know, helps migrant workers who are using bikes, helps people using their scooter, helps people who are using the bus ..."

(Participant A₅)

Get everyone on board. This overarching theme captures interviewees' comments highlighting the importance of inclusivity in the NPAGG. It was suggested that first and

foremost, there needs to be more discussion about the NPAGG. People living in Niagara should become aware that there is this big aspiration happening:

“The first thing that has to happen is that there has to be more discussion in the papers or on the radio, so more people knowing about [the Geopark] because I knew pretty much nothing about it. Until [Participant A₁] mentioned that, I hadn’t heard anything really that there was a big aspiration here. ... that’s where it has to start ... get the citizens of Niagara to know that this is possibility and what it would really mean for them not just like how it’s going to create jobs, but what it really actually means.” (Participant A₃)

Participant A₄ also expressed her concern that she thinks not many people know about the NPAGG, and that is where they should start. Another point of view was expressed in some participants’ narratives that specifically drew attention to the importance of inclusivity on the board level. The NPAGG should have members on board who represents diverse interests around the region:

“Yeah, I think there’s always the potential [to be a leading example in addressing income inequality]. It’s going to depend on who is on the board of directors over time as people come and go. Do we have the right people in there who have that concern and are willing to sort of put effort into dealing with that issue in a committed way? So, there’s the potential for sure. But I think it’s going to be a matter of who’s running it.” (Participant G₃)

Participant G₄ mentioned that the NPAGG enjoys academia’s presence on the board, and they are also fortunate to have someone representing Indigenous interests. But they need more

representation for marginalized people and have members speaking for the communities with not enough voice:

“I think it’s important to be inclusive in many of the decision-making structures ... making sure that the voices of people who may not typically have a voice at the table are included. Geoparks are very deliberate in that they want to have indigenous populations participation, and we’ve been really fortunate to have [that] ... So, for example, we could argue that we’ve got representation from the academic spectrum. ... But do we have the voices of, say, the agricultural community on our board right now, I’m not sure we do. Do we have the voices of other populations, who may be at economic disadvantage, on that board? ... I think it’s worth having these sorts of conversations again to ask the question; do we have the right representation to make sure that those structural decisions? (Participant G₄)

The need for diversification on the board was also stressed by Participant A₃. After the interview was over, Participant A₃ followed up with an email saying that she had checked the website of the NPAGG and that it has a lot of representation from academia and needs more diversity on the board:

“I took a quick look at the website and noted that the board has a heavy component of academia - they could think of diversifying a little. Just my opinion ... Here is the book that the board should read. The Power of Team Work (How we can all work better together) By Dr. Brian Goldman.”
(Participant A₃)

Shining a spotlight. In this theme, the importance of showcasing the best of the Niagara region and promoting businesses that are socially and environmentally responsible is evident. Both the Geopark board members and the advocacy group shared that they want the NPAGG to highlight the positives in Niagara. It was argued that if the Geopark wants to be successful, they need to focus on the positive things that Niagara can offer instead of dwelling too much on the negatives:

“They have to do the positives. I think it’s time for really selling everything positive that the Geopark can do. ... I guess maybe not to have the expectations of negative things happening with it. Just to keep in mind that it’s positive and moving forward, and it will be different. ... not even going or dwelling on what possibly could be negative about it.” (Participant A₃)

It was stressed that the NPAGG should not name and shame companies, for example, which are not giving a living wage or not going sustainable, and doing otherwise, namely focusing on negatives could be self-defeating:

“But are people going to want to come to a region where you know there’s immense inequality ... because if you say, oh well, this place is terrible, a lot of people in poverty. You’re going to lose partnerships ... that would be self-defeating, I think. ... if [the Geopark] is going to promote tourism, the message generally has to be positive. But what it can do is to highlight the people and the corporations that are doing well. So, that it’s more of a shining a light on the people and companies that are paying a living wage, that are treating their employees well, that are active in the community.” (Participant G₂)

A Geopark member added that the NPAGG should pay special attention to promoting businesses with sustainability components:

“... sustainable type operators or people that are thinking, in terms of a greater good with equality, with climate change in mind with, you know, with reusing, recycling, and making good environmental choices, and all that. We’re trying to highlight these operators whether they’re coffee shops, tour operators, or gift shops. We’re trying to highlight them and drive business to them.”

(Participant G₉)

Raise awareness. This theme captures the idea by some interviewees that the NPAGG needs to raise awareness about the existing income inequality and poverty. The partners and stakeholders should be involved in this discussion:

“Essentially, I feel stakeholders need to educate themselves first ... what is going on in their own communities. ... So, it starts with education. It starts with knowing what is going on. And once you know what is going on, then you can advocate for change that way. I think that’s where I would start.” (Participant A₁)

“Just keep it open mind about what possibilities could be. Talk to the stakeholders ... see what they think. Ask them what they’re thinking about it ... maybe have some educational webinars with partners about what inequality looks like in the Niagara region? Maybe to have an open conversation with employers to see if they see anything. I think a lot of discussion needs to happen.” (Participant A₂)

As it was explained, once the partners and stakeholders get to know more about the situation and the need for action, they will care more and be involved more in trying to make things better:

“When human beings care about something they contribute more.” (Participant G₅)

4.2.3. Mutual themes from the Geopark board members and the local businesses

There are two themes that were revealed in the responses of the NPAGG board members and the local businesses. As can be seen in Figure 4 below, these two themes are connected to the categories of “how the NPAGG can help” and “how locals can benefit.” These themes are “authentic experience” and “partnerships and connections.”

