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Towards Inclusive Tourism Governance: Social Inequality and Community Representation in Soppeng Tourism Villages

Irwan¹, Djohar², Akhmad Roja Badrus Zaman³

¹Department of Sociology, Sawerigading University, Indonesia

²Department of Public Administration, Sawerigading University, Indonesia

³Albert-Ludwigs-Universitat-Freiburg, Germany

Corresponding Author: Irwan; Email: irwanunsa212@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes social inequality and community representation in the governance of tourism villages in Soppeng Regency, South Sulawesi. The research used a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design in three tourist villages: Lompulle, Bulue, and Mattabulu. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, then analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis techniques. The results showed that local social structures play a central role in determining policy direction, benefit distribution, and tourism decision-making. Community participation is collective yet hierarchically structured, while informal mechanisms such as customary deliberations serve as a means of conflict resolution. The involvement of women and youth tends to be limited to operational functions, not at the strategic level. These findings show that the seemingly participatory governance of tourism villages is actually still trapped in patronistic logic and structural exclusion. Therefore, this study recommends the importance of policy interventions that strengthen inclusive representation and equitable distribution of power to support sustainable tourism development based on social justice.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, community-based tourism (CBT) has become a globally promoted development strategy to encourage local community empowerment and cultural preservation (Saayman & Giampiccoli, 2016). This approach emphasizes the importance of active community participation in destination management, economic benefit distribution, and decision-making. However, in practice, the implementation of CBT is inseparable from structural inequalities that limit the full representation of communities, especially in regions that still maintain traditional hierarchical social structures.

This phenomenon also occurs in Indonesia, where the development of tourism villages experiences inequality in terms of power distribution, control over resources, and representation in the planning process. Many studies show that the dominance of local elites and

the exclusion of vulnerable groups such as women, youth, and the poor are still the main problems in the management of tourist villages (Cole, S., & Morgan, 2010; Hampton, M. P., & Jeyacheya, 2020). The concept of participation, which should be deliberative and inclusive, is often reduced to administrative formalities without touching the deeper roots of social problems.

One of the main causes of these problems is the existence of deeply rooted and patronizing social structures, which shape unequal power relations within the community. These structures influence who has a voice in village meetings, who holds control over tourism assets, and who benefits from existing programs. Research by Nepal & Saarinen (2016) shows that in communities with hierarchical social structures, participation in tourism management is often limited by cultural norms and local power structures that reinforce exclusion of certain groups. Community

representation is not only influenced by formal mechanisms such as village meetings, but also by social relations attached to status, age, and gender, which ultimately create inequalities in access to and influence over decision-making.

Soppeng Regency in South Sulawesi is an interesting area to study in this context. Three tourism villages in the region-Lompulle, Bulue, and Mattabulu-have demonstrated success in maintaining cultural identity and building local tourism potential. However, a report from the Soppeng Tourism Office and field research findings reveal an imbalance of participation in governance, where key decisions are still dominated by certain actors with high social, political, or customary capital. This suggests a tension between formal structures of village governance and informal structures based on custom and kinship.

International literature emphasizes that the success of sustainable tourism governance relies heavily on the existence of fair and inclusive representation mechanisms. The principles of public deliberation, transparent consultation, and equal distribution of power are important pillars in participatory governance models (Hall, 2011). When local social structures fail to facilitate the involvement of various social groups, the risk of marginalization and social conflict increases. Therefore, a qualitative approach based on critical sociology is needed to uncover the power relations that work hidden in the governance process.

This issue is becoming increasingly relevant in the context of global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly target 11 (inclusive and sustainable cities and settlements) and target 16 (inclusive and accountable institutions). Failure to accommodate a plurality of voices in tourism governance not only hinders equitable development but can also undermine the social legitimacy of the tourism village development program itself (Unwto, n.d.). On the other hand, real and representative community involvement can strengthen a sense of belonging, broaden the distribution of economic benefits, and create governance that is more responsive to community needs.

A review of previous studies shows that research related to tourism villages in Indonesia still dominantly focuses on economic, promotional, and infrastructure aspects (Sujarwo, A., Pramono, H., &

Mursid, 2021; Dewi, M. H. U., Setyawan, I., & Prabowo, 2020). Few have highlighted the sociological dimension, particularly power relations and representation in the decision-making process. In fact, the problem of unequal participation is rooted in social structures that are not neutral and are full of differences in social, symbolic, and cultural capital between groups in rural communities (Moscardo, 2011).

Based on this reality, it is important to conduct a more in-depth study of how local social structures shape power relations and influence community representation in tourism village management. This study will not only fill the gap in the literature but also provide an empirical basis for the formulation of more inclusive tourism governance policies. The construction of participatory and fair governance can only be achieved if the diversity of voices in the community is truly heard and given space in every decision-making process.

