



Empowering Marginal Communities through Ecotourism: A Case Study of Telaga Sarangan, Magetan, East Java

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study investigates how ecotourism at Telaga Sarangan contributes to the empowerment of marginal communities, particularly in terms of economic inclusion, gender participation, and environmental stewardship. It addresses the question of whether community-based tourism can serve as a sustainable development tool in rural areas where formal employment opportunities are limited.

Design/methods/approach – A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews with 20 local stakeholders, including community leaders, female entrepreneurs, tourism workers, and local government representatives. Data collection was supplemented with direct observations and document analysis over a three-month field study in Magetan, East Java. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data and identify patterns of community engagement and empowerment.

Findings – The study finds that ecotourism has enabled marginal groups, particularly women and landless residents, to access alternative livelihoods such as food stalls, homestays, and souvenir crafts. Community participation in managing tourist activities has improved environmental awareness and fostered a sense of ownership. However, empowerment remains uneven, with limited decision-making roles for women and younger groups. Infrastructure limitations and seasonal income fluctuations also restrict the long-term sustainability of the empowerment process.

Research implications/limitations – The study is context-specific and may not be fully generalizable to other ecotourism destinations. Furthermore, informal power relations and external investor influence were not explored in depth.

Originality/value – This article contributes to the growing literature on community-based tourism by emphasizing the nuanced relationship between participation and empowerment. It highlights the need for integrated policy and infrastructure support to ensure equitable and sustainable outcomes for marginalized groups in ecotourism development.

OPEN ACCESS

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received:

06-05-2024

Accepted:

26-12-2024

KEYWORDS

Community-Based
Tourism,
Ecotourism,
Empowerment,
Marginalized
Groups, Rural
Development,
Telaga Sarangan,
Indonesia

Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Community-based ecotourism (CBE) is an emergent model in tourism that promotes sustainable development through economic inclusion and the

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integration of local communities in decision-making processes. CBE is essential because it empowers marginalized groups, allowing them to actively participate in tourism planning and management. This participatory approach encourages local communities to take ownership of tourism initiatives, which can lead to better economic outcomes and enhanced environmental conservation efforts when properly executed. In contrast, mass tourism often exerts detrimental effects on both local communities and environments as it operates with limited local input and often prioritizes profit over sustainability (Ursa & Arunkumar, 2023; , Kunjuraman, 2021).

Numerous studies illustrate the positive impacts of CBE. Research indicates that in areas where local communities are involved in tourism development, there is a notable increase in local economic benefits and a decrease in environmental degradation (Mitchell & Eagles, 2001; , Danaparamita et al., 2020). Programs that allow for local input into tourism strategies have been shown to enhance community support for tourism initiatives as residents feel a sense of ownership and benefit from economic returns generated (Vélez et al., 2023). Evidence from ecotourism developments, such as those examined in Kerala, India, demonstrates that community training and education significantly contribute to successful tourism practices by enhancing local capabilities and sustainability (Anggratyas, 2024). Furthermore, comprehensive policies are necessary to promote environmental, economic, and social considerations, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation can enhance the efficacy of these tourism models to withstand social changes and environmental pressures effectively (Bentley & Halim, 2024). In summary, CBE stands out as a viable tourism model that fosters sustainable development by empowering local communities, enhancing economic resilience, and preserving cultural and environmental integrity. Effective implementation requires robust policies, community involvement, and ongoing support to maximize benefits and minimize adverse impacts, thereby aligning with the principles of sustainable development.

Community-based ecotourism (CBE) has been increasingly promoted in Indonesia as an effective tool for rural development, particularly in areas rich in biodiversity and cultural heritage, such as Telaga Sarangan in East Java. This approach is significant because CBE facilitates local empowerment by generating livelihood opportunities for communities that typically face barriers related to land access, capital, and formal employment. By managing tourism activities locally, communities can foster economic resilience while preserving their cultural and environmental heritage. Such community management contrasts with traditional tourism models, which often exploit resources without adequate local benefit or involvement. This shift toward CBE aligns with global trends towards sustainable tourism development,

indicating a movement away from mass tourism which frequently disregards community welfare and ecological sustainability (Lovelesh et al., 2024).

