

Community Participation and Ecotourism Development on Komodo Island: A Qualitative Case Study of Village-Level Engagement and Strategic Barriers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines village community participation in ecotourism development on Komodo Island and identifies barriers that limit the transition from operational involvement to strategic authority. The analysis integrates Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation with community-based enterprise, empowerment, and collaborative governance perspectives. A qualitative case study was conducted in Komodo, Papagarang, and Mesa Villages from May to July 2025. Data were collected through 14 semi-structured interviews, two focus group discussions involving 6–8 participants per group, five participatory observation sessions, and document review. The data were analyzed manually using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. The findings show that residents actively participate as tour guides, sea transportation providers, culinary entrepreneurs, and homestay operators. However, pricing, promotion, visitor scheduling, investment priorities, and destination planning remain largely controlled by external tour operators and public institutions. Limited managerial capacity, weak collective organization, inadequate infrastructure, unequal market access, dependence on external booking channels, and environmental pressures restrict local value capture. The study recommends formal community representation in destination governance, stronger village cooperatives, transparent pricing and booking systems, continuous business and conservation training, infrastructure improvement, and participatory monitoring. Active economic participation does not automatically produce strategic authority without institutional support and inclusive governance.

Keywords: Community-Based Enterprise, Community Participation, Ecotourism, Komodo Island, Sustainable Livelihoods

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is expected to combine environmental conservation, local economic development, and meaningful community participation. This expectation is particularly important in protected island destinations, where biodiversity conservation and tourism-dependent livelihoods are closely connected. Komodo Island has exceptional ecological value as the natural habitat of the Komodo dragon and as part of Komodo National Park. Its surrounding villages also possess maritime knowledge, culinary traditions, fishing practices, and social institutions that can support distinctive tourism experiences. When these resources are managed inclusively, ecotourism can strengthen conservation while expanding livelihood opportunities for residents (Anggraini & Gunawan, 2021; Artha et al., 2023).

Tourism growth, however, does not automatically produce community empowerment. Research on Komodo National Park has identified ecological pressure, conflicts over tourism management, external investment, and limited local influence over strategic decisions (Choirisa,

2023; Mahmud, 2024; Mutthaqin, 2024; Purnama, 2024). Residents may obtain work as guides,

boat operators, food sellers, or homestay providers while remaining excluded from decisions about prices, visitor flows, promotion, investment, and benefit distribution. This distinction is important because employment participation and decision-making authority represent different levels of community involvement.

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation provides a useful framework for distinguishing symbolic or operational involvement from participation that redistributes decision-making power. In tourism settings, structural, operational, and cultural barriers may prevent communities from progressing toward genuine partnership and citizen control (Tosun, 2000). Scheyvens's (1999) empowerment framework further suggests that tourism should be evaluated through economic, social, psychological, and political outcomes rather than income alone. These perspectives indicate that meaningful participation requires both voice in governance and the capacity to retain benefits locally.

The community-based enterprise perspective complements participation theory by explaining how a community can collectively mobilize cultural, social, natural, and economic resources to create locally controlled ventures (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). In ecotourism, local enterprise development is shaped by market access, institutional capacity, ownership arrangements, and relationships with government agencies and private operators. Collaborative governance is therefore necessary to create forums in which communities participate as decision-making partners rather than only as service providers (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Previous Indonesian studies have documented community participation, conservation practices, carrying capacity, destination potential, and stakeholder collaboration (Fatina, 2023; Fifiyanti & Damanik, 2021; Firmansyah, 2023; Ziku, 2015). Nevertheless, limited attention has been given to the relationship among participation level, community enterprise formation, local value capture, and institutional authority in villages surrounding a highly protected and internationally recognized destination. As a result, the mechanisms through which operational participation may—or may not—develop into strategic community control remain insufficiently explained.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing village-level participation in Komodo, Papagarang, and Mesa; identifying strategic, institutional, entrepreneurial, and environmental barriers; and formulating an actionable framework for community-based ecotourism. The study asks three questions: (1) How are village communities currently involved in ecotourism activities? (2) What factors limit their participation in destination governance and local value capture? and (3) What institutional strategies can strengthen community authority, enterprise development, and sustainable livelihoods? The study contributes theoretically by connecting participation, empowerment, community enterprise, and collaborative governance, and practically by proposing responsibilities and monitoring indicators for key stakeholders.

2. METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study design to examine community participation and ecotourism governance within their real-life institutional and socio-cultural context. The study focused on Komodo, Papagarang, and Mesa Villages because residents in these locations are directly connected to tourism services, marine transportation, fisheries, and the Komodo National Park economy. The unit of analysis was the relationship between village participation, local enterprise activity, and strategic decision-making in ecotourism development.

