



Collaborative Governance in Community-Based Mangrove Ecotourism: A Longitudinal Case Study of Banua Pangka, Luwu Timur (2015-2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the governance dynamics of a mangrove ecotourism destination developed through grassroots initiatives in Banua Pangka, Luwu Timur, Indonesia. The main research questions guiding this study are: How do governance transitions in community-based ecotourism affect local participation? What role does symbolic exclusion play in the marginalization of grassroots actors? The destination, originally established by a local youth group, evolved into a popular site due to community-driven environmental efforts and viral social media promotion. As local government and village-owned enterprises (BUMDes) later took over its management, governance transitioned from a participatory model to a more bureaucratic structure, marginalizing the initiating community. Using an exploratory qualitative case study approach, this research draws on interviews, observations, and document analysis to examine the mechanisms of symbolic and procedural exclusion and the community's adaptive responses. The findings reveal that exclusion is not solely a result of institutional policy but is deeply embedded in symbolic actions that delegitimize grassroots actors. Nevertheless, the community demonstrates resilience by establishing alternative tourism services and informal networks. This study contributes to the literature on Community Based Tourism (CBT) by highlighting the tensions between institutionalization and grassroots ownership, and provides practical implications for designing inclusive governance models in sustainable tourism.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the concept of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has gained broad recognition as a key approach to sustainable tourism development (Jamwal et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). CBT is not only seen as a tool for empowering local economies but also as a mechanism to preserve the environment, safeguard cultural heritage, and build social capacity at the local level (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2020). In this approach, local communities are acknowledged as owners, planners, managers, and primary beneficiaries of tourism activities. However, the implementation of CBT faces significant challenges, particularly when external institutions intervene with their own agendas, which can undermine its core principles.

The dominance of formal institutions in CBT contexts often leads to power imbalances between local communities and institutional actors (Argent et al., 2019; Henson et al., 2024). Literature suggests that in many cases, local communities lose control over the destinations they initiated, either due to the absence of regulatory support or weak bargaining positions within

institutional tourism structures (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). This results in both symbolic and procedural exclusion of local communities, which in turn undermines the core principles of CBT.

In coastal areas and ecotourism settings, CBT approaches are particularly relevant due to their close ties to the management of fragile natural resources and the preservation of unique local ecosystems such as mangroves, coral reefs, and traditional fishponds (Nnaji et al., 2021; Okpala et al., 2022). Participatory management not only ensures environmental sustainability but also preserves the social and cultural values of communities living in harmony with nature. Therefore, academic discourse on community-based destination governance must emphasize the balance between community participation and institutional involvement that is inclusive and just.

This study is anchored in that discourse by examining the case of Banua Pangka in Luwu Timur, South Sulawesi, which initially developed as a coastal ecotourism destination through the initiative of a local youth community (Carnazzo et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2024). The initiative later gained wide public attention and evolved into a formally managed tourism destination under village governance and BUMDes. This transformation introduced new dynamics in destination governance, particularly concerning the role and position of the pioneering community in the newly established institutional system.

Within this framework, it is crucial to investigate how changes in governance structures affect local community participation, and to what extent the principles of CBT are maintained under the new management regime (Kim & Ho, 2021; Kunchay et al., 2024). Furthermore, this article seeks to understand the forms of exclusion experienced by the community and how they respond adaptively to these changes.

By situating this study in the discourse of social sustainability and collaborative governance in tourism, we aim to contribute conceptually and empirically to the development of more equitable, inclusive, and institutionally resilient destination management models.

The case of Banua Pangka in Wotu District, Luwu Timur, illustrates the practical dynamics of transitioning from community-based to institutional tourism governance (Van Ooteghem et al., 2023; Zetterholm et al., 2022). Initially built by local youth using recycled boat wood, this mangrove area became a popular tourist attraction due to its ecological uniqueness and Instagrammable photo spots. As visitor numbers grew, the village government and BUMDes assumed control, establishing a formal governance structure that marginalized the founding community.

While many studies highlight the success of CBT in empowering communities, few examine the conflicts and tensions that arise when control shifts from communities to formal institutions (Stone & Nyaupane, 2022; Hall, 2019; Cole, 2006). CBT literature often focuses on empowerment and economic benefits but offers limited insight into social resistance and adaptive strategies employed by communities facing structural exclusion.