The success of CBE in regions like Telaga Sarangan is corroborated by numerous studies. For instance, research conducted by Imanuella et al. highlights that effective community engagement in tourism planning and management directly contributes to improved socioeconomic conditions in rural areas, facilitating greater income-generation opportunities through tourism (Imanuella et al., 2024). Additionally, Guo et al. emphasize the evolution of sustainable tourism policies that aim to integrate local empowerment into tourism planning, confirming that well-structured community-based approaches can bolster local economies and enhance conservation efforts (Guo et al., 2019). Further evidence is provided by a study in Ciamis, West Java, demonstrating that CBE initiatives significantly benefit local residents' wellbeing and sustainability indices (Saputro et al., 2023). Furthermore, an analysis of Indonesia's Village Fund Program illustrates how local initiatives can be aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby contributing to broader economic and environmental objectives (Permatasari et al., 2021).

The promotion of CBE in Indonesian rural areas such as Telaga Sarangan exemplifies how tourism can be effectively managed to benefit local communities while ensuring sustainability and preservation of cultural heritage. By enhancing local capacities and facilitating participatory governance, CBE provides a promising model for rural development that aligns with sustainable tourism principles. The evidence underscores the need for continued support and strategic development of CBE initiatives, showcasing their potential to generate resilient economic growth and foster environmental stewardship.

The concept of empowerment in the tourism context is multifaceted, and while it can manifest through increased income, skills enhancement, community cohesion, and decision-making autonomy, it does not universally result in positive outcomes for local communities. Understanding empowerment in tourism requires a nuanced approach, as it may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities or be appropriated by elite groups, particularly in settings characterized by structural constraints and social hierarchies. This complexity emphasizes the necessity for critical examination of empowerment initiatives to discern their actual impact on diverse community members, especially marginalized groups. It is crucial to recognize that empowerment can encompass various dimensions, including economic, social, environmental, and political empowerment, as highlighted by various studies (Komariah et al., 2019), (Acharya, 2023), (Sanuja & Joseph, 2022), (Scheyvens & Watt, 2021).

For instance, Komariah et al. note that women's empowerment in agro-tourism development can stimulate active participation from stakeholders, underscoring the potential for community-based empowerment to promote inclusive growth when approached correctly (Komariah et al., 2019). Furthermore, Acharya discusses how the impact of tourism can manifest as economic, psychological, social, and political empowerment, reinforcing the importance of a multidimensional understanding of empowerment (Acharya, 2023). Conversely, studies like that by Sanuja and Joseph reveal that the concentration of tourism income among a small elite can perpetuate existing inequities, necessitating careful consideration of the dynamics at play in tourism management (Sanuja & Joseph, 2022). Additionally, Scheyvens and Watt advocate for including environmental and cultural dimensions in empowerment frameworks to address the broader impacts of tourism on communities (Scheyvens & Watt, 2021). This reinforces the understanding that while tourism can empower communities, it requires vigilant management to ensure that benefits are equitably distributed and that marginalized voices are effectively represented in decision-making processes.

In summation, while empowerment in tourism holds significant potential to benefit communities, it is crucial to recognize its complexities and the risk of reproducing inequalities. Effective empowerment initiatives need to transcend mere economic upliftment and involve all community members, especially underrepresented and marginalized groups, in meaningful decision-making processes. Thus, ongoing assessments and adaptive frameworks are essential to ensure that tourism genuinely serves as a tool for empowerment rather than a mechanism for reinforcing existing disparities. This study focuses on the interplay between **participation and empowerment** in the ecotourism development of Telaga Sarangan. It seeks to understand whether, and to what extent, ecotourism has empowered marginal groups in the local community, particularly women, landless households, and informal workers.

