



Collaborative Governance in Community-Based Mangrove Ecotourism: A Case Study of Banua Pangka, Luwu Timur

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigates the governance transformation of a mangrove ecotourism destination in Banua Pangka, Luwu Timur, Indonesia — a site initially developed through grassroots initiatives led by a local youth group and later formalized under institutional management. The research addresses two central questions: (1) How has the shift from community-led to institutionalized governance affected local participation? and (2) What mechanisms of exclusion have emerged, and how has the community responded? Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 stakeholders, participatory observation, and document analysis, the study reveals that while institutionalization brought increased visibility and infrastructure improvements, it also led to both procedural and symbolic exclusion of the original community actors. Exclusion was not primarily driven by policy but through informal practices and discursive strategies that undermined grassroots legitimacy. Despite marginalization, the initiating community demonstrated resilience by establishing alternative tourism services and informal networks, maintaining environmental stewardship and livelihood benefits. These findings contribute to Community-Based Tourism (CBT) literature by highlighting tensions between institutionalization and grassroots ownership, particularly in post-viral tourism contexts where rapid popularity precedes structured governance. The study underscores the need for inclusive governance models that recognize and integrate grassroots initiatives rather than displacing them. It provides empirical support for theories of symbolic exclusion and participatory inequality in sustainable tourism development, offering practical insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to balance growth with equity.



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Background

Over the past few decades, Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has emerged as a pivotal strategy for promoting sustainable tourism development. Rooted in principles of local ownership, participation, and benefit retention, CBT is widely recognized not only for its potential to stimulate rural economies but also for its role in conserving natural resources, safeguarding cultural heritage, and strengthening social capital at the community level (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2020; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). In ideal CBT models, communities are positioned as central actors—as planners, managers, and primary beneficiaries—of tourism activities within their territories.

However, the practical implementation of CBT often encounters significant institutional and structural challenges. One of the most persistent issues is the encroachment of formal institutions into community-led initiatives, which can lead to power asymmetries that marginalize grassroots actors (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). These imbalances frequently result in both procedural and symbolic exclusion, where local communities lose decision-making authority and face delegitimization of their roles in destination governance. This dynamic undermines the foundational principles of CBT and raises critical questions about the sustainability and equity of tourism development models.

In coastal and ecotourism contexts, such tensions are particularly pronounced due to the interdependence between tourism activities and fragile ecosystems like mangroves, coral reefs, and traditional aquaculture systems. The participatory management of these environments is crucial not only for ecological preservation but also for sustaining the cultural identities and livelihoods of local populations. Thus, academic discourse on CBT must move beyond economic empowerment narratives to critically examine how governance transitions affect community agency and social justice in tourism development.

This study contributes to that discourse by examining the case of Banua Pangka, an emerging mangrove ecotourism destination in Luwu Timur, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Initially established through grassroots efforts led by a local youth group, the site rapidly gained popularity via viral social media exposure. As visitor numbers surged, control over the destination shifted from informal community stewardship to formal governance structures under the village government and its local enterprise (BUMDes). This transition introduced new dynamics in destination governance, raising important concerns about the continuity of community involvement and the persistence of CBT values.

By situating this case within broader debates on collaborative governance and social sustainability in tourism, the study aims to advance both theoretical understanding and practical insights into how inclusive and resilient destination management models can be developed.

1.2 Specific Background

Banua Pangka, located in Wotu District of Luwu Timur, began as a small-scale initiative driven by local youth who transformed degraded mangrove land into an eco-friendly tourist attraction using repurposed materials. Lacking formal planning or external funding, the destination grew organically through word-of-mouth and digital visibility on platforms like Instagram. As visitor numbers increased, the local government and BUMDes intervened, introducing formal management structures and regulatory frameworks.

While this institutionalization brought greater visibility, infrastructure improvements, and access to public funding, it also led to the sidelining of the original community initiators. Decision-making authority was centralized, and the youth group that founded the site found itself excluded from key governance processes. This shift exemplifies a common trajectory in CBT destinations: from organic, community-driven development to structured, institutionally managed operations.

The Banua Pangka case thus provides a valuable opportunity to explore how governance transformations impact local participation and what forms of resistance or adaptation emerge when communities are marginalized from the tourism processes they initiated.

