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Integrating Local Wisdom in Tourism Strategies to Enhance Community Economic Growth

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Abstract: This study examines the effectiveness of a local wisdom-based tourism development approach as a strategy to enhance community income growth while ensuring cultural and environmental sustainability. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method, utilizing findings from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and a case study conducted in Southwest Sumba Regency. The research concludes that the key to success lies in synergistic collaboration among the community, local government, and the private sector, with a focus on local community sovereignty. Tourism will achieve maximum effectiveness when communities and traditional institutions are elevated from passive objects to active agents controlling tourism potential. This can be realized through: (1) Increasing equitable economic welfare, measured by the growth in turnover of small businesses (such as homestays and crafts) and job creation; (2) Preserving culture and traditional values, where traditional rules serve as operational standards and tools for socio-cultural governance; and (3) Synergistic and transparent governance, supported by strengthening the capacity of Pokdarwis and BUMDes. The primary implication of this research is that recognizing communities as the principal custodians of cultural and natural resources transforms tourism from a mere revenue generator into an effective tool for preserving traditions, supported by direct community incentives and responsibilities. The sustainability of this model relies heavily on the proactive role of local governments as facilitators and the engagement of a responsible private sector committed to local empowerment.

Keywords: Local Wisdom, Tourism, Community Income, Community Empowerment, Core Ownership.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Southwest Sumba (SBD), East Nusa Tenggara, offers a unique blend of exotic natural beauty and authentic megalithic cultural richness. Key attractions include: (a) Authentic

Cultural Destinations, such as traditional villages like *Ratenggaro* and *Wainyapu*, featuring traditional houses (*Uma Kalada or Uma Kalada Menara*) and rituals like *Pasola*; (b) Unique Architecture and Traditions, where the lifestyle, rituals, and social structures of the SBD indigenous people are well preserved, providing an immersive and experiential tourism experience beyond mere sightseeing; and (c) Unique Natural Attractions, including exotic beaches that enhance the overall tourism experience. However, the true essence and primary appeal of the destination lie in its local wisdom. Although there is significant potential and several efforts have been made, challenges remain in tourism management, particularly in leveraging local wisdom. These challenges include: (a) limited access and infrastructure, especially supporting facilities; (b) customs that may conflict with tourism activities; (c) human resource quality, which still faces obstacles in delivering services to tourists; and (d) low digital literacy among local tourism stakeholders, limiting their ability to conduct independent promotions.

Local wisdom in the context of tourism is generally understood as a set of traditional knowledge, values, norms, and practices held by local communities that shape their way of life and interaction with the environment. This wisdom often serves as a major attraction for tourists seeking authentic experiences. Tourism based on local wisdom emphasizes the active participation of local communities in the planning, management, and benefits of tourism activities. Sustainability encompassing economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects is a key pillar of local wisdom-based tourism, as it aims to maintain a balance between development and conservation. Local wisdom-based tourism is a development approach that centers on the values, traditions, culture, knowledge, and lifestyles of local communities as the foundation of tourist attractions and experiences (Richards, 2018). This concept extends beyond merely showcasing natural scenery; it also highlights intangible cultural assets that are deeply connected to a region's identity. The objective is to foster tourism that is sustainable, authentic, and delivers direct benefits to local communities. Through local wisdom-based tourism, communities can monetize their cultural and natural assets including artistic traditions, handicrafts, culinary specialties, and environmental conservation practices that have been passed down through generations (UNWTO, 2017).

Several studies on local wisdom-based tourism have been conducted (Pahriah et al., 2025; Amir, 2018; Vitasurya, 2016; Sulaiman et al., 2022; Irfan & Suryani, 2017; Cahyaningrum, 2017; Farhan & Anwar, 2016; Suardana et al., 2022). The results of these studies confirm that local wisdom not only serves as an authentic tourism asset (attraction) but also functions as a mechanism and key form of social capital to achieve sustainable community empowerment. All of these studies agree that local wisdom serves as a bridge connecting cultural potential with positive economic and social outcomes, creating a cycle in which tourism strengthens, rather than weakens, community identity and well-being.

Therefore, this study aims to identify an effective approach to address the challenges of sustainable tourism development in Southwest Sumba Regency and to transform the region's rich cultural heritage and local wisdom into a tourism-based economic system that is not only measurable in terms of income but also sustainable over the long term. While previous research has successfully demonstrated that local wisdom serves as an authentic tourist attraction, it has yet to convincingly show how local wisdom can be preserved as a system that ensures equitable and sustainable income for the entire community.