Authentic experience. This theme captures the participants’ beliefs that the NPAGG should focus on delivering authentic experiences and unique opportunities for visitors that are not mainstream:

“Geoparks are all about experience and like the tourism side experiencing the authentic, not the typical Clifton Hill, Niagara Falls, or go to a winery and leave. It’s about exploring the community. It’s about exploring the places that you’re going.” (Participant G₁)

It was evident in the explanations of Participant G₆ that the NPAGG does not intend to take away from already established tourism service providers but rather promote businesses that offer authentic experiences so that they can attract more people to Niagara:

“... visitors that are interested in the Geopark are going to be interested in some of those niche areas, those specialty areas and regions and the parts of Niagara that have particularly struggled ... So, we’re hopeful for that ... and

we're not fighting against the big boys. ... we want to see opportunities in sectors across the board, you know, Indigenous Heritage interpretation, ecotourism and true geotourism ... We want to see diversity and opportunities. We want to see authentic opportunities being delivered.” (Participant G₆)

Another point of view was expressed by a local business owner that the NPAGG should effectively utilize social media to navigate visitors towards local businesses that offer unique and offbeat services and products:

“If they want to be successful ... and of course, help fix the income inequality of the Niagara region, the Geopark [shouldn't] become more mainstream. They need to use the appetite for social media and how people navigate and find information these days. They need to use that appetite to their advantage in the modern world ... [they need to advertise] as hey, this is not mainstream. This is unique. This is kind of cool. This is offbeat. This is unconventional compared to what most people do. People do have a draw to that ... I think people come to Niagara, and they get steered or advertised towards the certain big events or big kind of successes and leaving all the other awesome potential businesses and attractions kind of in the dark. ... the Geopark should hone in on that because people do have an appetite to support local now, like they never had before.” (Participant B₁)

Partnerships and connections. This theme indicates the importance of building connections and partnerships among the Geopark members. It was specifically highlighted by two NPAGG board members as one of their main missions. All two business owners also drew attention to the importance of this theme:

“We need to connect and not just by emails and stuff but like have meet and greets. You know, I want to meet the other Geopark people. I want to meet the locals. I want to meet the same people who care like I care. I haven’t met any of them except [Participant G₁]. I know that they’re busy and stuff. But you know that’s something I would like to do cause I’m very passionate about it. So, I’d like to do that every month, every two months, every three months, whatever. Whatever they could do, but I think it’s important to actually be in the same space. ... I was very excited about the Geopark. I’ve never heard of Geopark until I moved here. ... I really valued their appreciation for the land, and I also value the sustainability part of it too, because I’m Inuit ... I just felt the connection with them, and I’m looking forward to doing some things with them.” (Participant B₂)

Having get-togethers and connecting the Geopark members is an essential way of building community ties. Such get-togethers can help develop a network of Geopark partners and benefit everyone involved. Participant B₁, a local business owner, when asked why he chose to connect with the Geopark, gave the potential of connecting with other business owners as a reason to be involved in the NPAGG:

“I was approached by the Geopark founding members ... about four or five years ago, give or take. So, that’s how I found out about it ... I thought to myself it wouldn’t hurt me to be involved with something extra like this as a business owner. And it would connect other small business owners and perhaps give each other more business and revenue, etc. ... lots of potential in those regards again, just building up the small businesses and locals who want to take off and

succeed, of course, but also creating that network between them. I think that'd be really beneficial ... and at the end of the day it just means more visitors to the Niagara region as a whole, and then everybody succeeds; more job opportunities ... It could help address the income inequality issue." (Participant B₁)

4.2.4. Themes from the advocacy group

There are two themes that were derived from the interviews from the advocacy group: "living wage employment" and "accessibility." The first theme "living wage employment" also appeared in a few instances in the comments of the NPAGG members, but it was not substantial. Therefore, "Living wage employment" is only getting presented as a theme by the advocacy group. The theme "accessibility" was only present in the narratives of the group advocating for poverty alleviation.

Living wage employment. This theme captures the expectations of the advocacy group and that is companies and organizations partnering with the NPAGG should be encouraged to be living wage employers. The NPAGG should also encourage the partners to provide their employees with benefits, such as paid sick leave, alongside being a living wage employer:

"... by advocating for living wage and all the benefits of a living wage. If they're partnering with businesses, I think they should be encouraging those businesses to pay a living wage and to be a certified living wage employer." (Participant A₁)

"I think my expectations for Geopark would be to have the employees adequately paid, unionized with benefits, and sick days, and that's in the tourist

industry. I think that would be my expectations if you're going to have a strong tourist industry you want to make it so that people are happy doing it and can live. I don't want to be thinking that Niagara is going to be making money on the backs of somebody else, right? So, I think that would be an expectation of mine that there is no longer gig employment.” (Participant A₃)

By encouraging partners to be living wage employers, the NPAGG can help tackle the issue of employment precarity in the region:

“Well, for employment, I would hope that all employers of these partnerships are giving all their employees a living wage or more because so many of our tourists activities in the Niagara region are minimum wage and no benefits. They send you home the minute they can. You know, it's a precarious work.”
(Participant A₄)

Accessibility. Another important matter that the NPAGG should focus on is the accessibility of activities and job opportunities, as suggested in this theme. Participant A₄ said that as a person with a disability, it is her expectation that the Geopark pay enough attention to accessibility issues:

“Well, I just want [Geopark-related jobs and activities] to be available to all levels of income especially lower income. And because I'm handicapped, make sure that it's available to all abilities. So, that would be my expectations.”
(Participant A₄)

Another interviewee pointed out that accessibility is one of the issues that have not been dealt with very well in Niagara:

“Another thing to keep in mind for the Geopark is that it has to be accessible for blind people, people in wheelchairs, and old people. Accessibility is one of the most important things. Inclusive and accessible. I think we have not done very well in making things accessible.” (Participant A₃)

4.2.5. The theme from the Geopark board members

“Education” is the only theme in this category. The importance of education for the NPAGG and its efforts in the reduction of income inequality was predominantly present in the narratives of some NPAGG members.

Education. This theme centers around the idea that education could play an important role in directing the focus of the NPAGG towards the social justice issues, such as income inequality and poverty, as well as promoting a transformative change. In the view of Participant G₁, the existence of higher education institutions in Niagara could serve as a push for the Geopark in addressing these kinds of problems:

“Given what we have here in Niagara in terms of Brock, in terms of the Environmental Sustainability Research Center and Niagara College, maybe these problems [of income inequality and poverty] are something that we think about more rather than other geoparks, ... and they don’t really dig deep into the heavy subjects and things like that. It seems to be something that we’re not shying away from because we want to maximize our assets in terms of student research or in general any research. ... and this is a sort of another way the Geopark plays a role. This type of research ... and a lot of the research that happens at Brock, in general, never goes beyond the walls of Brock ... unless you’re looking for it and you want to find it. ... We can promote that research

... to the people that might not normally go to the Brock University website ...”

