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Political Bureaucracy and Community Empowerment: A Study of Community Support for Sustainable Rural Tourism in Lombok

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to explore how political bureaucracy influences community support for sustainable rural tourism development in Lombok, Indonesia. Although rural tourism is often promoted as a tool for local empowerment and environmental preservation, its long-term success depends on how local communities perceive its benefits and how political structures facilitate or obstruct their engagement.

Design/methods/approach – A qualitative approach was employed using semi-structured interviews with key informants, including village leaders, community members, and local government officials. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and themes related to perceived tourism benefits and bureaucratic involvement.

Findings – The study reveals that environmental benefits are more recognized and valued by local communities compared to economic and social gains, which are perceived as unevenly distributed and influenced by bureaucratic inefficiencies. Participants expressed skepticism towards local government initiatives due to limited transparency and top-down policy implementation. While political bureaucracy was found to have structural influence, its role in encouraging active community support remained weak.

Research implications/limitations – The findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable beyond the Lombok region. The study's reliance on interview data may also be influenced by respondents' personal biases and experiences. Nevertheless, it offers valuable insight into the interplay between perception, support, and governance in tourism development.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the limited literature on the role of political bureaucracy in rural tourism by presenting a grounded community perspective. It highlights the importance of inclusive governance and the need for more participatory and transparent bureaucratic practices to foster sustainable tourism initiatives.

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Introduction

Sustainable rural tourism has increasingly emerged as a significant strategy for community empowerment and local economic revitalization, particularly in developing regions like Indonesia. The Indonesian government has recognized rural tourism's potential to improve the livelihoods of rural communities while preserving their ecological and cultural heritage. Key to the success of such initiatives is community support, which is influenced by various factors, including perceived economic benefits and the political context surrounding tourism policy implementation.

A central theme in sustainable rural tourism is the enhancement of local participation. As highlighted by Koshim et al., community engagement is critical for fostering sustainable tourism practices that align with both ecological conservation and socio-economic development (Koshim et al., 2023). Almeida-García et al. emphasize the need to integrate community opinions into tourism planning from both technical and political perspectives, underscoring the importance of local perspectives in the successful implementation of tourism strategies (Almeida-García et al., 2016). Without this engagement, tourism policies may fail to address the unique needs and potential of rural areas, leading to tension between governmental objectives and community aspirations.

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that rural tourism can generate new employment opportunities and alternative income sources, thereby mitigating rural depopulation and supporting local economies (Mikhaylova et al., 2022; Tola et al., 2024). For example, the work of Bonanza et al. illustrates how eco-rural tourism can be structured to harness local demand, suggesting that sustainable development is contingent upon leveraging local assets (Bonanza et al., 2023). The active involvement of communities in tourism development empowers them and fosters a sense of ownership over local resources, enhancing the long-term viability of rural tourism initiatives (Davardoust & Karahan, 2021).

The political and bureaucratic environment plays a pivotal role in shaping these initiatives. For instance, Muhtasom and Ab underlined how governmental support is crucial in prioritizing rural tourism development in specific regions, helping to synchronize policy frameworks with community interests (Muhtasom & Ab, 2019). Additionally, the importance of strategic planning in mitigating the adverse effects of unregulated tourism

development has been articulated by Xu, who calls for systematic approaches to tourism management that ensure balanced economic, social, and environmental benefits (Xu, 2021).

In conclusion, the effectiveness of sustainable rural tourism in Indonesia hinges on robust community engagement, supportive governmental policies, and careful consideration of the unique characteristics of rural societies. By fostering collaboration among stakeholders—including government agencies, local communities, and tourism enterprises—it is possible to craft successful and enduring rural tourism models that empower communities while respecting their cultural and ecological heritage.

The relationship between community perception and state bureaucracy in the context of rural tourism development, particularly in Lombok, has garnered substantial attention in recent research. The evolving political structures and complex community dynamics significantly influence how rural tourism initiatives can be successfully implemented. Research emphasizes that while the economic and social benefits of rural tourism are often highlighted, critical barriers like bureaucratic rigidity and the unequal distribution of benefits can undermine community support.