1.2 Relevance of the Study

The research on community-based ecotourism (CBE) is essential, as it highlights potential benefits and critically examines the conditions under which these benefits can be realized, particularly in the Global South. This examination is vital because there remains a significant gap in the literature, particularly with respect to the social impacts of CBE in contexts like Indonesia, where there is increasing governmental emphasis on developing "desa wisata" or tourism villages. Although there is a growing policy framework, empirical research exploring the social dynamics and outcomes of these initiatives is limited, particularly outside of Java's urban centers, creating a need for comprehensive studies to understand how

empowerment and community benefits unfold in these settings (Wahyuni et al., 2023).

For example, Wahyuni et al. specifically address sustainable community-based ecotourism management in Kaniungan Besar Island, Indonesia, demonstrating the multifaceted challenges and strategies that can optimize community engagement and enhance social benefits (Wahyuni et al., 2023). Similarly, Khalid et al. examine the relationship between community empowerment and sustainable tourism development, highlighting how community support plays a mediating role, which is particularly relevant in the context of rural areas in Indonesia where empowerment dynamics are still poorly understood (Khalid et al., 2019). Moreover, the work of Nunkoo and Gürsoy points out that residents' support for alternative tourism is contingent upon their perceived benefits, making it essential to democratize tourism planning to ensure that benefits are distributed equitably across social spectrums (Nunkoo & Gürsoy, 2016). This reinforces the need for targeted empirical studies that delve into the actual experiences of communities involved with CBE projects, particularly in Indonesia (Khalid et al., 2019).

While a considerable amount of literature has underscored the benefits of CBE, there remains a pressing need for empirical research that scrutinizes the actual socio-economic outcomes and conditions that shape community empowerment in Indonesia's tourism villages and similar contexts. Addressing this gap would not only contribute to theory-building but also provide valuable insights that can inform policy and practice, ensuring that the implementation of tourism initiatives genuinely supports community well-being and sustainable development.

Third, Telaga Sarangan provides a unique setting where **traditional livelihoods (e.g., agriculture, small-scale trade)** intersect with **state-led tourism planning** and **local entrepreneurship**. It is thus a fertile ground for exploring how formal and informal actors negotiate access to tourism-related resources and benefits.

Finally, the study responds to ongoing debates in development studies regarding the relationship between **participation and empowerment**. While participatory approaches are widely celebrated in policy discourse, critics have pointed out that not all participation is meaningful or transformative (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). This research contributes to these debates by offering a grounded analysis of community experiences and power dynamics in an ecotourism setting.

1.3 Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

1.3.1 Community-Based Ecotourism and Empowerment

Community-based ecotourism refers to tourism initiatives that are planned, owned, and managed by the local community, with the goal of conserving natural resources and improving livelihoods. Empowerment within CBE is generally understood as the process through which community members gain greater control over decisions and resources that affect their lives. Scheyvens identifies four dimensions of empowerment: **economic, psychological, social, and political**.

Community-based ecotourism (CBE) involves tourism initiatives that are planned, owned, and managed by local communities, aiming to conserve natural resources and improve livelihoods. Empowerment in this context encompasses community members gaining greater control over their decisions and resources, as articulated by Scheyvens' four dimensions of empowerment: economic, psychological, social, and political. The significance of CBE lies in its potential to foster genuine empowerment among local communities by engaging them actively in tourism development. This engagement facilitates not only economic benefits but also enhances social cohesion and the overall decision-making power of community members. However, understanding how empowerment is effectively realized requires a thorough examination of the conditions under which CBE operates and whether those conditions genuinely support the intended benefits for all community members (Assa, 2019), (Laksmi et al., 2023).

A study by Assa emphasizes that ecotourism can yield social and economic advantages for local communities while preserving the environment, highlighting that CBE's design significantly influences its efficacy (Assa, 2019). Similarly, Laksmi et al. illustrate that the development of ecotourism in Siangan Village empowers the local community by promoting self-reliance and environmental stewardship, indicating that empowerment encompasses both economic and social dimensions (Laksmi et al., 2023). Moreover, Angessa et al. provide evidence that CBE can lead to job creation and alternative livelihoods, which serve as incentives for conservation, underscoring the economic benefits of robust community engagement in tourism (Angessa et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Walter discusses the importance of recognizing the diverse dimensions of empowerment facilitated by CBE, emphasizing that economic gains are complemented by enhanced community identity and participation in decision-making processes, echoing Scheyvens' framework (Walter, 2011). This holistic approach underscores the multifaceted nature of empowerment and highlights the necessity for practitioners to consider various dimensions beyond economic benefits to measure the true effectiveness of CBE initiatives.