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This study demonstrates that when formal institutions take over destination governance, tensions emerge between the ideals of CBT and the realities of bureaucratization (Fu et al., 2023; Liverani et al., 2021). Through the case of Banua Pangka, we find that symbolic exclusion of communities not only hampers their participation but also prompts the emergence of adaptive strategies as forms of social resilience.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed an exploratory qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), aimed at gaining a deep understanding of the governance transformation of a mangrove ecotourism destination managed initially by a grassroots youth community in Banua Pangka, Luwu Timur. The case study

method was selected due to its capacity to provide contextualized insights into complex social phenomena involving institutional dynamics and community participation.

Research Site and Participants

Banua Pangka is a coastal mangrove area that has organically developed into a tourism destination through community innovation. Participants in this study were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, including:

- Five youth founders of the destination,
- Three village officials and BUMDes managers,
- Five local entrepreneurs and vendors operating in the area,
- Five domestic tourists,
- Two community leaders and environmental activists.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection combined multiple qualitative methods:

- In-depth semi-structured interviews: Conducted with 20 informants to explore narratives about the destination's history, governance changes, and perceptions of exclusion and adaptation.
- Participant observation: Undertaken during visits to Banua Pangka to observe governance dynamics, spatial arrangements, and interactions between community members, tourists, and government actors.
- Document analysis: Included review of village regulations, social media archives, and public communications related to destination management and tourism promotion.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to process the qualitative data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure. NVivo 14 software supported coding and categorization of themes, particularly around governance roles, conflict narratives, and adaptive strategies.

Themes were developed inductively, yet interpreted in light of existing literature on CBT governance, institutional power, and social exclusion (e.g., Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Snyman, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

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Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical clearance from the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Hasanuddin. All informants provided informed consent, and their anonymity was preserved. Pseudonyms are used in all quotes.

RESULTS

This section presents the main findings of the study based on thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and document reviews. Four central themes emerged, reflecting the governance evolution, community exclusion, and adaptive strategies.

Community-Driven Initiatives as the Genesis of the Destination

The origin of Banua Pangka as a tourist destination lies in the grassroots efforts of a local youth group who transformed discarded ship wood into elevated boardwalks and scenic photo spots

within a mangrove forest. These informal innovations attracted public interest and gained rapid attention through social media platforms. This form of community-led placemaking illustrates how marginalized groups can activate latent ecotourism potential using limited resources.

“We didn’t have capital—only spirit and scrap wood. But from that effort, people started coming, and the place went viral.” – Informant 3, Community Initiator

This finding confirms the role of bottom-up innovation in the emergence of alternative tourism landscapes, and underscores how affective labor and digital promotion can become tools of empowerment in peripheral regions.

Institutional Takeover and Bureaucratization of Governance

As the destination gained traction, the village government and BUMDes formalized its management. Although improvements were made to infrastructure, such as longer pathways and sanitation facilities, the institutional takeover sidelined the original community actors. They were no longer involved in decision-making or profit-sharing processes.

“We were not invited to any planning meetings. One day, the BUMDes took over everything.” – Informant 1, Founding Youth Member

This shift illustrates a form of procedural exclusion, where institutional control redefines legitimacy, replacing communal participation with administrative authority.

Symbolic Marginalization and Loss of Recognition

Beyond procedural barriers, symbolic exclusion was evident in public narratives and tourism branding that failed to acknowledge the community’s historical contributions. The erasure of grassroots origins from official village communications exemplified the politics of recognition, whereby institutional actors controlled not only governance but also the story of the destination.

“They used our ideas but erased our names. It’s as if we never existed in the development.” – Informant 5, Youth Organizer

Such symbolic marginalization reflects deeper struggles over memory and identity in destination governance, and challenges normative assumptions about inclusive CBT.

Community Adaptation Through Informal Entrepreneurship

Despite exclusion, the original community members adapted by creating independent micro-enterprises outside the formal BUMDes system. These included informal guiding services, food stalls, and social media content creation. Such entrepreneurial responses represent a form of resilience and socio-economic negotiation by marginalized actors.

“We couldn’t be part of the formal system, so we found ways to stay relevant. We run our own stalls and act as informal guides.” – Informant 2, Youth Entrepreneur

These actions suggest that exclusion from formal governance does not equate to disengagement. Instead, communities may re-enter the tourism economy through creative and informal means.