(Participant G₁)

Educational projects and activities arranged within the NPAGG can also help guide school children to learn about nature and the environment, which can positively affect their future:

“... education and awareness portion of the Geopark is big ... [Participant G₁] is working hard to get the Geopark curriculum into high schools, public schools ... six-year-old or eight-year-old, who all of a sudden is really thrilled by the concept of Wainfleet wetland or Wainfleet bog, and he decides he's into certain type of frog that he saw there, and he wants to become a biologist instead of sitting around with his buddies around a street corner and you know, eventually getting hooked on opioids.” (Participant G₉)

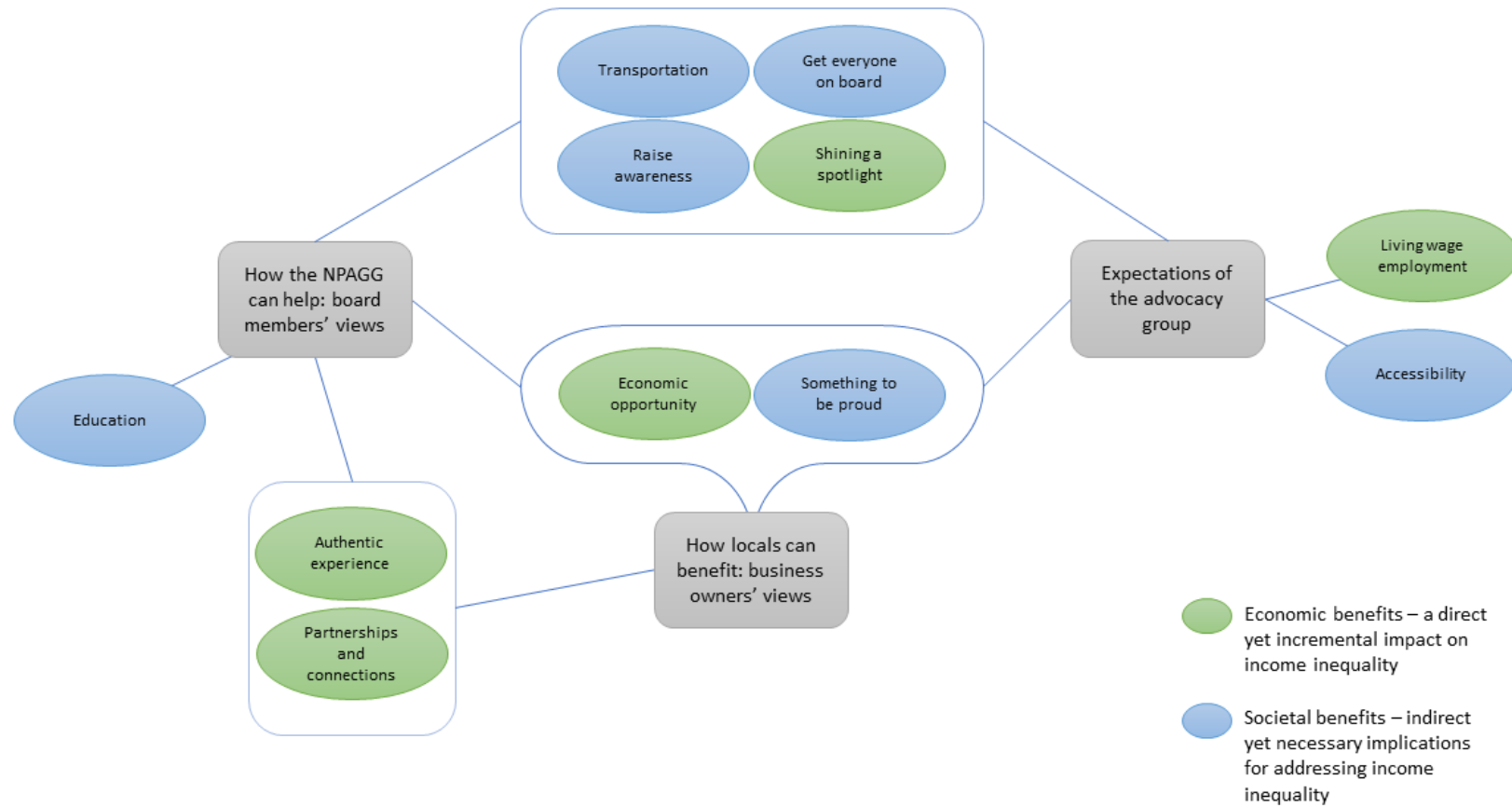


Figure 4. Thematic map of the final themes.

4.3. Limiting factors and risks

There are several limiting factors for the NPAGG in trying to help reduce income inequality in Niagara, as well as a few risks that are worth considering. As the NPAGG board members are the ones with expertise on the issue, they were directly asked a question about the challenges (i.e., limiting factors) and risks. But some participants from the advocacy group and local businesses also revealed their concerns. The limiting factors identified are “not a primary goal” and “problem bigger than the Geopark.” When it comes to risks, while some NPAGG board members stated that they do not see many risks, that is given under “not many risks,” others said the region may become “dependent on tourism” and “prices may go up.”

Not a primary goal. Some NPAGG board members argued that the fact that addressing income inequality is not the primary goal of the NPAGG, as well as of geoparks in general, is a limiting factor:

“I’m not sure income inequality is the number one objective of the Geopark, but even if it’s within the objectives, I think just not being a primary goal of the Geopark is a limiting factor.” (Participant G₈)

“It’s not a deliberately primary outcome. I think it’s a very important outcome, but it’s not a primary outcome.” (Participant G₄)

Problem bigger than Geopark. Some participants stated that the problem of income inequality in Niagara is insurmountable for the Geopark. All three groups of participants expressed their concerns that the problem is bigger than the NPAGG:

“... it’s a bit of a wicked problem because it’s not easily solved or even understood. Like Niagara Falls ... they get 14 million visitors a year. A lot of

the attractions in Niagara Falls are owned by a very small number of people or organizations. So, they're getting very wealthy. But the employees? They get jobs and they get an income, but it's not a really high income." (Participant G₃)