Participants were selected purposively based on direct knowledge of or involvement in ecotourism. Eligible participants included community tourism workers, owners of local tourism businesses, community or traditional leaders, tourism awareness group representatives, village government officials, conservation authorities, and relevant tourism operators. Snowball recruitment was used only when an initial participant identified another actor with specific knowledge of pricing, destination planning, conservation, or market relationships. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, which was determined when two consecutive

interviews produced no new codes, themes, or relevant information related to community participation, institutional constraints, economic benefits, and ecotourism management strategies. The research team assessed saturation by reviewing the interview summaries and updating the coding matrix after each interview.

Table 1. Participant Profile and Data Contribution

Participant group	Village/institution	Number	Selection criteria	Data contributed
Community tourism workers and local business actors	Komodo, Papagarang, and Mesa	6	Directly operated guiding, transport, culinary, souvenir, or homestay services	Operational practices, income pathways, market access, and service constraints
Community leaders/Pokdarwis/cooperative representatives	Komodo, Papagarang, and Mesa	3	Held a formal or informal community coordination role	Collective organization, representation, and local priorities
Village government and destination authorities	Komodo, Papagarang, and Mesa	3	Responsible for village administration, tourism, or conservation	Policy, regulation, planning, and coordination
Tourism operators/other stakeholders	Komodo, Papagarang, and Mesa	2	Influenced tourism packages, promotion, pricing, or visitor flows	Market structure, partnerships, and external control
Total	—	14	—	—

Fieldwork was conducted from May to July 2025. Data collection consisted of 14 semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes; two focus group discussions involving 6–8 participants per group; five participatory observation sessions conducted during ecotourism activities, village meetings, tourism service operations, and community interactions throughout the three-month fieldwork period; and a review of relevant village, tourism, and conservation documents. The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy and richness of their perspectives.

As the study involved non-invasive qualitative research with adult participants, formal institutional ethical review was not required under the applicable institutional research regulations. Nevertheless, the study followed established ethical principles for research involving human participants. All participants received clear information regarding the purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and intended use of the research findings. Written or audio-recorded informed consent was obtained before data collection. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the dataset, and participant codes ranging from INF-01 to INF-14 were used throughout the analysis and reporting.

Researcher reflexivity was addressed by acknowledging the researcher's position as an independent investigator who had no formal institutional or managerial role within the study communities before the research commenced. Access to potential participants was facilitated by village authorities and community representatives; however, these parties were not involved in determining participation, which remained entirely voluntary. To minimize potential researcher bias, reflective field notes were maintained throughout the fieldwork, semi-structured interview guides were applied consistently across participant groups, and emerging interpretations were continuously compared with interview transcripts, observation records, focus group discussions, and documentary evidence through data-source and method triangulation.

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development of candidate themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final report. The coding process combined deductive categories derived from Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, community-based enterprise theory, empowerment theory, and collaborative governance with inductive codes emerging from the participants' accounts. All coding and thematic development were conducted manually by the principal researcher. To enhance analytical transparency, consistency, and dependability, a codebook and decision log were maintained to document code definitions, coding decisions, theme development, revisions, and the rationale for analytical refinements.

Participation quality was assessed using three analytically defined levels. Operational participation referred to delivering tourism services without authority over planning, pricing, promotion, or resource allocation. Consultative participation referred to providing opinions or attending forums without guaranteed decision rights. Strategic participation referred to formal involvement in planning, budgeting, regulation, monitoring, and benefit-distribution decisions. These levels were used as interpretive categories rather than as a numerical scale.

Credibility was strengthened through source and method triangulation, comparison of evidence across the three villages, member checking with six participants, and maintenance of an audit trail linking interview codes, observations, themes, and interpretations. Reporting was reviewed against the COREQ guidance for interviews and focus groups (Tong et al., 2007).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented as interconnected themes. Within each subsection, empirical patterns are described first and then interpreted using participation, empowerment, community enterprise, and collaborative governance perspectives.

3.1 Patterns of Operational Participation

Community participation was most visible in service-based activities, including tour guiding, sea transportation, culinary services, and homestay operation. The available records identified 18 tour guides, 15 sea transportation fleets, 14 culinary businesses, and 10 homestay units. Because these categories use different units of measurement—people, fleets, businesses, and accommodation units—they are reported as an activity mapping and are not combined into a single denominator or percentage distribution.