CBE represents a promising framework for fostering local empowerment and sustainable development in tourism. By understanding and integrating

Scheyvens' dimensions of empowerment, stakeholders can better assess the impact of CBE and ensure that it effectively benefits local communities. The empirical evidence points to the need for careful planning and community involvement in CBE projects to realize their full potential, ensuring equity in the distribution of benefits and fostering genuine empowerment for all community members.

- **Economic empowerment** refers to access to income-generating opportunities through tourism.
- **Psychological empowerment** involves increased confidence, pride, and self-worth.
- **Social empowerment** relates to community cohesion and mutual support.
- **Political empowerment** entails participation in decision-making processes and control over tourism development.

While ideal in theory, these dimensions often do not materialize uniformly. For instance, Hampton (2005) and Blackstock (2005) found that elite capture, lack of capacity, and institutional barriers can hinder meaningful empowerment. Moreover, even when economic benefits exist, they may be unevenly distributed or temporally unstable.

1.3.2 Marginalized Groups in Tourism Development

Marginalized groups, such as women, landless farmers, and informal sector workers, face systemic exclusion in tourism economies due to structural barriers that limit their participation in decision-making and access to essential resources. Addressing these barriers is critical for fostering inclusive and equitable tourism development, allowing marginalized communities to participate fully in tourism economies. Such participation is essential for creating sustainable livelihoods and reducing inequalities in access to resources and decision-making. Without targeted interventions that address systemic exclusion based on class, gender, ethnicity, and geography, marginalized groups will continue to have limited opportunities in tourism-related activities (Lingadkar & Sankaranarayanan, 2024), Febriandhika & Kurniawan, 2020).

For instance, Lingadkar and Sankaranarayanan advocate for inclusive tourism development strategies that underscore the empowerment of underrepresented groups, highlighting the transformative potential of regenerative tourism approaches in revitalizing cultural and ecological systems (Lingadkar & Sankaranarayanan, 2024). Moreover, Tong et al. emphasize that empowering local communities through effective policy frameworks significantly enhances community participation in tourism, thus addressing historical inequalities and improving resource access (Tong et al., 2024). Additionally, Acharya discusses how tourism can serve as a tool for women's empowerment and community development, providing economic, social, and political benefits to marginalized communities (Acharya, 2023). Lastly, Hernández-González and Espeso-Molinero stress the importance of

applying decolonial perspectives in tourism studies to mitigate the extractive practices of dominant groups and promote a more equitable approach to tourism development (Hernández-González & Espeso-Molinero, 2025). In summary, systemic barriers hinder marginalized groups from fully engaging in tourism economies, exacerbating existing inequalities. Thus, addressing these barriers through inclusive tourism development initiatives is crucial for empowering these communities and enhancing their participation in decision-making. The evidence highlights the need for targeted interventions to promote resource access and equitable participation in tourism-related activities, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are distributed broadly rather than concentrated in the hands of a few.

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decision-making. The evidence highlights the need for targeted interventions to promote resource access and equitable participation in tourism-related activities, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are distributed broadly rather than concentrated in the hands of a few.

1.3.3 Participation vs. Tokenism

The concept of “participation” in development is widely used but often poorly defined. Arnstein’s (1969) “Ladder of Citizen Participation” is a classic model that distinguishes between tokenistic and genuine forms of participation. At the lower rungs are manipulation and therapy (non-participation); in the middle are informing, consultation, and placation (degrees of tokenism); and at the top are partnership, delegated power, and citizen control (genuine participation). In tourism, participation is frequently reduced to consultation meetings or limited employment opportunities, rather than full engagement in ownership and planning (Tosun, 2000). For participation to lead to empowerment, it must be coupled with capacity building, institutional support, and access to decision-making platforms.