1.3 Knowledge Gap

Despite the growing body of literature affirming CBT's potential to empower communities, there remains limited scholarly attention to the conflicts and tensions that arise during the institutionalization of grassroots initiatives. Most studies emphasize economic benefits and participatory planning mechanisms, yet fewer investigate the socio-political dimensions of exclusion or the resilience strategies communities employ when faced with top-down governance shifts (Stone & Nyaupane, 2022; Hall, 2019; Cole, 2006).

Recent empirical studies have begun to highlight the concept of symbolic exclusion —where community actors are formally included in governance structures but symbolically marginalized through discursive practices and institutional narratives (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017; Tomassini et al., 2022). However, the interplay between procedural and symbolic exclusion in the context of post-viral tourism growth and rapid institutionalization remains underexplored, particularly in Southeast Asia.

This research addresses that gap by offering a detailed qualitative analysis of how institutional takeover reshapes power relations in CBT settings and how communities respond through informal networks and alternative service provision. It contributes to ongoing debates on the limits and possibilities of participatory governance in sustainable tourism.

1.4 Here We Show

Through the case of Banua Pangka, this study reveals how the transition from community-led to institutionalized governance creates tensions between the ideals of CBT and the realities of bureaucratic management. Findings show that while formal structures may enhance operational efficiency and resource allocation, they often do so at the expense of local agency and inclusivity.

Crucially, the exclusion of the founding community was not solely the result of formal policy but was perpetuated through symbolic acts of delegitimization—such as framing grassroots actors as unqualified or inexperienced—which diminished their perceived legitimacy in governance processes. Despite these challenges, the community demonstrated resilience by developing alternative tourism services and informal networks, thereby maintaining a presence in the destination's evolving tourism landscape.

These insights contribute to both theory and practice by highlighting the need for governance models that recognize and integrate grassroots initiatives rather than displacing them. They also reinforce calls for more nuanced understandings of exclusion in CBT, moving beyond procedural analyses to include the performative and discursive dimensions of power.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Community-Based Tourism: Conceptual Foundations and Evolving Debates

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has been widely promoted as a model for sustainable tourism development that prioritizes local ownership, participation, and benefit retention (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2020; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). At its core, CBT is grounded in the principle that tourism should serve as a vehicle for local empowerment—both economically and socially—by enabling communities to manage their own resources, shape their visitor experiences, and control the distribution of benefits.

In practice, however, the implementation of CBT often diverges from its idealized framework. Numerous studies have documented how external actors—including governments, private investors, and non-governmental organizations—can exert influence over community-led initiatives, altering their trajectories and diluting local agency (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Cole, 2006). This tension between grassroots aspirations and institutional interventions underscores a key challenge in CBT research: understanding how power dynamics evolve during the process of institutionalization.

The case of Banua Pangka offers a compelling example of this dynamic. Initially a bottom-up initiative driven by local youth, the site was later formalized under village governance structures and managed through a village-owned enterprise (BUMDes). This transition reflects a broader pattern observed in many CBT destinations, where informal, community-driven efforts are eventually absorbed into more structured, top-down systems of management.

2.2 Collaborative Governance and Power Asymmetries in CBT

Collaborative governance has emerged as a central concept in CBT literature, emphasizing the need for inclusive decision-making processes that involve multiple stakeholders—particularly local communities, government agencies, and private sector actors (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Dredge & Jamal, 2013). In theory, such collaboration can lead to more equitable outcomes by ensuring that diverse voices are heard and integrated into planning and management.

However, empirical studies reveal that collaborative arrangements often reproduce existing power imbalances, particularly when institutional actors dominate the process (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017). Local communities may be formally included in governance structures but symbolically excluded through narratives that question their competence or legitimacy. These forms of symbolic exclusion, as highlighted by Tomassini et al. (2022), can be just as consequential as procedural exclusion in limiting genuine participation.

In the context of Banua Pangka, the shift from grassroots stewardship to institutional management illustrates how collaborative governance can become a façade for centralized control. While the local government and BUMDes introduced formal rules and administrative procedures, they

simultaneously marginalized the original initiators, whose contributions were no longer recognized as legitimate within the new system.