"I think there's a lot to be done. But it's bigger than just Geopark, right? ... I mean, in order to reduce income inequality, ... like we need rental control here to start. We don't have rental control here. We need something to cool off the housing market ... we need more support workers." (Participant A₁)

Participant B₁ argued that there are bigger agents than the NPAGG, namely the government and large corporations, that need to step up to tackle income inequality:

"I think that the Geopark would be an agent of change as a factor but not as a solver. I think ultimately at the end of the day, it's our government that has to step up to the plate, and then the major corporate and large businesses, friends or connections, for a lack of better words, they are the ones who are creating the wealth division beneath them, and that's a whole other conversation and issue. I think that's the root problem to be honest. But I think the Geopark can alleviate some of that inequality pain." (Participant B₁)

Several Geopark board members stated that the NPAGG does not have the political power to tackle income inequality, considering that it is a larger macroeconomic problem:

"It's not a regulatory entity. It doesn't have much in the way of political teeth."
(Participant G₂)

The comments of the two NPAGG members illustrated that it could be challenging to get people to care about social justice issues:

“... we are imposing it on a system that’s been there for 100 years, trying to get the folks on Clifton Hill to be sustainable.” (Participant G₄)

“... [having] people want to participate in sort of social justice issues, that’s a tricky thing. How do you get people to get on board with saying, yeah, you know what? Let’s pay a living wage. Let’s do that. And that’s the challenge, right?”

(Participant G₂)

It is a challenge that not all local people within the Geopark may be willing to accept changes and try out new things.

Not many risks. Some NPAGG board members argued that they do not see many risks and negative consequences associated with the development of the Geopark:

“I see nothing but opportunities on many levels. ... it will highlight the importance of sustainability in terms of inequality. I would say no, it would not exacerbate that issue.” (Participant G₇)

Two interviewees mentioned that there could be some negative impacts on the environment but that is negligible:

“The only risk to the environment that I can think of would be more people are going to get in their cars and drive to Niagara but that’s pretty small. ... I don’t see a big environmental impact, ... we’re not promoting gambling. We’re not promoting the motor car race, that might be coming to Niagara. We’re promoting, like I said, hiking ... cycling, kayaking, etc. ... and getting out to the to the corners of the places like Fort Erie or Wainfleet ... So, I can’t imagine

how what we're doing would have any appreciable risk of increasing inequality." (Participant G₉)

Even though some NPAGG board members cited a few possible negative environmental effects of the Geopark and tourism development, they mostly see it as a positive opportunity for the region.

Dependent on tourism. There is a concern shown by some participants that the region might become even more dependent on the tourism industry:

"The danger is that Geopark is seen as representing just the travel and tourism sector. ... They may be too much centered around tourism." (Participant G₅)

Two Geopark board members elaborated more on the risk of being dependent on tourism, pointing out that jobs in the tourism industry are precarious and susceptible to external shocks like COVID-19:

"... the more you sort of put into tourism industries and not into other things, you also get the chance that all the work is going to be precarious and seasonal, and non-union without good benefits." (Participant G₂)

"... as far as income inequality goes, I guess if anything, it just might make the region much more dependent on tourism, which can be a risk given you know what we just saw with COVID and everything else. Tourism industry is very susceptible to external shocks." (Participant G₃)

Prices may go up. There is also a risk that with the great success of the NPAGG may come great inflation. Participant G₄ showed her concern that some public properties can become

unaffordable for locals because of an influx of tourists, leading to increased fees, such as parking fees:

“... something that the Geopark needs to be really careful about is that if you see an increase of usage on a public property, oftentimes that’s an incentive for governments or for different tourism infrastructure to put up fees for services, whether those fees are direct fees, such as entry fees or membership fees or whether those are indirect fees, things like parking. ... let’s say the Niagara Glen. It used to be free parking, and it was a hiking area that many people enjoy it, and it is a geosite. Then they switched over the models such that you have to pay for parking and the parking fees are quite exorbitant, and so many of us who are local, who used to go there quite frequently to enjoy hiking because we are local, and this is our own public good. Suddenly we can’t. ... I can’t afford \$30 to go where I used to go hiking ... [maybe] once in a while, but we used to go much more frequently. And now suddenly we’re not going.” (Participant G₄)

Interestingly, another interviewee argued that higher parking fees are not very bad at all because the collected fees can be reinvested into public and alternative transportation:

“I’m a big fan of parking fees, the higher the better. ... at our beaches, everyone pays for that parking lot to exist there. Poor people, wealthy people, everyone pays. But the only people who use it are people who are wealthy enough to own a vehicle. So, all the poor people who never use that parking lot and don’t even have the ability to use that parking lot are still paying for it. ... parking is the thing that maintains inequality and parking fees actually address the inequality. Especially in public parking lot, they address the inequality, they’re not

creating a barrier to use the park. They're actually taking away a barrier, especially when those parking fees are reinvested in public transit and alternative modes of transportation. I live 15 minutes from the beach with bike ride. I would never bike there with my kids because it's so dangerous. Why is it so dangerous? Charge people who are driving to the beach a ton of money and use that money so it's not dangerous for poor people to bike there from St. Catharines. Then you'll actually be addressing the income inequality."

(Participant A₅)

Two NPAGG board members added that the inflation that may come with the Geopark development is contingent upon how successful the Geopark will be. If the NPAGG is very successful in drawing many visitors to geosites, which are located in less visited rural areas of Niagara, only then might increasing prices become an issue.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1. Income inequality in Niagara needs to be addressed

As reported in section 4.1., all the participants expressed their concerns with the growing disparity in income and wealth in Niagara. Most of the participants stated that the problem of inequality in Niagara is strongly deep-rooted and that a more concentrated effort is required to address this issue. By asking all participants whether there is a need to address income inequality in Niagara, I aimed to make a connection to John Rawls's argument that not all inequalities are a sign of injustice. Sometimes, "the fact that others have more or less than oneself is not by itself a reason to suspect injustice in the system [...] If the system of rules (the basic structure) is just, then the fact that others have more than oneself gives no cause for complaint" (Platz, 2020, p. 66). What is clear from all the participants' responses is that the level of income inequality in Niagara is unfair and there is a need to alleviate the effects of this uneven distribution in the region. Some participants also talked about the arbitrariness of social lottery (i.e., birth lottery) and its negative effects on the prospects of a younger generation. This is in line with Rawls' (1971) Fair Opportunity Principle, which is about minimizing the effects of natural and social lottery as much as possible so that young people with similar abilities and motivation get to have similar prospects in their lives. This type of thinking manifests itself in the existence of charitable organizations like United Way Niagara that aims to prevent poverty from being a generational issue and provide families in Niagara with tools to lift themselves out of poverty and on the path to a successful and rewarding life (United Way Niagara, n.d.). In the end, since all the participants in this study showed their concerns with the unfairness of the level of income inequality in the region, the NPAGG ought to be one of the agents, along with organizations like

United Way Niagara, at the forefront in helping tackle income inequality, as a part of their mission in working towards sustainable development.