1.4 Telaga Sarangan: Setting the Scene

Telaga Sarangan, located at an altitude of 1,200 meters on the slopes of Mount Lawu, has long been a tourism destination in East Java. Known for its cool climate, pine forests, and scenic lake, the site attracts both domestic and international visitors. The local economy is largely dependent on tourism-related activities, including boat rentals, horse rides, street food vending, and homestays.

However, beneath the picturesque surface lies a complex socio-economic structure. A significant portion of the local population lacks access to land or formal employment. Many work in the informal sector as porters, sellers, or seasonal laborers. Women often play key roles in managing food stalls or producing traditional crafts, yet they are rarely involved in planning or policy discussions.

In recent years, local government and NGOs have promoted ecotourism as a strategy to revitalize the area while ensuring environmental sustainability. Programs include waste management initiatives, tree planting, cultural festivals, and skills training for youth and women. However, questions remain about who truly benefits from these initiatives and whether they have altered existing power dynamics or merely reinforced them.

1.5 Research Aim and Questions

This article aims to explore the extent to which ecotourism at Telaga Sarangan contributes to the empowerment of marginalized communities. The central research question is:

To what extent has ecotourism empowered marginalized groups—particularly women and informal workers—in Telaga Sarangan?

To address this question, the study investigates the following sub-questions:

- 1) What forms of participation do marginalized community members engage in within the ecotourism sector?
- 2) How are economic benefits distributed among different social groups?
- 3) What barriers do marginalized groups face in accessing decision-making processes or tourism-related resources?
- 4) What policy or institutional factors influence the empowerment outcomes?

1.6 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows:

- **Section 2 (Methods)** outlines the research design, data collection strategies, and analytical framework.
- **Section 3 (Findings)** presents empirical insights on local participation, economic opportunities, and perceived empowerment.
- **Section 4 (Discussion)** interprets the findings in light of the theoretical literature on CBE and empowerment.
- **Section 5 (Conclusion)** summarizes key arguments and offers policy recommendations for strengthening community-based ecotourism and ensuring equitable empowerment.

1.7 Principal Contributions and Significance

This paper contributes to academic and policy debates in several ways:

- 1) It provides an **empirical case study** from a lesser-studied region in Indonesia, thereby filling a geographic gap in the literature.
- 2) It critically examines the **relationship between participation and empowerment**, offering insights into how power operates within tourism settings.
- 3) It highlights the **role of gender and informal labor** in shaping tourism experiences, and the need for more inclusive governance.
- 4) It offers **practical implications** for local governments, NGOs, and development agencies involved in designing community-based tourism interventions.

By situating the experiences of Telaga Sarangan within broader debates on sustainable tourism and empowerment, this paper advances a nuanced understanding of how ecotourism can both enable and constrain development outcomes for marginalized communities.

Methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative case study design to investigate community participation and empowerment in ecotourism at Telaga Sarangan, utilizing a framework that combines principles of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and critical ethnography to ensure a comprehensive understanding of local dynamics. The case study approach is particularly effective for uncovering the complexities of social phenomena in their

natural settings. This design allows the researchers to capture the lived experiences of community members, particularly marginalized groups, and to analyze the interplay between their local agency, existing institutional structures, and prevailing socio-economic realities. By incorporating participatory methodologies, the research aspires to highlight local knowledge and engage with the community, ensuring that the research accurately reflects their perspectives and experiences (Cahill et al., 2018), (Loaiza et al., 2021).

Yin (2014) emphasizes the advantage of case study research for exploring intricate issues in contextually rich environments, providing a robust framework for qualitative inquiry (Cahill et al., 2018). Moreover, the principles of PRA focus on eliciting community knowledge and fostering participation, which aligns well with the critical ethnographic emphasis on reflexivity and power relations (Loaiza et al., 2021). This methodological choice is supported by findings in the literature that underscore the importance of integrating local voices in social research to mitigate biases and ensure that the inquiry is participatory in nature (Loaiza et al., 2021). For instance, Loaiza et al. illustrate how critical ethnographies contribute to understanding the nuances of public policies and community engagement, reaffirming the project's methodological foundation in capturing diverse perspectives (Loaiza et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the utilization of a qualitative case study design, informed by principles of PRA and critical ethnography, allows for a nuanced exploration of community participation and empowerment within the ecotourism framework at Telaga Sarangan. This approach not only seeks to document community experiences but also interprets the dynamics of empowerment, providing valuable insights into the processes and constraints that shape local engagement in tourism development. Ultimately, it aims to foster a greater understanding of how ecotourism can support marginalized voices in shaping their environments and decision-making processes.