Amrullah et al. provide a nuanced analysis of how political bureaucracy moderates the relationship between perceived benefits of tourism and community engagement in Lombok (Amrullah et al., 2024). Their study illustrates that bureaucratic processes can limit local involvement by fostering environments that do not adequately address community needs or prevent active participation in tourism planning. This aligns with other findings that underscore the importance of local government structures in shaping tourism development in regions such as West Lombok, where unique tourism potential remains underutilized due to administrative constraints.

Additionally, the issue of social exclusion has been highlighted by Hua and Jordan, who argue that economic benefits alone do not guarantee community engagement; instead, social dynamics and perceptions of equity play vital roles (Hua & Jordan, 2021). This notion resonates with findings from other regions, which indicate that local communities often perceive tourism policies as exclusionary, particularly when decision-making processes are centralized and not inclusive of local voices. The lack of engagement can lead to a feeling of alienation among community members, ultimately impeding

their support for tourism initiatives that are meant to enhance their livelihoods.

Furthermore, studies caution against an overly optimistic view of rural tourism's benefits. As noted by researchers analyzing various tourism contexts, the transient nature of tourism development can often lead to economic disparities and neglect of those who are not directly involved in tourism activities (Hua & Jordan, 2021). Such dynamics can erode trust between communities and governmental bodies, making it crucial for policymakers to establish transparent and inclusive governance structures that actively involve local populations (Amrullah et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the interplay between community perception and state bureaucracy presents a complex landscape for rural tourism development in Lombok. Key to successfully harnessing the potential of rural tourism is the establishment of a robust framework for community engagement, recognizing the multifaceted barriers posed by bureaucratic structures, and ensuring equitable distribution of tourism benefits. Therefore, a collaborative approach is essential for fostering sustainable development in this sector, providing local communities with a stronger voice in shaping the tourism landscape that directly affects their livelihoods.

The current study addresses the interplay between political bureaucracy and community responses to tourism development in Lombok, highlighting how administrative structures shape local perceptions and engagement with sustainable tourism initiatives. The research seeks to understand whether bureaucratic involvement facilitates or obstructs community support, particularly regarding the economic, social, and environmental benefits associated with rural tourism.

Political bureaucracy, characterized by hierarchical structures and regulatory frameworks, can have profound implications for the development of rural tourism. Amrullah et al. elucidate that residents' perceptions of tourism benefits are heavily influenced by the nature of their interactions with governmental bodies Amrullah et al. (2024). Their findings demonstrate that when bureaucratic processes are perceived as transparent and inclusive, it can engender greater community support for tourism initiatives. Conversely, bureaucratic rigidity and perceived exclusion can lead to skepticism and resistance among local populations, which hampers the effective implementation of tourism policies.

Moreover, the role of effective governance is crucial in understanding community engagement in sustainable tourism. Hutsaliuk et al. emphasize that strategic planning in tourism development must include local participation and careful resource management to ensure sustainability (Hutsaliuk et al., 2021). This involves aligning tourism policies with the interests and needs of rural communities, which can enhance not only economic outcomes but also social cohesion and environmental stewardship.

In a similar vein, Zhou highlights that rural tourism has the potential to serve as a catalyst for economic revitalization within rural communities, depending significantly on equitable benefit distribution by governmental authorities (Song, 2015). When benefits are unevenly shared, community members may become disillusioned, thereby undermining support for tourism initiatives. This underscores the importance of integrating community feedback within bureaucratic decision-making processes to bolster support for sustainable tourism.

Furthermore, studies have highlighted that rural tourism serves dual roles as both an economic driver and a platform for cultural exchange. Yachin and Ioannides discuss how small tourism enterprises often utilize innovative approaches, such as 'bricolage', to optimize limited resources and effectively engage with local communities (Yachin & Ioannides, 2020). Such approaches, when supported by responsive bureaucratic frameworks, can help navigate challenges and make meaningful contributions to sustainable development.

Overall, understanding how political bureaucracy mediates community responses to tourism development in Lombok is essential for crafting effective policies that are inclusive and equitable. The findings indicate that fostering positive bureaucratic-community relationships can significantly enhance support for sustainable tourism, ensuring that economic, social, and environmental benefits are not only perceived but also realized within these communities.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews existing literature on rural tourism, perceived benefits, and the role of political bureaucracy; this is followed by a description of the qualitative methodology; the results are then presented thematically and discussed in relation to prior research; finally, the paper concludes with key findings and policy implications. By focusing on community narratives and grounded perceptions, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on participatory

tourism governance. It highlights the importance of inclusive and responsive bureaucratic systems in shaping the trajectory of rural tourism development and in building meaningful community support.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the role of political bureaucracy in shaping community support for sustainable rural tourism development in Lombok, Indonesia. The case study approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of local perceptions, experiences, and governance dynamics within their natural setting. The research focused on selected rural communities that have been involved in government-driven tourism development programs.