5.2. The role of the NPAGG in addressing income inequality

Economic benefits

It is expected that the establishment of the NPAGG will bring economic opportunities (see Figure 4 above). The main issue here is how to ensure that those people who are struggling at the lower end of the income spectrum have similar chances of benefiting from the potential economic benefits as the well-off. It could be done in two ways. First, the NPAGG needs to make sure that all the available opportunities (e.g., job or training opportunities) within the Geopark are advertised to everyone equally. For example, to that end, the website of the NPAGG could serve as a useful go-to portal for everyone. It is one of the main expectations from geoparks to support local people by creating economic opportunities (see, e.g., Azman et al. 2011; Farsani et al., 2011; Farsani et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2015). By finding and offering basic economic opportunities for people, especially the ones struggling with poverty coupled with poor mental health and addiction, the NPAGG can make a step forward, albeit an incremental one, to directly help fight poverty and reduce the level of income inequality. This idea seems like trying to make a hole in the water as the question that begs to be answered is how many people the NPAGG can lift out of poverty in this way. The answer most probably is not many. Nonetheless, by connecting with the right organizations, such as Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (<https://wipeoutpoverty.ca>), the NPAGG can extend its role in lifting people struggling with financial hardships.

Second, the Geopark should help promote destination marketing for areas other than Niagara Falls, which receives the lion's share of tourism benefits, so that visitors can see other

reasons to spend a couple of more days in other municipalities of Niagara. It should in fact be one of the aims of geoparks to increase the duration of the tourists' visit to geopark areas and in addition to the summer period, to extend the visiting period to the spring and fall seasons (Zouros, 2016). It is important to note that when promoting tourism products across the region, the intent of the NPAGG is to show that in addition to the mass tourism of the Falls, the Niagara region has much more to offer in terms of authentic experiences, such as wine or culinary tourism (Brouder & Fullerton, 2016). There was a concern among established tourism service providers in the Falls that the Geopark might try to take away from them to support other municipalities. In fact, there was an open letter from Niagara Falls Canada Hotel Association to the city council stating that they do not support the NPAGG initiative for Niagara, "We are concerned with this effort having an adverse impact on development in the tourist core and we are already heavily regulated with multiple layers of bureaucracy and do not wish to compound this further" (Spiteri, 2021). Therefore, the NPAGG needs to make sure that its initiatives to promote authentic niche tourism services and products in other municipalities of Niagara are meant to be complementary, not competitive (Fullerton & Brouder, 2019). Niche activities, such as geohiking and geocycling, within the Geopark can bring about an increase in the number of visitors, especially adventure seekers (Farsani et al., 2011). Presenting this type of activities under one single brand is an opportunity to showcase the authenticity of the region (Werther, 2022). To this end, the effective use of social media can help popularize the geosites and attract more visitors. Social networks like Instagram and Facebook are viable and popular options to promote geopark brands (Rocha & Duarte, 2022; Salamzadeh et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2021). If we look at an example from Canada, in Tumbler Ridge Global Geopark, the area is full of attractions at the ends of the geotrails, such as waterfalls, caves, beautiful alpine lakes, and places on a cliff

where one can see the whole Rocky Mountain Range, which has been really appealing for tourists, especially the tourists that like to be active on Instagram, and that has played very well for attracting more tourists (M. Maggs, personal communication, July 7, 2022). Thus, the NPAGG should pay adequate attention to utilizing social media to the fullest in promoting offbeat places and activities across Niagara.

Apart from promoting local businesses, the NPAGG should also encourage them to adopt sustainable practices and highlight those who have already done so. It is expected that the Geopark provide more exposure for businesses that pay close attention to sustainability (Ratten et al., 2018). Local small- and medium-sized enterprises can certainly benefit from such a strategy by the NPAGG. Adopting more sustainable and responsible practices could bring benefits for businesses, especially the ones offering tourism products and services since it can encourage more tourists to choose their services (Cheung, 2016). Geoparks can also offer incentives, say in the form of geocertification, for local business ventures to adopt responsible practices (Rodrigues et al., 2021). It is essential that such incentives by the NPAGG have a requirement for businesses to be living wage employers. As employment precarity is an issue in Niagara (Boggs et al., 2018), adequate pay and employee benefits should be one of the principles the NPAGG should uphold.

Another benefit that the NPAGG can bring for local businesses connected with the Geopark is an opportunity to build partnerships and bring more business to each other. In fact, it is geoparks' mission to build partnerships among local businesses, as well as civic groups (see Cai et al., 2019; de Castro et al., 2022; Lee & Jayakumar, 2021; Ngwira, 2015; Ratten et al., 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2021). In Canada, we can look at the example of Tumbler Ridge Global Geopark. It has a geopartner program, which teaches local businesses what the geopark is about

and encourages them to include geological or geographical education into what they are already doing, and then they get to be listed as a geopartner on the geopark's website, and whenever the geopark is planning an event, they turn to their geopartners first. For example, they had an interesting idea with one of their partners, Meikle Wind, who would normally sponsor Mother's Day brunch but could not do it anymore because of COVID. So, during the pandemic, Meikle Wind turned to the geopark for advice on what to do for mothers in Tumbler Ridge now that they could not arrange their usual brunch. The geopark members came up with an idea that would support small businesses that were suffering during COVID, by buying their products (e.g., soap bars) to create gift baskets for mothers in Tumbler Ridge, and with this initiative, the geopark managed to use the sponsor money to directly spend about \$25,000 on local businesses (M. Maggs, personal communication, July 7, 2022). These types of initiatives could also be arranged by the NPAGG and their partners, which would support not only local business ventures but also boost the morale among everyone involved. It is notable that some NPAGG members have already built connections with each other. Figure 5 below illustrates social media posts taken with permission from the Instagram profile of Owen Bjorgan ([@owenshikingandadventures](https://www.instagram.com/owenshikingandadventures/)), who is a local tour guide connected with the NPAGG. The posts show his partnership with another NPAGG member, Red Roof Retreat.