METHODS

The research method employed is qualitative, utilizing a case study or ethnographic approach. This method is particularly appropriate as it enables researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the tourism development process, explore the significance of local wisdom from the community’s perspective, and analyze social interactions alongside their

economic impacts. Data collection will focus on participant observation, FGD, and document analysis to obtain rich, descriptive data (Creswell, 2016). Key informants will include representatives from the Southwest Sumba Regency Tourism Office, community leaders, tourism business owners, and NGOs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Local wisdom-based tourism development is a strategic approach that emphasizes the cultural values, customs, traditions, and lifestyles of local communities as its central appeal. The objective is not only to attract tourists but also to empower communities, preserve the environment, and, most importantly, sustainably increase community income. In the context of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Province, particularly Southwest Sumba Regency, this approach is highly relevant and holds significant potential due to its unique cultural and natural richness.

A local wisdom-based tourism development approach that aligns with the social and cultural context of Southwest Sumba must be grounded in local knowledge and existing social systems. This approach should empower communities economically while preserving cultural authenticity and promoting environmental sustainability. Based on various relevant sources and research findings, the indicators of success for local wisdom-based tourism development particularly in regions like Southwest Sumba encompass several key aspects frequently highlighted in discussions, including those from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) we conducted with policymakers, especially those in the tourism sector. Generally, these success indicators are evaluated not only from an economic standpoint but also from socio-cultural and environmental perspectives.

The results of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) indicate that the key to successful tourism development lies in the implementation of Community-Based Tourism (CBT). This success is measured by the integration of three main indicators: enhancing the economic welfare of local communities, preserving local culture and wisdom, and protecting the environment of tourist destinations. The success of tourism is tangibly measured by the overall improvement in the economic well-being of local communities, rather than by focusing on a select few. This is achieved through increased revenue from small businesses, such as homestays, souvenir shops, and food stalls, as well as the creation of new jobs for local residents. For example, in Southwest Sumba (SBD), indigenous communities manage and provide authentic experiences such as visits to *Ratenggaro* and traditional rituals where revenue from ticket sales and guide services goes directly to the community coffers, effectively increasing Village Original Income (PAD) and individual earnings. Furthermore, tourism demand encourages the strengthening of human resource capacity through training programs to become cultural guides or digital managers, directly enhancing community skills and competitiveness. Finally, tourism revenue is also used as an incentive fund to maintain cultural assets, such as traditional houses, and to finance rituals, which socially enhances community dignity and pride in their culture, making it an important non-financial indicator of well-being.

A key indicator of successful tourism is the active participation of the entire community in planning, management, and oversight. The presence and effectiveness of local institutions, such as the Tourism Awareness Group (*Pokdarwis*) and Village-Owned Enterprises (*BUMDes*), demonstrate a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for tourism within their region. In practice, the *Sumbanese* community's right to access information and participate in decision-making is guaranteed, with every development policy such as the construction of homestays or the designation of tourist routes subject to customary deliberation and community approval. This ensures that the community members are the primary agents shaping the direction of development. Furthermore, active involvement, exemplified by the direct production and sale of Ikat weaving by *Sumbanese* women, has successfully shortened the

market chain, provided fair prices to weavers, and strengthened the traditional skills-based economy.

The success of tourism is measured not only by the number of visitors but also by the extent to which it strengthens, rather than undermines, local wisdom and traditions. This success is demonstrated by the preservation and even enhancement of traditional rituals, handicrafts, and dances as key attractions, without excessive commercialization. In Southwest Sumba (SBD), culture is promoted both as a guiding principle (norm) and a primary attraction, making customary values mandatory operational standards for tourists. Examples of this implementation include the requirement to follow customary procedures (*Pahomba*) when entering sacred sites—such as seeking permission from a *Rato* (traditional leader)—to maintain the sanctity of these locations, as well as the strict enforcement of customary law to protect resources, including prohibitions against destructive development in restricted areas. Thus, tourism functions as a socio-cultural control mechanism that preserves Sumba's heritage.

Tourism success is characterized by synergistic governance achieved through strong coordination among local governments, indigenous communities, and businesses. This synergy ensures a shared commitment to managing tourism in a socially just and environmentally sustainable manner, preventing the destruction of nature and culture for short-term profit. Another crucial aspect is a clear and transparent revenue-sharing system, such as allocating specific percentages for village funds, maintenance of traditional sites, and management. This transparency is essential for fostering trust and encouraging community participation. Furthermore, community-based investment is promoted, with the government or private sector prioritizing empowerment for example, by developing basic infrastructure like local homestays rather than constructing large hotels managed by external parties. All these efforts are supported by human resource training programs aimed at cultivating a generation of tourism managers grounded in traditional values. The presence of a skilled next generation that upholds local wisdom ensures the quality of service remains authentic, ultimately sustaining revenue streams and maintaining SBD's competitiveness in the tourism market.