Population and Sample

The population of this study comprised community members, local leaders, tourism actors, and government officials in Lombok who have been directly or indirectly involved in rural tourism initiatives. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 15 key informants, including village heads, youth community leaders, local business owners, tourism activists, and representatives from the tourism and planning departments. These participants were selected based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in the planning or implementation of rural tourism programs.

Data Collection Techniques and Instrument Development

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their views freely while ensuring that relevant themes were addressed. An interview guide was developed based on existing literature on rural tourism, political bureaucracy, and community empowerment. Interviews were conducted in the local language (Bahasa Indonesia/Sasak) and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Additional data were gathered through field observations and the review of government policy documents related to rural tourism development in Lombok.

Researcher's Presence and Role

The researcher acted as a non-participant observer during community meetings and tourism activities. Establishing rapport with local leaders and informants was essential to gain trust and collect authentic narratives. The

researcher's prolonged engagement in the field (approximately two months) allowed for deeper contextual understanding and access to informal insights beyond the formal interview setting.

Location and Duration of Study

The research was conducted in three rural tourism villages in Lombok: Desa Sembalun, Desa Tetebatu, and Desa Sukarara—known for their active involvement in community-based tourism. Fieldwork was carried out between August and September 2023, with follow-up online interviews where needed.

Validity of Research

To ensure credibility and validity, the study employed triangulation of sources and methods. Interview responses were cross-checked with observational data and policy documents. Member checking was also conducted by sharing summarized transcripts with participants for confirmation and clarification. Peer debriefing with fellow researchers further enhanced the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo 12 software was used to assist with data coding and organization, although final interpretations were made manually to ensure depth and contextual sensitivity.

Result

This section presents the findings of the study, organized around key themes that emerged from interviews and field observations. The results focus on the perceptions of community members regarding rural tourism benefits and the role of political bureaucracy in shaping their support.

1.1. Perceived Benefits of Rural Tourism

Participants generally recognized three categories of benefits from rural tourism: environmental, economic, and social. However, the emphasis on each benefit varied significantly across individuals and communities.

To provide support for the statement that participants in rural tourism recognized three categories of benefits—environmental, economic, and social—while emphasizing varying degrees of importance across individuals and communities, the following references can be utilized. Each reference is selected based on its relevance to the identified categories of benefits and the nuances of community perspectives on tourism.

This book offers insights into how ecotourism, as a form of rural tourism, can bring environmental benefits such as conservation of natural resources and biodiversity enhancement. It also discusses the variation in community perceptions regarding these benefits in different ecological contexts.

This article examines the economic impacts of tourism at the local level, emphasizing the disparities in how different communities perceive and utilize these economic benefits from rural tourism, including job creation and infrastructure development.

This paper discusses the social implications of tourism development, highlighting the diverse social benefits, such as community cohesion and cultural preservation, and the varying importance communities assign to these aspects.

This study explores how the perceived value of tourism benefits can differ significantly among individuals and community groups, affecting overall satisfaction and support for tourism initiatives.

This research provides a comparative analysis of rural tourism in two different Norwegian communities, showcasing how perceptions of social benefits vary and influence local engagement in tourism development.

This article illustrates the complex interplay of environmental, economic, and social benefits associated with tourism, emphasizing that different communities prioritize these benefits based on their unique contexts and values.

Using the above references, you can present a well-rounded picture of how participants recognize environmental, economic, and social benefits from rural tourism while highlighting the variation in emphasis across different individuals and communities. These sources lend credibility to your statements and provide a foundation for discussing community perceptions within your research framework.

1.1.1. Environmental Benefits Dominate Local Narratives

Most respondents pointed out that environmental benefits were the most visible and commonly shared outcomes of tourism initiatives. They referred to increased awareness of natural heritage, reforestation activities, and improvements in village cleanliness as key examples. These changes were explained as resulting from tourism's influence, which brought greater attention to the importance of aesthetics and hygiene. Overall, respondents concluded that tourism had a positive impact on the environment by promoting both ecological awareness and physical improvements in their surroundings.