Therefore, this article aims to critically analyze how social inequality and community representation manifest in the practice of tourism village governance in Soppeng Regency. Using a qualitative approach and the lens of critical sociology theory, this research will examine the formal and informal mechanisms at work in tourism decision-making, as well as how local actors negotiate amidst complex social structures. This article is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions in encouraging more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable tourism village management.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design. This approach was chosen to examine in depth the dynamics of social inequality and the practice of community representation in tourism village governance. Case studies are considered relevant because they allow a thorough exploration of complex phenomena occurring in a particular social context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clear (Yin, 2018). The research focuses on three tourist villages in Soppeng Regency-Lompulle, Bulue, and Mattabulu-which were purposively selected because they have strong cultural backgrounds, but also face challenges in

creating equitable and inclusive tourism governance.

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted with 45 key informants consisting of village heads, traditional leaders, Pokdarwis managers, women homestay business owners, and youth arts and culture actors. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to reach informants with direct experience in tourism village management. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for reflective and open-ended narrative exploration. In addition, participatory observation was conducted in village deliberation activities, cultural festivals, and daily tourism activities. Documents such as meeting minutes, village regulations on tourism, as well as community social media posts were used as complementary materials and data validation.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis techniques to identify thematic patterns that reflect power relations, social exclusion, and representational practices in tourism governance. The stages of analysis included data familiarization, manual coding, theme grouping, and interpretation based on critical sociological theory. This approach allows for the exploration of the deep meanings of informants' narratives and how they relate to broader social structures (Braun, V., & Clarke, 2019). Validity and reliability were strengthened through triangulation of methods and sources, as well as member checking with a number of informants to confirm the results. The researcher also maintained reflexivity throughout the research process by keeping a field journal and recording the dynamics of interpretation as a form of openness to analytical bias (Tracy, 2010; Nowell et al., 2017). This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative research, with informed consent, assurance of confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tourism Potential of Soppeng Regency

Soppeng Regency, South Sulawesi, is one of the regions actively developing village-based tourism potential through cultural and natural approaches. Villages such as Lompulle, Bulue, and Mattabulu have been designated as tourism villages

by the local Tourism Office, with the support of attractions such as the Walennae Geopark, Mappadendang traditional ceremony, Lejja hot spring, Liu Pangie waterfall and Petta Bulu Matanre cultural site. These three villages reflect the diverse social and cultural landscape of the Soppeng people, who still maintain traditional values and patronistic social structures in their daily lives.

Although formally developed as tourist destinations, tourism governance in these villages still faces challenges in terms of representation and equitable participation. Hierarchical social structures, the dominance of customary elites, and the weak access of women and youth to decision-making spaces are the main obstacles to realizing inclusive governance. Against this background, this research focuses on how social inequality and community representation are manifested in tourism governance practices in the three villages, through a qualitative approach based on the experiences of local actors.

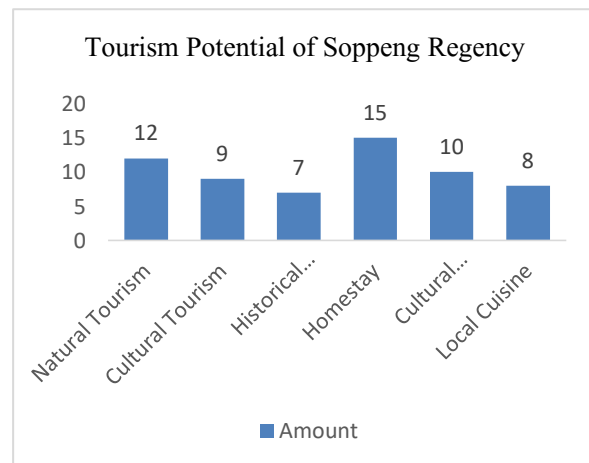


Figure 1. Tourism Potential of Soppeng Regency

Soppeng Regency has strong natural tourism potential, with part of its area falling within conservation areas. In Bulue Village, around 85% of the area is within a protected zone, making destinations such as Lejja Hot Springs, waterfalls, and camping areas receive high landscape aesthetic scores (SBE) between 51 and 184 in a GIS-based Scenic Beauty Estimation study (Hasanuddin et al., 2020). The study confirmed that the area has nine high-value natural tourist sites, such as Lejja Hot Spring (SBE = 81.33) and Menawoe Waterfall (SBE = 184.44).

The geological and cultural potential of Soppeng is strengthened through the development

of the Walennae Geopark. The area has high archaeological value, with findings of vertebrate fossils and ancient human artifacts in the Pleistocene layer (*Stegodon celebensis*, *Celebochoerus heekereni*), as well as recognition as a strategic cultural heritage area (Muhammad Nur,

2015). Local commitment to make Walennae an aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark also shows synergy between conservation of geodiversity, biodiversity, and cultural diversity (Declaration of the Regent of Soppeng, July 2023).