Societal benefits

The establishment of the NPAGG can bring about societal benefits, with indirect yet necessary steps towards addressing income inequality (see Figure 4 above). To that end, the NPAGG first and foremost needs to get everyone on board, i.e., to involve local people in the management of the Geopark, which can help spread the benefits and opportunities arising from its establishment. The importance of community involvement is well-documented for the success

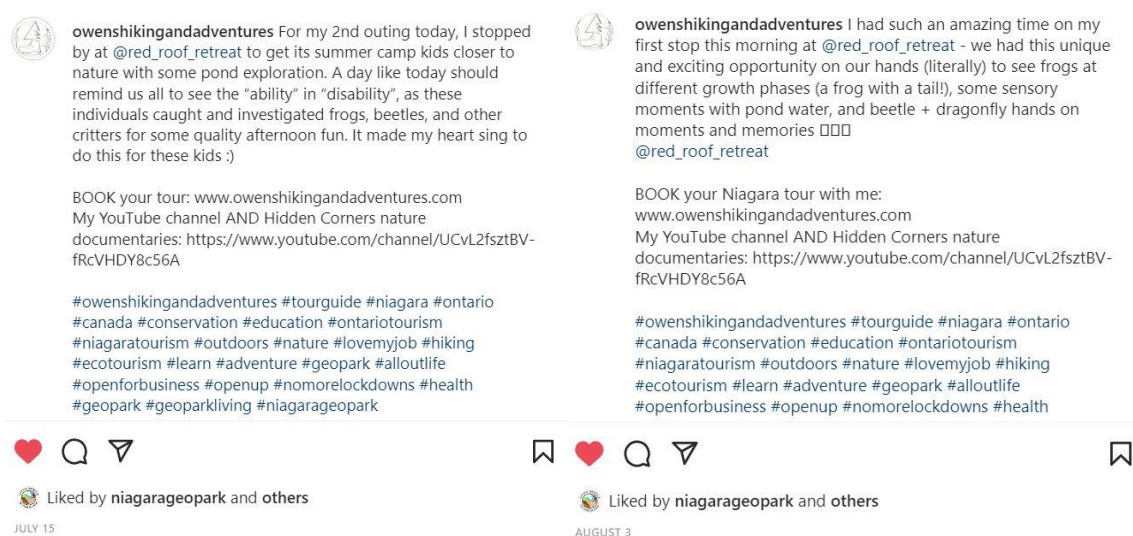


Figure 5. Already existing connection between two NPAGG members. Adapted from Instagram, by O. Bjorgan, 2022, Retrieved August 14, 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/owenshikingandadventures>. The photos of these posts are not included in this figure because they show other identifiable people, whose permission has not been acquired. Copyright 2022 by Owen Bjorgan. Included with permission.

of geoparks (see Briggs et al., 2022; Dousin et al., 2022; Dowling, 2013; Guo & Chung, 2019; Padiaditi & Moquay, 2022; Ratten et al., 2018; Ríos et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2015; Werther, 2022; Zouros, 2016). Whether tourism will contribute to inclusive development in the region depends on whoever makes decisions about its development (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). That is why inclusivity at the board level (i.e., the board of directors) is necessary for the NPAGG so that there are members in the management team representing diverse groups across Niagara.

Moreover, the educational component of geoparks is significant for their endeavors to attain sustainable development (Catana & Brilha, 2020; Silva & Sá, 2018). In that sense, the existence of higher education institutions and research organizations, such as Brock University or Niagara College, can be a big opportunity for the NPAGG to collaborate to raise awareness of the problems of social justice and inequality in the region. Geoparks should promote awareness

of the key issues that society faces, such as climate change and the empowerment of indigenous peoples (Zouros, 2016). It is important to note that raising awareness and having discussions should not be one-sided, meaning that the NPAGG should also consult with stakeholders and partners and listen to their suggestions on how to move forward in addressing inequalities. Since education is a significant component of UGGps, geoparks, including Niagara's aspiring Geopark, are expected to be and act as one of the key actors in the implementation of SDG 4, i.e., inclusive and equitable quality education (Silva & Sá, 2018), which is highly relevant to SDG 10, i.e., reducing inequalities (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016; Kanbur, 2021). Therefore, the educational projects and activities within the NPAGG bear relevance in addressing inequalities.

Another positive endeavor that the NPAGG is expected to do is to engender a sense of pride and belonging. Its connection with reducing inequalities is a subtle one that many people may overlook. The argument is that once people feel a sense of belonging and ownership of the place they call home, only then will they truly care about contributing and making their home a better place to live. This needs to be one of the main goals of the NPAGG, making the residents of Niagara feel proud and connected. Educational projects and activities for children, especially outside the school environment, can be arranged by the NPAGG, which can foster a sense of pride, identity building, and personal development (Fernandes et al., 2021). In other words, the Geopark can help develop values, such as concerns over environment and equity, especially among youth and bring together like-minded people for societal development. In the literature on geoparks, many researchers found that the establishment of geoparks instills a sense of pride in local people and encourages them to be involved in geopark activities (see Azman et al., 2011; Canesin et al., 2020; de Araújo Pereira, 2022; Han et al., 2018; Lee & Jayakumar, 2021; Shahhoseini et al., 2017; Werther, 2022).