Table 2. Recorded Ecotourism Activities and Participation Characteristics

Activity sector	Recorded unit	Primary community role	Observed capability	Key constraint	Participation level/evidence
Tour guiding	18 guides	Trekking assistance, visitor safety, and interpretation of Komodo and savanna ecosystems	Strong experiential and ecological knowledge	Uneven formal training and limited influence over package design	Operational; INF-01, INF-05, observation
Sea transportation	15 fleets	Inter-island transport, snorkeling trips, and island-hopping services	Local maritime knowledge and available vessels	Prices and schedules often shaped by external agents	Operational; INF-03, INF-06, observation

Culinary services	14 busines	Preparation and sale of local food and beverages	Use of local ingredients and cultural products	Limited promotion, packaging, quality standardization, and direct market access	Operational; INF-04, INF-07, observation
Homestays	10 units	Community-owned accommodation and hospitality	Personalized local experience	Facilities and marketing remain below expected destination standards	Operational; INF-02, observation

Tour guides contributed local ecological knowledge and direct visitor interpretation, while boat providers connected visitors to destinations across the national park. Culinary and homestay activities broadened the range of benefits available to village households. These roles demonstrate meaningful economic engagement, but they remain concentrated in implementation rather than control over the tourism system.

As one local guide explained:

"We understand the local environment because we grew up here and have worked with tourists for a long time. However, opportunities for professional guide training remain limited. We want to improve our skills, particularly in foreign languages, first aid, and environmental interpretation, so that we can provide better services and compete with guides from outside the village" (INF-01).

This account illustrates that local guides possess substantial place-based knowledge but still face limited access to formal qualifications and professional development. As a result, their ecological expertise has not yet been fully converted into stronger bargaining power, recognized professional status, or greater involvement in destination-level decision-making.

3.2 Power Asymmetry and Limited Strategic Authority

Across the three villages, participants described limited influence over package pricing, destination promotion, visitor scheduling, investment priorities, and tourism regulations. External tour operators and public institutions retained greater control over market information and formal decisions. Community members were therefore visible in the tourism economy but had weaker authority over the rules that shaped revenue, access, and long-term development.

As one participant explained:

"Even though we are the ones serving the tourists, we are rarely involved when decisions are made about prices, promotions, or tourism policies. Those decisions are usually made by tour operators or government agencies, while we simply implement what has already been decided" (INF-03).

This account demonstrates that community involvement remains concentrated in the implementation of tourism services, while strategic authority continues to be held by more powerful external actors. This pattern corresponds to Arnstein's (1969) distinction between participation that permits involvement and participation that redistributes power. The evidence is most consistent with operational participation and limited consultation rather than partnership or community control. It also reflects the structural constraints identified by Tosun (2000), in which communities participate within arrangements established by more powerful administrative and commercial actors. The analytical contribution of this finding is that the main constraint is not the absence of community activity, but the separation between community labor and strategic authority.

3.3 Community Enterprise and Local Value Capture

The villages possess resources that can support community-owned enterprises, including guiding knowledge, maritime skills, local food products, homestays, cultural practices, and conservation activities. These resources provide a basis for product diversification beyond wildlife observation, such as community-led cultural tours, cooking experiences, marine education, local product sales, and longer village-based itineraries. However, weak collective organization, limited digital promotion, insufficient business skills, and dependence on external booking channels constrain the community's ability to package services and retain a larger share of tourism value.

As one homestay or culinary business operator explained:

"We have local products and unique experiences to offer, but we still work individually. There is no shared system for promotion, pricing, or booking, and most visitors are brought by outside tour operators. Without better organization and marketing, it is difficult for us to increase our income or expand our businesses" (INF-02).

This statement illustrates that the primary constraint is not the absence of local products or entrepreneurial interest, but the lack of collective mechanisms through which community businesses can coordinate, reach markets, and manage tourism services. From a community-based enterprise perspective, the existence of individual tourism businesses does not automatically create collective economic control. Community enterprise requires shared organization, locally legitimate rules, access to finance and markets, and the ability to combine natural, cultural, and social resources into jointly governed products (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). Similar research has shown that community-based tourism produces stronger development outcomes when local organizations control products and decision-making processes rather than serving only as fragmented suppliers (Zapata et al., 2011). The Komodo case therefore indicates an entrepreneurial bottleneck between available local assets and the institutions required to convert those assets into sustained local value capture.

3.4 Institutional, Infrastructure, and Environmental Constraints

Three interconnected constraints weakened the transition toward strategic participation. First, managerial, language, financial, digital, and service-standard capabilities were uneven across community groups. Second, local coordination mechanisms did not yet provide a sufficiently strong platform for collective negotiation with tourism operators and public authorities. Third, inadequate waste-management systems, docks, visitor facilities, and conservation controls increased operational costs and environmental risks. Participants also remained vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations in tourism demand and continued dependence on fisheries and tourism-related income.