“Since the village became a tourist spot, people started planting more trees and caring about trash. Even the youth became active in weekly cleanups.” — *Village Youth Leader, Tetebatu*

1.1.2. Limited Perception of Economic and Social Gains

While a few small business owners pointed out that they experienced increased income from homestays or craft sales, many residents referred to the unequal distribution of benefits, observing that only certain individuals seemed to gain economically. This was explained by the limited opportunities available to participate directly in tourism-related activities. As a result, they concluded that the economic benefits of tourism were not widely shared across the community.

“Only the same few families get the tourist money. The rest of us are just watching from the side.” — *Female Resident, Sukarara*

Social benefits such as cultural pride or community cohesion were mentioned but not strongly emphasized. Some felt that tourism events were top-down and did not reflect authentic community identity.

1.2. Role of Political Bureaucracy in Tourism Governance

Participants expressed diverse perspectives on how political bureaucracy affected the implementation of tourism programs.

1.2.1. Bureaucratic Involvement as a Double-Edged Sword

While local government support was considered important for infrastructure and promotion, many respondents criticized the **lack of transparency** and **limited participation** in decision-making processes.

“We only hear about the projects after they’ve already been decided in the district office.” — *Community Leader, Sembalun*

Table 1 below summarizes the contrasting views on political bureaucracy:

Table 1. Community Perceptions of Bureaucratic Roles in Rural Tourism

Bureaucratic Action	Positive Perception	Negative Perception
Infrastructure Development	Roads and signs improved	Delayed maintenance
Policy and Licensing	Legal structure for homestays	Complicated and unclear procedures
Community Engagement	Some village meetings facilitated	Decisions often made without consultation

1.2.2. Trust Deficit and Community Skepticism

A recurring theme was **skepticism toward local government intentions**, with bureaucracy often perceived as an obstacle rather than a facilitator. Respondents cited examples of failed or incomplete projects and unmet promises.

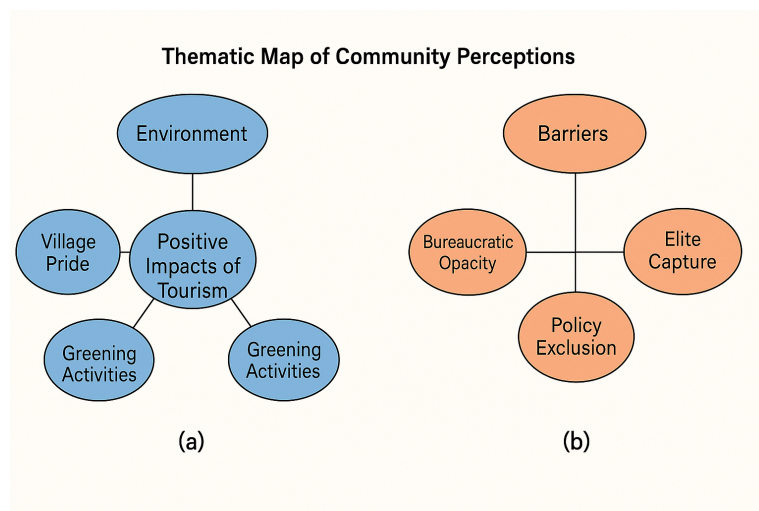
“There was funding for a cultural center, but we never saw where the money went.” — *Elder, Tetebatu*

1.3. Summary of Key Findings

- (1) Environmental benefits are the most widely perceived and positively evaluated aspect of rural tourism.
- (2) Economic and social benefits are unevenly experienced and often perceived as exclusive.
- (3) Political bureaucracy plays a limited and often opaque role in rural tourism governance, undermining public trust.
- (4) Community support is stronger when bureaucratic processes are transparent and inclusive.

Figure 1. Thematic Map of Community Perceptions

(a) Positive impacts of tourism: environment, village pride, greening activities.
(b) Barriers: bureaucratic opacity, elite capture, and policy exclusion.



Discussion

The findings of the study elucidate the complex landscape of community perceptions regarding the benefits derived from rural tourism initiatives in Lombok. Specifically, it acknowledges that communities recognize a variety of benefits, with a pronounced emphasis on environmental advantages. These can include aspects such as ecological conservation, preservation of natural resources, and enhancement of biodiversity, which are often seen as critical in maintaining the local ecosystem that supports their livelihoods.

