

Community Involvement As A Key Factor In Increasing Tourism In North Sulawesi Province

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism is increasingly becoming a focus in regional development, especially in areas with natural and cultural wealth such as North Sulawesi Province. However, the success of the development of this sector is primarily determined by the active involvement of local communities. This research aims to analyze the participation of the community in increasing tourism, as well as develop a sustainable community-based tourism model. The method used is a qualitative descriptive approach with data collection techniques through observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and literature studies. The research is focused on three areas that represent marine tourism potential, namely Minahasa, Mitra, and East Bolaang Mongondow. The results of the study show that community involvement is still at the stage of limited participation, especially in the aspects of planning and decision-making. In fact, the local potential possessed by the community, such as the values of cultural wisdom and an open attitude towards tourists, is an essential capital in the development of sustainable tourist destinations. For this reason, it is necessary to develop a model of community involvement that includes increasing awareness, economic empowerment, participation in decision-making, and preserving culture and the environment. This research emphasizes that community involvement is not only complementary but the primary foundation in building inclusive, competitive, and sustainable tourism.

Keywords:

Community involvement, sustainable tourism, local empowerment, North Sulawesi, community participation

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the strategic sectors that encourages sustainable economic development, especially in developing countries that have abundant cultural diversity and natural resources. In the era of globalization and post-COVID-19 pandemic, tourism is also an instrument of socio-economic recovery, as it prioritizes the concept of inclusive development that involves local communities as the leading actors. In this context, the involvement of local communities is not only seen as a supporting element but also as a key factor in realizing the success and sustainability of the tourism sector (Kahveci, 2023; Loehr et al., 2021; Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021). North Sulawesi Province is one of the regions in Indonesia that has a huge potential for marine and cultural tourism. Destinations such as Bunaken Marine Park, Siladen Island, and the coast of Minahasa offer natural charm that attracts not only domestic but also international tourists. However, the growth of the tourism sector in this province has not been fully balanced with the active involvement of local communities in the management and development of tourist destinations. Many tourism development programs are still top-down and not integrated with the needs, aspirations, and capacities of the local community. The global literature on sustainable tourism emphasizes the importance of a participatory approach, in which local communities have a role in every stage of the process, from planning and implementation to tourism policy evaluation. This substantive involvement is believed to be able to increase a sense of ownership, strengthen social cohesion, and encourage local innovation that is relevant to the local cultural and ecological context. Therefore, strengthening the role of the community is not only a moral demand but also an effective strategy to achieve sustainable tourism goals (Fernández-Bedoya et al., 2025; Santorinaios et al., 2023; Stacchini et al., 2024). The involvement of local communities in tourism

development is also closely related to strengthening social and economic capacity. Through active participation, people can reap direct economic benefits, such as increased income through homestays, local cuisine, and handicrafts. In addition, this engagement creates opportunities to improve tourism literacy, knowledge of environmental conservation, and managerial and service skills. This provides sustainable added value for the local community while improving the quality of tourist destinations (Bhammar et al., 2021; Seidel et al., 2021). However, studies have shown that public involvement in tourism is often limited to the level of information and consultation, with no real space in decision-making. This suggests that there is still a gap between participatory idealism in theory and practice in the field. Therefore, a more holistic approach model is needed, which not only identifies local potential but also designs systematic empowerment and facilitation strategies to enhance community participation across the board (Spadaro et al., 2023; Srisawat et al., 2023). In North Sulawesi, specific challenges include low community managerial capacity, limited access to training and financing, and a lack of integration between the government, the private sector, and local communities. This situation is an obstacle to creating synergy for community-based tourism development. In fact, this province has rich local wisdom, a strong spirit of cooperation, and a tourism-friendly culture that has great potential if optimized within the framework of inclusive tourism development. Seeing this urgency, this study focuses on analyzing community involvement as a key factor in improving the tourism sector in North Sulawesi Province. This research not only explores forms of community participation but also designs a contextual and implementable community-based tourism development model. The primary focus is on the Minahasa, Mitra, and East Bolaang Mongondow regions, which represent the characteristics of marine tourism and the diverse local participatory potential. Understanding the dynamics of community involvement in the local context, this research's results are hoped to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of more community-oriented tourism policies. The findings of this study are also relevant for stakeholders at the national and global levels who are driving tourism transformation towards a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable direction.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses qualitative descriptive methods to understand in depth the form and level of community involvement in increasing tourism in North Sulawesi Province. This approach is considered the most appropriate because it is able to describe social realities and community dynamics holistically, especially in the context of community-based tourism development. The research was conducted in three representative areas that have high marine tourism potential, namely Minahasa Regency, Southeast Minahasa Regency (Mitra), and East Bolaang Mongondow Regency (Boltim) (Anindhita et al., 2024; Ferdian et al., 2024; Purwoko et al., 2022). The data collection techniques used include Direct observation, In-depth interviews, documentation, and Student Literature. Observations were carried out to capture the phenomenon of community involvement in practice. At the same time, in-depth interviews were conducted with community leaders, local tourism actors, village governments, and tourism business groups. Documentation was obtained from local government reports, local media, and archives of community activities. Literature review is used to compare empirical findings with the theory and practice of community participation in sustainable tourism (Phelan et al., 2020; Priatmoko et al., 2021; Undap et al., 2019). In this study, informants were selected purposively, considering their active involvement in the tourism sector and their role in the local community. A total of 90 informants were divided proportionally among the three research areas. This number is considered adequate to gather rich, in-depth, and representative information on the complexity of community engagement. Four validity criteria are used in qualitative research to ensure the validity of the data: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulating sources and techniques maintains credibility, transferability is guaranteed by providing thick contextual descriptions, dependability is carried out by systematically recording the research process, and confirmability is achieved through trail audits and collective discussions with the research team (Widianingsih et al., 2023; ZUSMELIA et al., 2020). Data analysis is carried out in stages: Data Reduction, Data Presentation, and Concluding. The collected data is compiled, classified