Table 1. Comparison of Tourism Village Potential of Soppeng Regency

Tourism Potential Components	<i>Mattabulu</i>	<i>Bulue</i>	<i>Lompulle</i>
Number of Cultural Attractions	8	6	5
Number of Homestays	6	4	3
number of tour packages	7	5	4
Number of Featured Souvenirs	10	7	6
Number of Cultural Attractions	3	2	3
Number of Natural Attractions	5	4	4

Description:

1. Mattabulu offers various tourist attractions, including natural attractions such as the Valley of Love and Liu Pangie Waterfall, as well as cultural attractions such as the Petta Bulu Matanre site and the traditional art of mappadendang.
2. Bulue is known for its Lejja hot springs and Minawoe Waterfall, as well as the historical site of Datu Mario's Tomb.
3. Lompulle offers natural attractions such as Labempa and Walennae Geopark, as well as cultural attractions such as the Mappadendang harvest party.

Based on the results of thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation during field research in three tourist villages in Soppeng Regency, it was found that local social structures play a central role in shaping community-based tourism governance patterns. The data obtained shows that power relations, social norms, as well as deliberative mechanisms that develop at the local level are not only the context, but also, at the same time, instruments in tourism-related decision-making practices. These findings are classified into four main themes that illustrate how social structures function in supporting participatory and sustainable tourism governance.

Local Social Structure as a Policy Steering Mechanism and Decision Legitimization

The data shows that traditional leaders and village heads have central authority in decision-making related to tourism management, not only in administrative aspects, but also as guarantors of social legitimacy for the policies taken. Power

relations in the community are based on symbolic and cultural capital, where social position is determined by age, descent, and proximity to traditional values.

Andi Amri, Head of Lompulle Village, stated: "We cannot be separated from adat, because every policy on tourism must be in line with the cultural values that we maintain" (Interview, 2024). This finding confirms that decision-making processes tend to be exclusive and centralized, limiting the space for representation for women and youth groups. This reflects the patronistic logic in the village social structure that inhibits the realization of equal deliberative participation.

Collective Participation within a Traditional Social Hierarchy Framework

Although village tourism management involves the wider community, the form of participation is framed in a hierarchical social logic and based on family values. Community participation is not solely due to institutional openness, but rather due to cultural norms that emphasize social solidarity and collective obligation.

Andi Baso, a homestay manager in Bulue, states: "We all work together, but it is the elders who determine the direction and the way of working." (Interview, 2024). This means that participation is normative and does not automatically reflect involvement in decision-making. This finding reinforces the critical sociology argument that participation in traditional societies is often not free from the determinations of social structures that limit the mobility of subordinate actors.

Conflict Resolution and Access Distribution through Informal and Cultural Mechanisms

Local social structures provide effective informal mechanisms to resolve conflicts and regulate the distribution of tourism benefits. Customary forums and family meetings are the main arenas for reducing inter-group tensions, especially in youth competition over the management of tourism services.

Rudi Daeng, a youth from Lompulle, said, “If there is a fight over homestays or tourist spots, it is usually the traditional leaders who intervene. We believe in deliberation rather than reporting to the government” (Interview, 2024). This phenomenon shows that the sustainability of tourism governance is not solely determined by formal institutions, but also by the legitimacy built through local values such as sipakatau and consensus deliberation. Thus, informal structures function as adaptive instruments of social control.

Gender and Generational Role Inclusiveness within the Boundaries of Traditional Structures

Women and youth actively contribute to tourism operations, but their roles are still limited to supporting and domestic functions. Women are involved in providing culinary services and cleaning homestays, while youth are starting to take on important roles in digital promotion and art performances.

Makkuraga, a housewife in Bulue, said: “I help in the kitchen when there are guests, or clean the homestay. But for big meetings it's usually the men” (Interview, 2024). These limitations reflect structural inequalities in representation, despite indications of social change among youth. This finding supports the literature that inclusivity in community-based tourism is not always equally realized due to the reproduction of patriarchal values and social stratification in village communities.

This discussion aims to interpret the field findings through the lens of recent theoretical and empirical studies, to explain how local social structures shape the governance of tourism villages in Soppeng Regency. Using a critical sociology approach and participatory governance theory, this discussion links the four main themes of the research results with academic literature and sustainable tourism development policies. In the context of a community with a hierarchical social

structure, power relations, collective participation, informal mechanisms, as well as gender and generational roles are understood not as separate entities, but as intertwined elements in community tourism management practices. Therefore, each of the following sub-discussions will analytically illustrate the relationship between social structure and the sustainability of local value-based tourism governance and contemporary social dynamics.