Together, these themes reveal the tensions between institutionalization and grassroots ownership in CBT contexts, and highlight the importance of designing governance structures that sustain, rather than replace, community agency.

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DISCUSSION

Contextual Interpretation

The findings from Banua Pangka underscore the disconnect between the ideals of CBT and the realities of governance transition. While CBT emphasizes community empowerment and shared decision-making, the institutionalization of tourism governance in Banua Pangka led to a reconfiguration of power dynamics (Stone & Nyaupane, 2022). The transition from community-led to bureaucratically managed governance created formal hierarchies and unintentionally marginalized the very actors who initiated the destination's development. This is consistent with broader critiques in the literature that argue institutional logics often undermine community control.

Revisiting the Research Questions

The first research question examined how institutional takeover affects community participation (Onyeaka et al., 2022; Radüntz & Meffert, 2019). The evidence shows that exclusion occurred both procedurally and symbolically. Procedural exclusion was marked by the community's absence in planning and profit-sharing, while symbolic exclusion was evident in the erasure of community narratives from public discourse. The second research question asked how community members respond to exclusion. The community employed informal entrepreneurial strategies to remain economically and socially relevant, illustrating their agency and resilience despite being sidelined.

Engagement with Prior Literature

This study aligns with Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018), who emphasize that power imbalances can persist even within participatory frameworks. Similarly, Snyman (2021) highlights that tourism projects in marginalized regions often fail to deliver inclusive benefits due to weak community representation. However, the Banua Pangka case adds nuance by documenting how grassroots actors resist exclusion not through protest, but through adaptive entrepreneurship that reclaims space in the tourism economy. This expands the theoretical understanding of agency in CBT contexts and supports critical analyses found in Novelli et al. (2006) and Moscardo (2008) regarding partnership breakdowns and the need for capacity-building in CBT settings.

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Practical and Theoretical Implications

Practically, the findings suggest that tourism governance must recognize and preserve the historical contributions of community actors (Basla et al., 2022; Domingos et al., 2022). Policymakers should incorporate community voices into formal structures through advisory roles, co-management boards, or participatory budgeting. Theoretically, this study contributes to debates on institutional exclusion by emphasizing the symbolic dimensions of disempowerment and the potential for informal reintegration through grassroots innovation.

Study Limitations

As a single-case study, the research findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable across all CBT projects (Leblanc et al., 2022; Leenen et al., 2024). The emphasis on qualitative data also limits the ability to quantify impacts. However, the depth of contextual insight provides a valuable basis for theory building in community governance and tourism exclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the governance transformation of the Banua Pangka ecotourism destination, revealing how the institutionalization of community-based tourism (CBT) can result in the procedural and symbolic exclusion of grassroots actors. The findings highlighted that while the community initially led the development of Banua Pangka through creative and resourceful initiatives, the transition to bureaucratic management under local government and BUMDes sidelined these original contributors. Exclusion occurred not only through governance restructuring but also through the erasure of community narratives from public discourse.

Despite these challenges, the study also found that community actors demonstrated notable resilience. Through informal entrepreneurship and alternative engagement strategies, they carved out new roles and sustained their presence in the destination's tourism economy. These findings challenge simplistic views of community disengagement and emphasize the complex, adaptive strategies communities adopt in the face of institutional marginalization.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature on CBT by integrating the concept of symbolic exclusion into discussions of participatory governance. It also underscores the importance of acknowledging historical contributions in destination development and calls for inclusive governance structures that are reflexive and context-sensitive.

In practical terms, the results suggest that policymakers and tourism planners should design governance frameworks that institutionalize community participation without disempowering the very actors that initiate grassroots tourism. Such frameworks should prioritize co-management, historical recognition, and capacity-building to support the long-term sustainability of CBT models.

Ultimately, the case of Banua Pangka serves as a reminder that sustainability in tourism is not only ecological or economic, but also social and political. Ensuring that community voices are preserved, respected, and integrated into decision-making processes is essential for the ethical evolution of community-based tourism.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with the publication of this manuscript. As a single-case study, the research findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable across all CBT projects. The emphasis on qualitative data also limits the ability to quantify impacts. However, the depth of contextual insight provides a valuable basis for theory building in community governance and tourism exclusion.

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