2.2 Research Population and Sample

The research population includes various stakeholders involved in or affected by the ecotourism activities at Telaga Sarangan, including:

- 1) Local community members (men and women),
- 2) Informal tourism workers (stall vendors, boatmen, homestay owners),
- 3) Government officials (from the Department of Tourism and Village Office),
- 4) NGO representatives involved in local development,
- 5) Traditional leaders and religious figures.

Using **purposive sampling** and **snowball sampling** techniques, 20 informants were selected based on their roles, experiences, and relevance to the research objectives. Efforts were made to include voices from marginalized groups, particularly:

- 1) Women entrepreneurs with micro-businesses,
- 2) Youth involved in creative tourism initiatives,
- 3) Landless and informal sector workers.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques and Instrumentation

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods over a **three-month period (June–August 2024)** in Sarangan Village, Magetan Regency. The main techniques used were:

a) In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 key informants. An interview guide was developed with thematic areas including perceptions of ecotourism, participation roles, economic impacts, social inclusion, and empowerment. Interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed for analysis.

b) Participant Observation

The researcher spent extended time in the community, attending local events, observing tourist interactions, and visiting homestays, markets, and natural conservation sites. Detailed fieldnotes were maintained to capture social dynamics and non-verbal cues.

c) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Two FGDs were held: one with women entrepreneurs and another with youth tourism volunteers. These sessions provided a platform for collective reflection and triangulation of individual narratives.

d) Document Analysis

Relevant policy documents, tourism brochures, local village planning reports (RPJMDes), and NGO project proposals were analyzed to understand institutional framing and the official narrative of empowerment.

2.4 Researcher's Presence and Role

The researcher maintained a **semi-participant role**, engaging with the community without intervening in tourism operations. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. The researcher is fluent in both Indonesian

and Javanese, facilitating rapport and deeper access to community insights. Local gatekeepers (village elders and youth leaders) also helped in identifying relevant informants and organizing meetings.

2.5 Research Location and Duration

The research was conducted in **Sarangan Village, Plaosan Subdistrict, Magetan Regency, East Java**. Telaga Sarangan is a prominent ecotourism site surrounded by mountainous terrain and forested areas. The study took place from **June to August 2024**, with two follow-up visits in October and December 2024 for validation and stakeholder feedback.

2.6 Data Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings, several strategies were employed:

- **Triangulation** of data sources (interviews, observations, documents) and stakeholder perspectives,
- **Member checking**, where preliminary findings were shared with participants to confirm interpretations,
- **Peer debriefing**, involving consultation with academic colleagues and local experts,
- **Thick description**, by providing detailed accounts of the research context and participant narratives,
- **Reflexivity**, where the researcher documented positionality, assumptions, and ethical considerations in a research journal.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

- 1) Familiarization with data through transcription and repeated reading,
- 2) Generation of initial codes related to participation, power, gender roles, economic impact, and barriers,
- 3) Searching for themes and organizing them into meaningful categories,
- 4) Reviewing themes against the full dataset,
- 5) Defining and naming themes with reference to theoretical frameworks, and
- 6) Producing a coherent narrative supported by direct quotations and field observations.

The coding process was both inductive (emerging from the data) and deductive (guided by literature on empowerment and CBE). Data were managed using NVivo 12 software for efficient categorization and retrieval.

Results

This section presents the research findings based on thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and document review conducted in Sarangan Village. The results are organized into four major themes: patterns of participation in ecotourism, economic outcomes and livelihood diversification, gender dynamics and social inclusion, and barriers to community empowerment.