by theme, and analyzed thematically according to community engagement indicators. These indicators include participation in the planning, implementation, supervision, and evaluation of tourism activities. In addition, this study also developed a model for strengthening community participation based on field findings (Hermawan et al., 2023; Hidayat et al., 2024). In the second phase of this study, as a follow-up to the findings, a community-based tourism development model will be designed and tested. This model consists of three main components: strengthening tourism awareness, increasing economic access, and increasing the social capacity of local communities. This model is expected to become a strategic framework for building more active, productive, and sustainable community involvement in the North Sulawesi tourism sector.

DISCUSSION

Level of Community Participation in Tourism Development Community participation is a fundamental element in sustainable tourism development. In various international literature, public participation is classified into several levels, ranging from informing to citizen control. In the context of this study, it was found that the level of community involvement in North Sulawesi, especially in Minahasa, Mitra, and Boltim, is still at the stage of passive and semi-active participation. Local communities are more involved in the implementation phase, such as providing accommodation, selling local food, and welcoming tourists. However, their participation in the planning and decision-making stages is still limited. This is due to the lack of an open and participatory dialogue forum between tourism stakeholders and local communities. In Arnstein's theoretical framework, this condition reflects the stages of consultation and placation, where people are given space to express their opinions but do not yet have the power to make strategic decisions. This indicates that there is an inequality in the tourism management structure that is not inclusive (Contreras, 2019; Karner et al., 2019; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). The lack of public knowledge about rights and opportunities in the tourism sector also influences limited participation. This ignorance often makes people feel that they are only complements to the tourism development process, not as the principal owner or actor. Another factor is the development approach, which is still top-down, where the government and investors dominate the planning process. This condition creates a misalignment between tourism development policies and the real needs of the community on the ground. The community's low substantive participation directly impacts its low sense of ownership of the tourism program that is built. As a result, communities do not have a strong drive to care for, preserve, or develop destinations in a sustainable manner. For this reason, policy interventions are needed that allow the community to be actively and equally involved in the entire tourism development process, from planning to implementation to evaluation. A collaborative and educational approach is the first step towards improving the quality of community participation in the tourism sector's development (Botchwey et al., 2019; Rosen & Painter, 2019).

The Values of Local Wisdom as Social Capital of Tourism

Local wisdom is a socio-cultural asset that is highly valued in the development of the tourism sector, especially in the context of community-based tourism development. In North Sulawesi, local wisdom is reflected in values such as *Mapalus* (gotong royong), Respect for guests, and cultural openness. These values not only strengthen the social cohesion of the community but also form a positive image of tourist destinations in the eyes of tourists (Hasriyanti et al., 2021; Sirajuddin et al., 2022). This study found that the practice of local wisdom is powerful in daily community activities, such as traditional activities, community service, and the implementation of cultural festivals. Unfortunately, this potential has not been fully utilized strategically in the development of tourism products and services. Some cultural activities are only ceremonial and are not systemically integrated into tourism packages with economic value. In fact, these cultural values can be a strong differentiator in the competition for tourist destinations between regions. In an era of global tourism that tends to be homogeneous, local uniqueness is the main attraction for tourists looking for an authentic experience. Therefore, the preservation and innovation of local traditions are important steps in strengthening the attractiveness of destinations. Direct interaction of tourists with local communities that uphold the values of local wisdom can create an immersive experience. Tourists not only see the beauty of