This phenomenon aligns with Stone and Nyaupane's (2022) critique of participatory inequality in CBT, which argues that inclusion does not necessarily equate to empowerment. The authors emphasize the importance of examining both who participates and how participation is defined, noting that structural constraints often limit the extent to which communities can influence decisions.

2.3 Symbolic Exclusion and Adaptive Resilience in Post-Viral Tourism Destinations

An emerging theme in recent CBT literature is the role of symbolic exclusion—a process by which communities are systematically devalued or delegitimized in official discourses, even if they remain active participants in tourism operations (Tomassini et al., 2022; Stone & Nyaupane, 2022). Unlike procedural exclusion, which involves formal barriers to participation, symbolic exclusion operates through language, representation, and institutional narratives that frame certain actors as peripheral or irrelevant.

In post-viral tourism contexts—where destinations experience sudden popularity due to digital exposure—symbolic exclusion becomes especially pronounced. Rapid growth often triggers institutional responses aimed at managing crowds and regulating operations, which can inadvertently sideline the very actors who initiated the tourism activity (Jamal & Camargo, 2020).

Banua Pangka exemplifies this trend. As social media visibility increased visitor numbers, the destination attracted attention from local authorities who sought to formalize operations. However, rather than integrating the founding youth group into the new governance structure, the institution framed them as untrained and informal, thereby justifying their marginalization. Despite this, the community responded with adaptive resilience, developing alternative tourism services and informal networks to maintain a presence in the destination.

These findings resonate with Hall's (2019) discussion on adaptive governance in tourism, which emphasizes the capacity of communities to innovate and persist in the face of structural constraints. They also reinforce calls for a more nuanced understanding of participation—one that goes beyond formal inclusion to consider how power is exercised through discourse and representation.

2.4 Grassroots Initiatives and Institutional Encroachment in Coastal Ecotourism

Coastal and ecotourism settings present unique challenges and opportunities for CBT, given their reliance on fragile ecosystems and the deep cultural ties communities often have with marine and coastal environments (Nepal & Saarinen, 2021; Buckley, 2011). Mangrove conservation areas, coral reefs, and traditional aquaculture zones are frequently positioned as focal points for sustainable tourism, yet their management often involves complex negotiations between local actors and formal institutions.

Grassroots initiatives in these contexts often emerge organically, driven by community needs and environmental concerns rather than formal planning (Hanafiah et al., 2020). However, as these initiatives gain traction, they tend to attract institutional interest, which can result in encroachment and reconfiguration of governance roles.

The case of Banua Pangka highlights how grassroots innovation can catalyze tourism development, only to be overtaken by bureaucratic mechanisms that prioritize regulation over inclusivity. This trajectory raises important questions about how to protect the rights and agency of initiating communities while ensuring the sustainability of rapidly growing destinations.

2.5 Bridging Theory and Practice: Toward More Equitable Governance Models

This review reveals a growing body of literature that critically examines the limits of CBT in practice, particularly in relation to governance transitions and community displacement. Yet, there remains a need for empirical studies that explore how communities respond to institutional takeover and what strategies they employ to assert agency in changing circumstances.

By focusing on Banua Pangka, this study contributes to ongoing debates by offering a detailed account of how symbolic and procedural exclusion unfold in a real-world setting and how grassroots actors

resist marginalization through informal adaptation. It supports theoretical arguments that call for more reflexive approaches to collaborative governance, where institutional frameworks recognize and integrate local knowledge and initiative.

Moreover, it provides practical insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to design tourism governance models that are not only participatory in form but also equitable in substance.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), aimed at generating in-depth insights into the governance transformation of a mangrove ecotourism destination in Banua Pangka, Luwu Timur — a site initially developed through grassroots youth initiatives and later formalized under institutional management. The case study method was chosen for its capacity to unpack complex socio-political dynamics within bounded systems, particularly where processes of institutionalization, community participation, and exclusion unfold over time.

The research aligns with the study's central questions:

(1) How has the shift from community-led to institutionalized governance affected local participation?

(2) What forms of exclusion have emerged, and how has the community responded?