As one village government official explained:

"Improving community skills is important, but training alone is not enough. We also need better coordination among villages, stronger community organizations, improved infrastructure, and clearer cooperation with tourism operators. Without these, local people will continue to participate only as service providers rather than as partners in decision-making" (INF-10).

This statement indicates that the barriers to strategic participation are institutional and structural, rather than merely individual. These findings show that capacity building should not be treated as training alone. Improvements in individual skills will have limited effects when communities lack formal representation, collective business institutions, transparent market arrangements, adequate infrastructure, and stable access to resources. Scheyvens's (1999) empowerment framework suggests that economic participation without political empowerment may leave communities dependent on external actors. Similarly, collaborative governance requires inclusive forums, agreed procedures, trust building, effective coordination, and shared

responsibility among public institutions, local communities, and tourism businesses (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

3.5 Strategic Priorities for Community-Based Ecotourism

The strategy emerging from the findings is to connect capacity building with institutional authority, enterprise development, conservation, and measurable accountability. The following priorities translate the empirical barriers into implementable actions.

Table 3. Prioritized Strategy, Institutional Mechanism, Funding Pathway, and Monitoring Indicator

Priority	Action and institutional mechanism	Responsible actors	Potential funding pathway	Monitoring indicator
1. Formal community representation	Establish a village ecotourism council with defined seats and voting rights in destination planning, pricing discussions, conservation programs, and annual evaluation.	Village governments, Komodo National Park authority, district tourism office, Pokdarwis	Village budget, destination management budget	Number of formal meetings; community attendance; proportion of decisions with documented community approval
2. Community enterprise development	Strengthen a tourism cooperative or joint business unit for packaging, direct booking, transparent pricing, procurement, and revenue distribution.	Village cooperative, Pokdarwis, local entrepreneurs, universities	Village-owned enterprise capital, cooperative finance, CSR, competitive grants	Number of community-owned products; direct-booking share; annual cooperative revenue; member benefit distribution
3. Skills and service standards	Deliver recurring training in business management, digital marketing, languages, safety, hospitality, packaging, and conservation, followed by mentoring and competency assessment.	Tourism office, universities, NGOs, industry partners	Government training allocation, CSR, donor or NGO programs	Training completion; competency results; service-quality assessment; participation of women and youth
4. Fair market access	Develop a transparent price reference, village digital catalogue, direct sales channel, and written partnership standards for external operators.	Cooperative, destination management organization, tour operators	Cooperative operational funds, digitalization grants	Published price reference; direct enquiries; commission retained locally; number of formal partnership agreements

5. Community-based conservation	Integrate local guides, fishers, and youth into visitor education, waste management, environmental patrols, and habitat restoration.	Park authority, village groups, conservation NGOs	Visitor levy or park revenue-sharing, environmental grants	Waste volume managed; patrol frequency; compliance incidents; restoration activities
6. Participatory monitoring	Publish an annual community ecotourism scorecard covering participation level, local ownership, income distribution, service quality, and environmental pressure.	Multi-stakeholder council and independent academic partner	Shared destination-management budget	Annual public report; completed indicators; corrective actions implemented

The proposed strategy moves beyond generic calls for empowerment by assigning responsibilities, identifying possible resource channels, and defining indicators. Its central principle is that community capacity and community authority must develop together. Training should therefore be linked to formal representation, collective enterprise structures, direct market access, and participatory conservation monitoring. This integrated approach is consistent with evidence that community-based tourism is more sustainable when economic benefits, social organization, and political voice reinforce one another (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that village communities surrounding Komodo Island are actively involved in ecotourism, but primarily as operational service providers. Tour guiding, boat transportation, culinary businesses, and homestays create livelihood opportunities and contribute local knowledge to the visitor experience. Nevertheless, community influence over pricing, promotion, visitor management, investment, and destination planning remains limited. The principal finding is therefore not a lack of participation, but an imbalance between extensive operational involvement and weak strategic authority.

The most urgent policy priorities are to formalize community representation in destination governance, strengthen village-level tourism cooperatives, expand direct market access, link training with mentoring and certification, and finance community-based conservation through transparent destination revenues or grants. Local governments, the national park authority, tourism operators, cooperatives, universities, and conservation organizations should use shared indicators to monitor decision rights, local ownership, benefit distribution, service quality, and environmental performance.

The study is limited by its qualitative design, focus on three villages, dependence on participant accounts and field observations, and the possibility of researcher interpretation bias. The heterogeneous activity counts in this study describe service mapping and should not be treated as respondent percentages. Future research should test the proposed relationships using larger quantitative samples, compare villages and protected destinations, and measure changes in local ownership, revenue retention, political participation, and environmental outcomes over time.

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