nature, but also experience the social life of the local community, such as taking part in traditional ceremonies or learning to cook traditional food. This creates emotional added value that is difficult to find in other destinations (HL et al., 2022; Praptika et al., 2024). In addition to enriching the tourist experience, local wisdom also acts as a social control mechanism. For example, the values of cooperation and deliberation in the community can be used to preserve the environment, prevent social conflicts, and form fair and balanced tourism governance. However, strengthening local wisdom as social capital in tourism requires systematic efforts. Local governments, academics, and tourism actors need to develop training programs and cultural tourism curricula that can strengthen the community's capacity to care for and manage its cultural heritage professionally. Thus, local wisdom is not only preserved as a collective memory but also optimized as cultural capital that can be converted into economic value and community pride. Strengthening local values is an integral part of a sustainable and equitable tourism development strategy.

Infrastructure Challenges and Local Economic Readiness

One of the important findings in this study is the low readiness of tourism-supporting infrastructure in the North Sulawesi region, especially in the Minahasa, Mitra, and Bolaang Mongondow areas. Road access to tourist destinations is still limited, especially in coastal and hilly areas, which hinders tourists' mobility and logistics to support tourist activities. This has an impact on the low level of visitation, even though the area has very promising natural potential. In addition to accessibility, public facilities such as sanitation, tourist information centers, places of worship, and parking lots are often unavailable or unsuitable for use. In fact, these facilities are a fundamental prerequisite for creating comfort and satisfaction for tourists. When the basic infrastructure has not been met, no matter how large the tourism potential, it will not be able to develop optimally. A lack of private sector investment also exacerbates this limitation. Many investors are still hesitant to invest their capital due to limited infrastructure and the lack of clear incentive regulations from local governments. As a result, the development of the tourism sector is slow and uneven across potential areas.

On the other hand, local communities also face serious economic challenges in accessing tourism business opportunities. Most micro business actors in the tourism sector lack sufficient business capital and have difficulties accessing formal financial institutions. This has prevented the optimal development of many local potentials, such as homestays, traditional restaurants, and handicrafts. Low business literacy and management skills are additional obstacles. Many people are not familiar with the concepts of excellent service, digital marketing, financial management, and packaging of tourism products. As a result, the local economy's competitiveness in the tourism sector is still weak compared to other regions that are more advanced in terms of systems and human resources. The local government has initiated several training and assistance programs for tourism MSMEs. However, the programs are still sporadic and have not been integrated in the long term. A sustainable program design based on local needs is needed so that the community is not only an object but a major actor in the tourism economic value chain. By overcoming infrastructure problems and increasing the economic capacity of local communities, an inclusive and competitive tourism ecosystem will be formed. This will not only support regional economic growth but also strengthen the community's role as the primary foundation in the sustainable development of the tourism sector.

Environmental Commitment and Ecotourism Sustainability

Environmental sustainability is a key foundation in the development of the tourism sector, especially in areas that rely on natural ecosystems as a major attraction, such as North Sulawesi. Marine tourism in the region, such as Bunaken and Pulisan, relies heavily on the preservation of marine ecosystems, coral reefs, and coastal cleanliness. Without good environmental management, tourism is not only stagnant, but can also lead to long-term environmental degradation. This research found that local communities have begun to show commitment to environmental conservation, although it has not been massive and systematic. Several initiatives, such as mangrove planting, anti-plastic waste campaigns, and self-waste management, have emerged in several tourist villages. Budo Village, for example, is an example of how people can independently form recycling centers and educate the younger generation about the importance of protecting the environment.

However, many regions still lack a collective awareness of ecotourism principles. This is due to a lack of environmental education, local government support, and an incentive system for communities that succeed in preserving nature. Many people have not seen the direct link between protecting the environment and the sustainability of the tourism economy. In fact, modern tourists, especially from abroad, are increasingly paying attention to sustainability when choosing tourist destinations. Destinations that have a green, clean, and eco-friendly image will more easily attract repeat tourists and expand the market through organic promotion. Therefore, awareness of the importance of "green tourism" needs to be built through an educational and community-based approach. It is also important to create regulations that encourage collaboration between the government, tourism actors, and the community in maintaining the carrying capacity of the environment, for example, by implementing tourism zoning, visitor quotas, and environmental conservation levy obligations for tourists, tourism service providers need to have operational standards based on ecotourism principles. Environmental commitment must also be instilled in the institutional structure of tourist villages. Tourism management institutions need to have divisions or task forces that focus on environmental monitoring, pollution reporting, and coordination with the Environment and Tourism Agency. Thus, the ecological aspect is not only a slogan, but is integrated into destination governance. By strengthening its commitment to environmental conservation, North Sulawesi can become a pilot for ecotourism development in the eastern region of Indonesia. The integration between eco-friendly practices and community participation in governance will create a strong synergy between nature conservation and economic growth through tourism.