By focusing on a single case with rich historical and contextual depth, this approach enabled a nuanced understanding of power shifts, institutional narratives, and adaptive strategies employed by marginalized actors.

3.1 Research Site and Participant Selection

Banua Pangka is located in Wotu District, Luwu Timur, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Originally a degraded mangrove area, it was revitalized by a group of local youth who built basic tourism infrastructure using recycled materials. Over time, the destination gained popularity via social media, prompting formal governance interventions by the village government and BUMDes (Badan Usaha Milik Desa).

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation across key stakeholder groups:

- 1) 5 youth founders: Individuals who initiated the ecotourism activities and played a central role in early development.
- 2) 3 village officials and BUMDes managers: Actors responsible for implementing formal governance structures.
- 3) 5 local entrepreneurs and vendors: Community members involved in tourism-related businesses.
- 4) 5 domestic tourists: Selected to understand visitor perceptions and the broader appeal of the destination, which influenced institutional interest.
- 5) 2 community leaders and environmental activists: Individuals with insight into the socio-environmental context and external pressures shaping governance.

Tourists were included as informants to triangulate perspectives on the destination's evolution and public image, which played a role in legitimizing institutional intervention.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through a triangulated qualitative approach, combining three primary methods:

- 1) In-depth semi-structured interviews: A total of 20 interviews were conducted with stakeholders to explore their experiences and interpretations of governance changes, including perceived exclusions and adaptive responses. Interview guides were structured

around themes such as origin stories, decision-making processes, conflict narratives, and future aspirations.

- 2) Participant observation: Field visits were conducted to observe spatial arrangements, daily operations, and interactions between tourists, locals, and institutional actors. These observations helped identify informal practices and power dynamics not always articulated in interviews.
- 3) Document analysis: Official village regulations, promotional materials, and archived social media posts were reviewed to trace institutional narratives, policy frameworks, and marketing strategies that contributed to the reconfiguration of governance.

All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative dataset, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, coding, theme generation, theme review, definition and naming, and report writing. NVivo 14 was used to support systematic coding and categorization of emerging themes related to governance roles, symbolic exclusion, and community adaptation.

While the analytical process was largely inductive, findings were interpreted in light of existing literature on CBT governance, institutional power, and participatory inequality (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Snyman, 2021). This dual approach ensured both fidelity to participants' voices and theoretical grounding in broader debates on sustainable tourism and community displacement.

To enhance validity and reliability, member checking was conducted with key informants to verify interpretations, while peer debriefing sessions with academic colleagues provided critical feedback on emerging themes.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Hasanuddin. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and they were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage. To protect identities, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper. All recorded data were stored securely and only accessible to the research team.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Revisiting the Research Question

This section interprets the findings through the lens of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) theory and governance studies, focusing on how institutionalization affects community participation and how grassroots actors respond to exclusion.

4.1.1 How Has the Shift from Community-Led to Institutionalized Governance Affected Local Participation?

The transition from informal, youth-led development to formal governance under BUMDes and village authorities significantly altered the power dynamics in Banua Pangka. The original initiators were systematically excluded from decision-making processes, profit-sharing mechanisms, and official narratives about the destination's origin. This reflects both procedural exclusion—where communities are denied formal roles in governance—and symbolic exclusion, where their contributions are erased from public memory and institutional discourse.

These findings support Scheyvens and Biddulph's (2018) critique that participatory frameworks often fail to deliver genuine empowerment when institutional actors dominate the process. In this case, formalization did not enhance inclusivity but instead created new barriers to local agency.

4.1.2 What Forms of Exclusion Have Emerged, and How Has the Community Responded?

Exclusion in Banua Pangka was not solely a matter of policy or legal structure—it was also performative and discursive. Institutional actors legitimized their control by reframing the narrative around the destination's origins, positioning the youth group as informal volunteers rather than co-developers.

Despite this marginalization, the community demonstrated resilience through adaptive entrepreneurship, creating independent micro-enterprises such as informal guiding services, food stalls, and digital content production. These actions reflect what Stone and Nyaupane (2022) describe as "everyday resistance"—a form of social resilience that allows communities to remain active participants in tourism economies despite formal exclusion.