Social Structure as Symbolic Regulation and Policy

The finding that traditional leaders and village heads play a dominant role in tourism policy-making confirms Bourdieu's concept of habitus and symbolic capital, where cultural power becomes recognized capital in the decision-making process. A recent study by Fitriyah et al. (2024) on local elites in Pandeglang noted that elites function as opinion leaders, mediators, and decision-makers in the development of tourism villages, confirming the dominance of local elites in the governance structure of community tourism.

This phenomenon reflects the existence of asymmetric participation-despite the appearance of participation, strategic decisions are still controlled by customary elites and formal figures. This is in line with the findings of (Moscardo, 2023), who state that community tourism governance is often driven by symbolic elites, rather than more subordinate groups, posing challenges to the legitimacy of democratic participation processes. To overcome this, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity and legitimacy space for marginalized groups so that they can influence policies in a balanced manner.

Collective Participation within the Boundaries of Cultural Hierarchy

Community participation in the context of homestays and cultural festivals is more ritualistic than deliberative. The study by Sakas, D. P., & Reklitis (2021) emphasizes the importance of true collaboration in community-based participation - not symbolic participation - to produce real impact for the welfare of local communities. The pattern that emerged in Soppeng reflects a form of participation tokenism as described by Arnstein (1969), where involvement is only at the symbolic level, not at the level of genuine decision-making.

However, local values such as gotong royong and sipakatau reflect valuable social capital in

strengthening social cohesion. Local governance studies by Kim & Lee (2022) confirm that collaboration between local actors improves destination image and tourists' sense of attachment, while strengthening social ties within the community. Thus, although participation lacks inclusive structures, local cultural values have the potential to be the foundation for more substantive engagement if coupled with systemically inclusive mechanisms.

Informal Mechanisms as Instruments of Resolution and Stability

The success of conflict resolution through customary forums and family mediation is a clear example of customary governance. A study by Filling (2021) in the context of small-scale conflict resolution confirmed that customary institutions are effective in providing informal adjudicative mechanisms that communities trust. In Soppeng, this is reflected in the community's recognition and trust in conflict resolution - relying more on adat than formal authorities - as Rudi Daeng and La Tenri found.

This model is in line with Ostrom's (1990) co-management framework and Manaf et al.'s (2018) study of the Ngleng tourism village. (2018) on Nglanggeran tourism village, which emphasizes local stakeholder collaboration as an effective mechanism for managing shared resources. This informal mechanism not only reduces conflict but also creates adaptive social control and respects local norms as a basis for legitimacy in tourism management.

Gender and Generations: An Evolving Inclusivity Agenda

Although women and youth are operationally involved in tourism, their access to formal decision-making structures remains limited, reflecting patriarchal inequalities. Vujko et al. (2024) show that empowering women through associations and enterprises in rural tourism can be a significant trigger for social transformation. The context of Soppeng reflects that women play a supporting role, but not yet in a strategic position.

Meanwhile, youth engagement through digital promotion reflects agency within structure, where they utilize technological opportunities to widen the meeting of decision institutions (Wu, 2024). The digital platform study by Tang et al. (2024) shows that digital integration can accelerate rural

revitalization and open up new participation spaces for the younger generation. However, to move towards sustainable inclusiveness, structural interventions such as leadership training and access to formal forums for women and youth need to be intensified.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that local social structures have a fundamental role in determining the direction, legitimacy, and governance practices of tourism villages in Soppeng Regency. In communities with strong customary values, traditional leaders and village heads not only act as cultural symbols, but also as strategic policy-making actors. Decisions in tourism management tend to be concentrated on figures who have high social and symbolic capital, resulting in inequality in the representation of marginalized groups such as women and youth. This pattern reflects the reality of procedural and not fully deliberative participation.

Nonetheless, informal mechanisms such as customary deliberation, gotong royong, and the principle of sipakatau have proven to be important tools in maintaining social stability, resolving conflicts, and strengthening cohesion in community tourism management. These local values become social resources that enable consensus-oriented governance and sustainability. Community participation, although within a hierarchical frame, shows great potential to be developed in a more inclusive direction if facilitated by a collaborative approach and strengthening village institutional capacity.

In the context of social transformation, the involvement of the younger generation through digital platforms and the participation of women in the tourism service sector show new dynamics that open up opportunities for hybrid governance-combining local wisdom with modern participatory approaches. Therefore, the main recommendation of this research is the importance of integration between local social structures and institutional interventions that are responsive to social change, including leadership training, strengthening deliberative forums, and utilizing technology. This strategy will expand the space for social representation and strengthen the foundation for

inclusive, equitable, and sustainable tourism governance.

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