Recommendations for Collaboration-Based Community Engagement Models

Based on the analysis of the dynamics of community involvement in tourism development in North Sulawesi, this study recommends a collaboration-based model of community engagement. This model is designed to address the challenges of under-maximizing participation, the inequality of roles between stakeholders, and the need for a system that encourages cross-sectoral collaboration in sustainable and inclusive tourism development. The first component of this model is increased tourism awareness. The community needs to understand the importance of the tourism sector in encouraging local economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation. This effort can be carried out through formal and non-formal education, tourism awareness campaigns, and the involvement of Indigenous leaders and youth in counseling. The second component is the economic empowerment of local communities. Local governments need to provide access to entrepreneurship training, business assistance, and microfinance assistance for local tourism business actors. With the increase in economic capacity, people will have independence in managing tourism products and will no longer depend on external investors. The third component is involvement in decision-making. Community participation must be facilitated through a tourism village deliberation forum or tourism committee consisting of residents, business actors, and local government officials. This forum serves as a forum for coordinating, planning, and evaluating tourism programs to be more aspirational and responsive to the community's needs. The fourth component is community-based cultural and environmental preservation. The community needs to be given the role of guardian of cultural and natural heritage through strengthening customary institutions, conservation training, and integrating local values in tourism activities. The application of the principles of community-based tourism (CBT) is very relevant to create harmony between preservation and utilization. The fifth component is strategic partnerships between stakeholders. Collaboration between local governments, the private sector, universities, and non-governmental institutions is key to the success of this model. Each actor needs to align their roles and contributions to create an inclusive and sustainable tourism ecosystem. Finally, this model should be supported by a participatory monitoring and evaluation system. The public is given space to assess the effectiveness of the program, submit criticism, and provide input on the tourism policies implemented. Transparency and accountability in destination management will strengthen public trust and increase voluntary participation. With the implementation of this model, it is hoped that tourism development in North Sulawesi will not only be oriented towards economic growth but also be able to strengthen social cohesion, cultural preservation, and environmental

sustainability. Community involvement is no longer a complement, but a leading actor in the transformation of the tourism sector.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that community involvement is a significant pillar in sustainable tourism development. The community not only plays a role as a beneficiary but also as a strategic actor in maintaining, managing, and developing local tourist destinations. In the North Sulawesi region, especially in Minhas, Mitra, and Boltim, it was found that community participation still tends to be limited to operational activities. At the same time, involvement in planning and decision-making aspects is not optimal. The socio-cultural potential of the North Sulawesi people, such as the value of cooperation, hospitality, and the preservation of customs, is an important capital in strengthening the destination's identity. However, these values have not been fully capitalized on in the design of integrated tourism products, even though they have an emotional and experiential added value that is in high demand by global travelers. Therefore, the preservation and integration of local wisdom into the tourism system needs to be a priority. From an economic perspective, the biggest challenge is limited access to capital, training, and infrastructure. The local community is not fully prepared financially and managerially to manage tourism businesses independently and competitively. This indicates the importance of economic empowerment strategies targeting tourism-based MSMEs and policy interventions that favor vulnerable groups and Indigenous communities. Meanwhile, the environmental aspect is a crucial element that cannot be ignored. Marine tourism, which is the main attraction of North Sulawesi, is very vulnerable to damage if not managed responsibly. The community's commitment to environmental conservation has grown, but it still needs to be strengthened through more intensive incentive systems, zoning regulations, and environmental education. As a policy implication, local governments need to develop a multi-stakeholder collaboration-based tourism development model that ensures the full involvement of the community in every stage of destination development. This model must include tourism-aware education, skills training, provision of access to capital, and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples and local actors. Collaboration between the government, the private sector, academia, and the community is key to the success of this model. Thus, strengthening the community's carrying capacity is not only a technical approach but also a transformational strategy for building inclusive, resilient, and sustainable tourism. If applied consistently, this model can be replicated in other regions with similar characteristics and make a real contribution to regional economic development and the preservation of Indonesia's cultural heritage.

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