This aligns with Moscardo's (2008) argument that CBT sustainability depends not only on formal structures but also on the capacity of communities to innovate and persist in changing governance contexts.

4.2 Theoretical Contributions: Symbolic Exclusion and Adaptive Agency

One of the key theoretical insights from this study is the importance of recognizing symbolic exclusion as a distinct yet powerful mechanism of marginalization in CBT settings. Unlike procedural exclusion, which involves formal barriers to participation, symbolic exclusion operates through language, representation, and institutional narratives that delegitimize grassroots actors.

This builds on recent work by Tomassini et al. (2022), who argue that participatory inequality in tourism is not just structural but also performative. In Banua Pangka, the erasure of the youth group from official storytelling reinforced institutional authority while undermining community legitimacy.

At the same time, the community's informal entrepreneurial responses highlight the concept of adaptive agency—the ability of marginalized groups to re-enter tourism systems through alternative, non-institutional means. This expands the conceptual understanding of agency in CBT literature, moving beyond binary notions of inclusion/exclusion toward more fluid and dynamic forms of engagement.

4.3 Practical Implications for Equitable Tourism Governance

The findings offer several practical implications for policymakers and practitioners aiming to design inclusive tourism governance models:

- 1) **Recognize and Integrate Grassroots Initiatives:** Formal institutions should acknowledge the historical role of community actors and integrate them into governance structures rather than displacing them.
- 2) **Ensure Participatory Decision-Making:** Co-management frameworks, advisory boards, or participatory budgeting can help preserve community voice in formal planning processes.
- 3) **Support Informal Adaptation Strategies:** Rather than criminalizing or ignoring informal tourism activities, local governments can provide training, small-scale funding, and legal recognition to support grassroots innovation.

Failure to do so risks replicating patterns of exclusion that undermine the very principles of sustainable and community-based tourism.

4.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

As a single-case study, the findings from Banua Pangka are context-specific and may not be generalizable across all CBT settings. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research limits the ability to quantify the extent of exclusion or measure economic impacts.

However, the depth of contextual insight provides a strong foundation for future comparative studies, particularly in post-viral tourism destinations where rapid popularity precedes structured governance. Further research could explore how different institutional models—such as cooperatives or hybrid governance arrangements—can better balance top-down regulation with bottom-up participation.

This case also invites deeper exploration of the role of digital platforms in shaping tourism trajectories, particularly how they empower grassroots initiatives but also attract institutional takeover.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the governance transformation in Banua Pangka, a mangrove ecotourism destination in Luwu Timur, Indonesia, initially developed by a local youth group and later formalized under village governance structures. The findings reveal how institutionalization—often framed as a step toward sustainable management—can paradoxically lead to both procedural and symbolic exclusion of grassroots actors.

Procedural exclusion manifested through the community's marginalization from decision-making and profit-sharing processes, while symbolic exclusion occurred via the erasure of their historical contributions from public narratives and tourism branding. These dynamics challenge the foundational principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which emphasize empowerment, participation, and benefit retention at the local level (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Stone & Nyaupane, 2022).

Despite these exclusions, the original initiators demonstrated resilience through informal entrepreneurial adaptation, including independent guiding services, food stalls, and digital storytelling. This finding expands theoretical understandings of agency in CBT contexts by illustrating that disengagement is not inevitable—communities can and do find creative ways to remain relevant even when formally excluded.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by integrating the concept of symbolic exclusion into discussions of participatory governance in tourism. It highlights how power operates not only through structural control but also through narrative construction, reinforcing calls for more reflexive and inclusive governance models that recognize both the material and discursive dimensions of marginalization (Tomassini et al., 2022; Moscardo, 2008).

Practically, the research underscores the need for inclusive governance frameworks that institutionalize community participation without displacing grassroots actors. Recommendations include:

- 1) Establishing co-management arrangements between local communities and formal institutions,
- 2) Ensuring historical recognition of initiating actors in tourism branding and policy documents,
- 3) Supporting informal adaptation strategies through capacity-building and micro-finance programs.

Ultimately, this case illustrates that sustainability in tourism is not solely ecological or economic—it is also deeply social and political. Protecting community agency and preserving local narratives are essential components of ethical and resilient CBT development.

6. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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