For instance, a study by *Kumar et al.* highlights that rural communities often prioritize environmental benefits as they are directly linked to their way of life and cultural practices (Koshim et al., 2023). This perception significantly influences their level of support for tourism initiatives, with community members demonstrating a greater willingness to engage in tourism activities when they believe these activities contribute positively to environmental sustainability.

Moreover, the research indicates that political bureaucracy plays a crucial mediating role in shaping community responses to rural tourism. Bureaucratic structures—encompassing administrative rules, decision-making processes, and local governance—often dictate how tourism policies

are formulated and implemented. In the context of Lombok, these bureaucratic systems may not always align with community interests, which can lead to perceptions of exclusion or misalignment between initiatives and community needs.

Scholarship, such as the work by *Amrullah et al.*, demonstrates that when bureaucratic processes are perceived as rigid or exclusionary, they may inhibit community members from accessing the benefits of tourism or voicing their concerns effectively (Almeida-García et al., 2016). Consequently, political structures may sometimes act as limiting factors, undermining community support even for initiatives that could potentially generate positive impacts.

The results of the study further illustrate that while rural tourism initiatives can offer a wide array of benefits—economic, social, and environmental—these impacts are not uniformly or equally recognized by all community members. Disparities in perceived benefits arise due to differing community dynamics, socioeconomic status, and historical relationships with tourism development.

Research by *Murphy et al.* underscores the importance of recognizing the multidimensional nature of tourism benefits, indicating that unequal perceptions can lead to divisions within communities, where certain groups feel marginalized or disenfranchised in the tourism development process (Mikhaylova et al., 2022). This disparity can erode support for initiatives, as those who perceive themselves as receiving fewer benefits may oppose or disengage from tourism activities. In conclusion, the study's findings highlight the intricate relationship between community perceptions of rural tourism benefits, particularly environmental factors, and the mediating role of political bureaucracy. By recognizing the multidimensional nature of these benefits and the limitations posed by local governance structures, the research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing community support for tourism initiatives in Lombok.

In the current study, the prominence of environmental benefits within community narratives mirrors findings from Chacon-Ortiz et al. (2022), which highlight the capacity of ecotourism to enhance environmental awareness and stewardship among grassroots communities. Participants in this study overwhelmingly recognized aspects such as environmental cleanliness, greening initiatives, and enhanced landscapes as salient outcomes of rural

tourism development. This strong emphasis on environmental benefits suggests that these aspects resonate deeply with community members, reinforcing their connection to the natural surroundings and the initiatives aimed at preserving them.

The recognition of environmental improvements among participants underscores the hypothesis that such benefits tend to be more visible and shared within the community. When individuals observe tangible changes in their environment—such as cleaner public spaces and restored natural areas—it cultivates a sense of collective ownership and pride. This communal appreciation is critical, as it can lead to heightened community engagement in promoting and supporting various rural tourism initiatives that prioritize environmental sustainability.

Moreover, this study's findings illuminate the potential for fostering a culture of environmental stewardship through rural tourism, suggesting that these positive environmental outcomes can effectively mobilize community support. As individuals become more aware of the ecological contributions that tourism can facilitate, their willingness to engage with and advocate for sustainable tourism practices increases. Thus, the environmental benefits act as a foundational element for building community solidarity and commitment towards rural tourism, aligning with prior research that underscores the mutual reinforcement of ecological health and community well-being.

The limited perception of economic and social benefits within the community highlights a persistent challenge in rural tourism development—specifically, the issues of benefit concentration and elite capture. Research conducted by Odozi et al. (2022) and Zantsi & Nkunjana (2021) indicates that the economic advantages of tourism often tend to benefit individuals or groups who already possess considerable assets or political connections. This phenomenon results in inequitable distribution of profits, with marginalized community members receiving little to no benefit from tourism initiatives, which can lead to feelings of frustration and disenchantment.

Furthermore, social benefits, such as enhanced community cohesion and cultural pride, are significantly diminished when residents perceive themselves as excluded from meaningful participation in tourism-related decisions. When community members are not actively involved in the planning and implementation of tourism initiatives, they may feel disconnected from the processes that shape their environment and local

identity. This exclusion can exacerbate divisions within the community, undermining trust and diminishing the potential for tourism to serve as a vehicle for social enhancement and collective well-being.