By consistently implementing a Community-Based Tourism (CBT) approach, customs, rituals, and environmental governance are preserved. This approach enables communities to control and manage natural and cultural resources while generating direct economic benefits for their members. Through community involvement and empowerment, CBT helps preserve culture and the environment while raising tourists' awareness of local values. Furthermore, CBT promotes equitable and sustainable, people-centered economic growth by ensuring that tourism profits are not solely enjoyed by large tourism businesses or external parties but also by local communities, who are the owners and primary drivers of tourist destinations. Collaboration among stakeholders is also essential to achieving the shared goal of inclusive and sustainable tourism development.

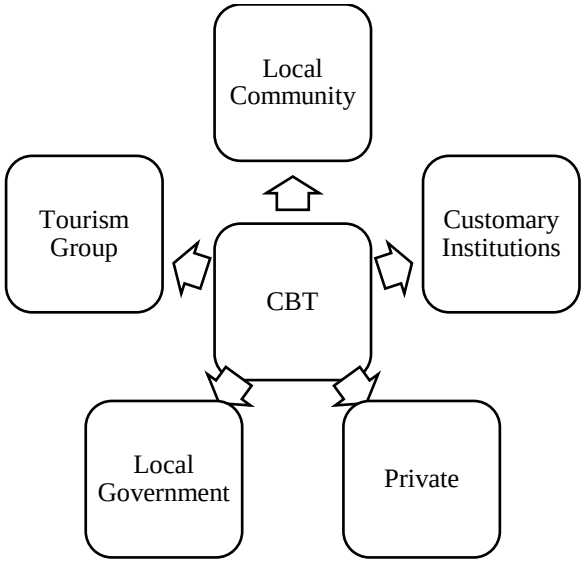

Figure 1. CBT Framework

Sustainable tourism development aimed at enhancing community welfare requires collaboration among various stakeholders. Local governments serve as facilitators and regulators by providing infrastructure, funding, and policy support. Local communities are the primary providers of tourism products and services, preserving cultural traditions under the guidance of customary institutions to ensure that cultural values and norms remain the foundation of tourism. Meanwhile, the Tourism Awareness Group (*Pokdarwis*) organizes communities, manages destinations, and acts as a liaison between communities, the government, and the private sector. Finally, the private sector offers essential support through capital investment, training, and marketing to improve product quality and increase revenue. Together, these components work harmoniously to achieve sustainable and socially equitable tourism.

Through the complementary roles of all parties, tourism can serve as a major driving force for the economic well-being of local communities while ensuring that it does not compromise the noble values and preservation of the natural resources that constitute its main attractions.

The primary implication of this research is that tourism will reach its maximum effectiveness when local communities and traditional institutions are elevated from passive objects to active agents controlling tourism potential. Recognizing them as the principal custodians of the cultural and natural resources in their regions will transform tourism. Its role will extend beyond revenue generation to become an effective tool for preserving local traditions and knowledge, as communities will have a direct incentive and responsibility to maintain them.

A community-based tourism approach can succeed only with the full support of local governments, which must act as proactive facilitators and regulators. This support includes establishing policies that prioritize local interests, such as a Tourism Master Plan, and providing adequate basic infrastructure at tourist sites, including roads, water supply, and communication networks.

Finally, private sector involvement is encouraged, but under strict conditions. The private sector must act as a productive partner and business accelerator, operating responsibly in social and cultural contexts. The primary focus should be on empowering local communities rather than merely profiting from existing resources.

CONCLUSION

Research on local wisdom-based tourism development in Southwest Sumba Regency concludes that the key to success lies in synergistic collaboration among the community, government, and private sector. This approach has proven effective in increasing community income while preserving cultural and natural resources and prioritizing local community sovereignty. In this collaboration, the community and traditional institutions of Southwest Sumba serve as the primary custodians of cultural and natural resources. The local government plays a vital role as a facilitator and policy regulator. Meanwhile, private sector involvement can accelerate tourism growth but must be conducted with social and cultural responsibility.

Suggestion

Strengthening the capacity of communities and customary institutions is a comprehensive effort to enhance their role in the tourism sector. Communities receive practical training in various areas, including becoming professional tour guides, managing hygienic homestays, mastering digital marketing for handicrafts, and improving service quality. Institutionally, local organizations such as the Tourism Awareness Group (*Pokdarwis*) and Village-Owned Enterprises (*BUMDes*) are being strengthened in organizational governance, financial transparency, and negotiation skills with external parties. Meanwhile, customary institutions are empowered to sustain cultural values and norms as the foundation for tourism operations.

Local governments are responsible for ensuring adequate basic infrastructure at tourist destinations, particularly those managed locally, such as homestays. This infrastructure includes road access, clean water supply, sanitation, and communication networks, which help eliminate initial barriers for small business owners. Furthermore, local governments must facilitate community access to training, human resource development, and funding sources or incentives necessary to develop innovative tourism businesses, often through collaboration with village-owned enterprises (*BUMDes*) or tourism-focused community groups (*Pokdarwis*)

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