The NPAGG can also help people struggling with financial hardships by advocating for a better public transport system and accessibility of employment opportunities, activities, and educational projects within the Geopark. A neglected public transport system hinders racialized, disabled, and poor people's access to jobs and services (Reid-Musson, 2018). Public transport in the Niagara region is unsatisfactory, which can be a major barrier for young people from poor families, as well as immigrant youth in trying to socialize, volunteer, and find employment (Ajandi & Neamtz, 2017). In the literature, the role of geoparks in advocating for improvements in public transport is non-existent. It can be explained in the sense that every area has its own unique issues that geoparks have to accommodate. Place branding like geopark status reflects the ambition and hope that such branding will offer solutions to practical/functional place-related problems (Werther, 2022); in Niagara's case, one of the main place-related problems that the NPAGG should tackle is public transportation. Also, better infrastructure such as a transport connection and pedestrian access will attract visitors to be more active in exploring the activities and the area within geoparks (Fauzi & Misni, 2016). So, a better transport system will benefit not only the local people of Niagara but also the visitors. It can improve people's lives, especially the ones who do not own a car and are at the lower spectrum of income distribution, and their access to work and services.

Limiting Factors

The first limiting factor for the NPAGG to address income disparities is the fact that it is not a primary goal for the Geopark. Similarly, UNESCO (2017) did not specify SDG 10 as one of the main goals for geoparks. However, there have been studies showing cases where geopark development has contributed to SDG 10 (see, e.g., Rosado-González et al., 2020b). It is possible that geoparks can work indirectly on SDG 10 (de Castro et al., 2022). Even though addressing

the uneven distribution of income and wealth may not be one of the main goals of the NPAGG, there is still a potential for the Geopark to join the battle against inequalities and perhaps poverty.

Secondly, the problem of inequality requires much more than what one single body like the NPAGG can do. It is a wicked problem that requires deeper structural and transformative changes. But not all local people within a geopark are willing to accept changes and try out new things (Wu et al., 2021). That is why it is such an imperative task for the NPAGG to gain everyone's trust and make sure that people are on board. Consequently, it can lead to the development of societal values like empathy and mutual respect, all of which can otherwise be corroded by the growing level of disparities (Vandemoortele, 2017).

Risks associated with the development of the NPAGG

The NPAGG board members regarded the Geopark development mostly as a positive endeavor for the Niagara region. However, they also identified certain minor risks that may come with the activities of the Geopark. With the great success of the NPAGG, a greater number of tourists can be attracted to visit rural areas, and thus environmental pressure may arise, such as traffic congestion, littering, and inadequate waste disposal. These types of minor issues have been recorded in some geoparks (see Cahyadi & Newsome, 2021; Cai et al., 2019; de Castro et al., 2022; Deng & Zou, 2022). It is also possible that the development of the NPAGG can lead to inflation in rural areas of Niagara. But that is highly contingent upon the success of the Geopark.

Another noticeable risk that may come with the Geopark development is the possibility of the region becoming more dependent on tourism. The tourism industry is highly susceptible to external shocks like COVID-19, which can disrupt tourism altogether. Also, by generating more

employment in tourism without addressing its precarious nature, the NPAGG runs the risk of exacerbating income inequality in Niagara.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This study ranks among the first few to explore income inequalities in the context of geoparks. Societal issues, such as the lived reality of communities and the uneven distribution of tourism benefits, have received a dearth of attention in geopark studies (Stoffelen, 2020). The present study was designed to address this gap in the literature. Recognizing income inequality as an issue of distributive justice, I used John Rawls' (1971) theory of justice as a sensitizing concept to guide the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The data were collected via semi-structured interviews and were thematically analyzed, following the step-by-step guide by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis provides findings on the potential role of Niagara's aspiring Geopark in addressing income disparities in the Niagara region.

Before the discussion of the role of the NPAGG, this study presents the descriptive results pertaining to the question of how income inequality is perceived in Niagara. By including people's perspectives, I wanted to explore (un)fairness of the level of income inequality, which has not been documented by many studies. The results show that all participants of this study consider the level of income inequality in Niagara unfair, thereby requiring immediate action. As it was evident in the responses of interviewees, the unfair level of income inequality in Niagara manifests itself in noticeable cases of homelessness, a high number of people struggling with mental health, and drug addiction, which are worsened by a lack of support. Many participants said that one's ethnicity, social background, and gender play a significant role in their standings in the income spectrum and their life prospects. As Rawls argued, all these different characteristics and positions of people must be removed from our thought process in the original position so that a more just distribution of resources and opportunities can be organized. What could be the role of the NPAGG in this?

The results of the thematic analysis show that the development of the NPAGG can present economic and societal benefits for the pursuit of more equitable distribution. The economic benefits that the NPAGG brings about can have a direct, albeit marginal impact on the fight against income disparities. The economic benefits include providing a basic opportunity for people struggling with poverty, promoting local businesses located outside the mass tourism areas of Niagara, especially the ones that offer authentic experiences and pay attention to offering sustainable products and services, and helping those businesses to build partnerships among each other. It is also expected from the NPAGG to encourage its partners to be living wage employers. The societal benefits of the Geopark development have indirect yet necessary implications for addressing income inequality. The NPAGG offers the opportunity to get everyone on board and have their voices heard in the decision-making process. This process of unifying people's voices can help advocate for a better public transport system and accessibility of opportunities. Moreover, NPAGG can bring benefits through education to raise awareness of social justice issues in Niagara and to instill a sense of pride and ownership of the region.

It must be noted that there are also minor risks associated with the development of the NPAGG and limiting factors for its role in addressing income inequality. The Geopark should have a cautious approach to promoting rural and less visited areas since it may lead to inflation, crowding, and littering in those places. Considering that tourism is susceptible to external shocks, more tourism development can make Niagara more dependent on it. But these risks bear relevance in the case of the considerable success of the NPAGG. More weight should be attached to the limiting factors (i.e., challenges) for the NPAGG. First, it was mentioned that addressing income inequality is not the primary outcome of the Geopark. Second, several participants said that the problem of income inequality could be too formidable for the NPAGG. Even though

only the Geopark board members were asked about the risks and challenges due to their expertise, some participants from the advocacy group and business owners also expressed their concerns regarding this challenge that the issue of inequality is bigger than the Geopark. It is true that the inequalities in Niagara are deep-rooted and require more transformative changes to build a more just society with a fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and rights. With the right management and partnerships, the NPAGG can be one of the agents at the forefront of contributing to this cause.