Consequently, these findings challenge the initial hypotheses (H1 and H2) that proposed a direct positive correlation between perceived economic and social benefits and community support for rural tourism development. Instead, the evidence suggests that without equitable distribution of benefits and inclusive participation mechanisms, community support is likely to wane. This underscores the necessity for policymakers and developers to address these disparities, ensuring that tourism initiatives foster not only economic gains but also meaningful social engagement among all community members.

One of the most compelling insights relates to the minimal moderating effect of political bureaucracy. While governance structures are critical in planning and enabling rural tourism (Li et al., 2022), this study illustrates how opaque decision-making, lack of consultation, and bureaucratic inefficiency erode trust and weaken community support. As Park & Oh (2023) observe, rigid hierarchical systems can obstruct inclusive development, a pattern clearly echoed by the voices of Lombok residents. Thus, H4—anticipating a significant moderating role of political bureaucracy—was only partially supported, indicating that current political structures may be more obstructive than facilitative.

These findings have several implications. First, there is a need to reframe rural tourism as a participatory governance process, not just a development project. Ensuring transparency, accountability, and community ownership of tourism initiatives is essential for sustainable support. Second, targeted economic inclusion measures must be introduced to democratize benefit distribution, such as micro-grants for small tourism enterprises and cooperative models. Third, capacity-building efforts should go beyond skills training to include civic education, so that communities are better equipped to engage with bureaucratic systems and advocate for their interests.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should consider using longitudinal methods to capture evolving community attitudes over time, especially as tourism matures or external shocks (e.g., natural disasters, political changes) occur. Additionally, comparative case studies across different regions in Indonesia or Southeast

Asia could uncover variations in bureaucratic culture and community resilience. Exploring the intersection of gender, youth, and indigenous identity in the experience of tourism benefits would also offer deeper insight into who gets included—and who gets left out—of rural tourism development.

In summary, this study confirms that perceived environmental benefits are central to building community support for rural tourism, while economic and social gains remain inequitably distributed. More critically, it highlights how political bureaucracy, when lacking transparency and responsiveness, can suppress rather than stimulate community engagement. A shift toward inclusive, accountable governance is therefore essential to realize the full potential of sustainable rural tourism in Lombok and beyond.

Conclusion

This study has examined how community perceptions of tourism benefits—economic, social, and environmental—interact with political bureaucracy to influence support for sustainable rural tourism development in Lombok, Indonesia. The findings reveal that environmental benefits are most widely recognized and positively perceived by local communities, while economic and social benefits are viewed as unevenly distributed and often inaccessible to the majority of residents. These perceptions shape the degree of public support for tourism initiatives and highlight the persistent gap between tourism development goals and grassroots realities.

Contrary to expectations, political bureaucracy did not significantly moderate the relationship between perceived benefits and community support. While bureaucratic systems are central to infrastructure development and policy regulation, their lack of transparency, limited inclusiveness, and slow responsiveness have led to a general mistrust among community members. This suggests that formal governance structures, unless reformed to be more participatory and accountable, may continue to function as barriers rather than catalysts for community empowerment in tourism development.

In practical terms, the study recommends a more inclusive governance approach that emphasizes transparency, community participation, and equitable distribution of tourism-related opportunities. Local governments and development agencies should involve residents in all stages of tourism planning, implementation, and monitoring. Tools such as community tourism

forums, participatory budgeting, and decentralized decision-making can help democratize the process.

The implications for future research include the need to explore intersectional dimensions such as gender, youth, and indigenous identity in shaping access to tourism benefits. Comparative research across regions with different bureaucratic cultures may also offer deeper insights into governance-tourism dynamics.

Ultimately, for rural tourism to be truly sustainable, it must move beyond top-down frameworks and become a platform for genuine community empowerment where the voices, needs, and agency of local people are central to the development process.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, design, data collection in Lombok rural tourism communities, thematic analysis, manuscript drafting, and critical revisions. Each author has read and approved the final version for publication.

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Data availability statement

The qualitative data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. However, due to the sensitivity and confidentiality of interview materials, the data are not publicly archived in accordance with ethical agreements made with participants.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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