In the end, the limitations of this study deserve the mention. First, COVID-19 had a significant impact on the prospect of this thesis. This study project started when I was in my home country in 2021. The travel restrictions for a lengthy period of time limited my access to essential literature resources, a prime example being a lack of access to John Rawls' (1971) book until February 2022. Also, due to COVID-19, the data collection for this study had to be done online via software like Microsoft Teams. But face-to-face interviews could have provided more elaborate results with a deeper understanding of participants' ideas and feelings. Second, the number of interviews was first planned to be thirty. But due to a lack of interest in the study, the number is down to sixteen. The number of participants from local tourism-related businesses is just two. Therefore, it is highly possible that important suggestions that can be useful for the prospect of the NPAGG were overlooked. That is why future research on this topic should include more voices from tourism-related businesses. Also, four out of five participants from the advocacy group are connected through the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network, which can explain why great weight is given to the idea that the Geopark should encourage living wage employment. It is necessary that future research on this topic in Niagara include the voices of people in other organizations, such as United Way Niagara.

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Appendix A. Interview guide

Questions for the members of the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network

1. Please, describe your perspective on income inequality in Niagara (if any). Can you please provide an example of how income inequality is noticeable in the region?
2. How do you think ethnicity, gender, social background, urban or rural lifestyles play a role in the income inequality pattern of the Niagara region?
3. Do you think that there is a need to address income inequality in Niagara? Please, provide a justification for your response.
4. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how would you rate public or private attempts in Niagara aimed at reducing income inequality in Niagara? Please, explain your answer.
5. What role can individual people play in reducing income inequality?

A brief description of a geopark will be given before asking questions related to it.

6. What would be your expectations from the Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark in addressing income inequality?
7. From your perspective, how can the geopark support fair distribution of economic benefits and employment opportunities for all in Niagara? Can you please give an example?
8. What recommendations do you have for the geopark regarding its future efforts on reducing income inequality in Niagara?
9. Do you have any questions for me? Do you have any concerns that you want me to address in this research?

10. If you know anyone else who might be willing to participate in this study, could you please forward them the details of this study and my contact information so that they can contact me if they are interested in participating in this study?

Questions for the members of the board of directors of the Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark

1. Are you aware of income inequality in Niagara? (If not, I will give brief information)
2. Please, describe your perspective on income inequality in Niagara (if any). Can you please provide an example of how income inequality is noticeable in the region?
3. How do you think ethnicity, gender, social background, urban or rural lifestyles play a role in the income inequality pattern of the Niagara region?
4. Do you think that there is a need to address income inequality in Niagara? Please, provide a justification for your response.
5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how would you rate public or private attempts in Niagara aimed at reducing income inequality in Niagara? Please, explain your answer.
6. Please, describe the importance of tackling income inequality in the agenda of the Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark. Is it even possible for the geopark to advise on poverty or inequality?
7. In what ways the geopark can address income inequality in the region?
 - Is there any specific plan developed or being developed?
 - How do you think looking at the other geopark models in Canada or other parts of the world would help?

8. What could be the challenges for the geopark in addressing income inequality in Niagara?
9. What could be the risks (e.g., unequal distribution of benefits, higher inflation) associated with the establishment of the geopark in Niagara?
10. How do you think Niagara geopark can become a leader in Canada or around the world in addressing income inequality?
11. Do you have any questions for me? Do you have any concerns that you want me to address in this research?

**Questions for the members of the tourism industry who developed partnership with the
Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark**

1. Are you aware of income inequality in Niagara? (If not, I will give brief information)
2. Please, describe your perspective on income inequality in Niagara (if any). Can you please provide an example of how income inequality is noticeable in the region?
3. How do you think ethnicity, gender, social background, urban or rural lifestyles play a role in the income inequality pattern of the Niagara region?
4. Do you think that there is a need to address income inequality in Niagara? Please, provide a justification for your response.
5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how would you rate public or private attempts in Niagara aimed at reducing income inequality in Niagara? Please, explain your answer.

A brief description of a geopark will be given before asking questions related to it.

6. When and why did you choose to partner with the Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark?
7. What are your perceived benefits from becoming a partner with the aspiring geopark (if any)?
8. What are your current and future expectations from the geopark in supporting local businesses?
9. How do you think the geopark can support fair distribution of economic benefits and employment opportunities for all in Niagara? Can you please give an example?
10. How do you think the geopark can be an agent of change for people who are struggling with poverty?
11. Do you have any recommendations for the geopark regarding its future efforts on reducing income inequality in Niagara?
12. Do you have any questions for me? Do you have any concerns that you want me to address in this research?
13. If you know anyone else who might be willing to participate in this study, could you please forward them the details of this study and my contact information so that they can contact me if they are interested in participating in this study?

**Questions for the members of the tourism industry who do not have partnership with the
Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark**

1. Are you aware of income inequality in Niagara? (If not, I will give brief information)
2. Please, describe your perspective on income inequality in Niagara (if any). Can you please provide an example of how income inequality is noticeable in the region?

3. How do you think ethnicity, gender, social background, urban or rural lifestyles play a role in the income inequality pattern of the Niagara region?
4. Do you think that there is a need to address income inequality in Niagara? Please, provide a justification for your response.
5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how would you rate public or private attempts in Niagara aimed at reducing income inequality in Niagara? Please, explain your answer.
6. Are you aware of the aspiring geopark in Niagara?
 - If yes, have you considered partnering with the geopark?
 - If not, I will you give a brief description of a geopark (I will then ask: Would you consider partnering with the Niagara Peninsula Aspiring Global Geopark? Why?).

A brief description of a geopark will be given before asking questions related to it.

7. How do you think the geopark can support fair distribution of economic benefits and employment opportunities for all in Niagara? Can you please give an example?
8. How do you think the geopark can be an agent of change for people who are struggling with poverty?
9. What would be your recommendations for the geopark regarding its future efforts on reducing income inequality in Niagara?
10. Do you have any questions for me? Do you have any concerns that you want me to address in this research?
11. If you know anyone else who might be willing to participate in this study, could you please forward them the details of this study and my contact information so that they can contact me if they are interested in participating in this study?