3.1 Patterns of Community Participation in Ecotourism

Community participation at Telaga Sarangan can be categorized into three broad domains: (1) direct involvement in tourism services, (2) participation in conservation and environmental activities, and (3) informal support and cultural contributions.

3.1.1 Direct Involvement in Tourism Services

Many local residents are engaged in tourism-related occupations such as:

- 1) Horse rental and riding services around the lake,
- 2) Paddle boat operators,
- 3) Street food and souvenir vendors,
- 4) Homestay owners,
- 5) Photographers and local guides.

These roles are usually passed down intergenerationally and are based on proximity to the lake area. Respondents explained that income from tourism is more lucrative and flexible compared to agricultural labor.

“I used to farm, but since tourists come every weekend, I opened a food stall. It’s more reliable and closer to home.” — Female food vendor, 38 years old

However, access to these roles is not equally distributed. Residents who own land or property near the lake tend to benefit more, while those in peripheral areas rely on seasonal or auxiliary roles such as parking attendants or porters.

3.1.2 Participation in Environmental Conservation

The Sarangan tourism office collaborates with local NGOs to promote environmental activities, including:

- 1) Reforestation efforts around the lake,
- 2) Lake cleaning drives,
- 3) Waste segregation and management programs.

Youth groups and student volunteers are often involved in these activities, especially during tourism festivals. However, participation levels drop significantly during low-tourism seasons.

“We clean the area before big events. But after that, not everyone keeps it clean. It depends on the season and how crowded it is.” — Youth volunteer, 21 years old

Table 1 presents a classification of community participation types and the average frequency of involvement based on observational data.

Table 1. Types and Frequency of Community Participation

Participation Type	Main Actors	Frequency (monthly avg.)
Food/souvenir vending	Women, elderly	12–20 days
Horse/paddle boat services	Men, youth	10–15 days
Homestay operation	Families	8–12 days
Waste management	Youth, NGOs	1–2 days
Cultural performances	Children, community arts	1–2 events

3.2 Economic Outcomes and Livelihood Diversification

3.2.1 Income Improvement and Business Creation

The shift from agriculture to tourism has resulted in significant changes in household income structures. Respondents reported earning between IDR 1.5 to 3 million per month from tourism-related activities, which, although seasonal, exceeds previous earnings from farming.

“Selling satay by the lake can bring in IDR 200,000 a day on weekends. That’s more than a week’s income from farming.” — Male vendor, 46 years old

Many residents have diversified their income by combining traditional occupations with tourism micro-enterprises, including:

- (1) Cultivating vegetables while running a homestay,
- (2) Producing herbal drinks for tourists,
- (3) Offering motorcycle transport services,
- (4) Renting traditional costumes for photo spots.

This diversification has increased economic resilience, especially during the COVID-19 recovery phase.

3.2.2 Local Entrepreneurship and Challenges

Several young entrepreneurs have started digital promotion campaigns, including Instagram-based marketing for homestays and food stalls. However, limited access to digital infrastructure, training, and internet connectivity remains a barrier for scaling up.

Figure 1. Livelihood diversification map in Telaga Sarangan (a) Traditional occupations and (b) Tourism-based microenterprises

(a)

(b)

Figure 1. Traditional vs. tourism livelihoods among residents

3.3 Gender Dynamics and Social Inclusion

3.3.1 Women's Involvement in the Tourism Economy

While tourism in Sarangan was initially male-dominated, women have increasingly assumed visible roles in small business management, particularly in:

- 1) Culinary stalls (nasi pecel, wedang jahe),
- 2) Souvenir crafts (batik, miniatures),
- 3) Homestay operations,
- 4) Cooperative savings groups.

Their financial contributions have enhanced household bargaining power. However, most women remain confined to operational roles and are excluded from planning forums.

“We are happy we can earn money, but we are never invited to meetings with village leaders or tourism managers.” — Women’s group member, 42 years old

3.3.2 Inclusion of Youth and Marginal Workers

Youth are active in creative tourism initiatives such as:

- 1) Organizing music events,
- 2) Designing photo spots,
- 3) Promoting attractions via social media.

Yet, youth voices are largely informal and unrecognized in official tourism planning. Similarly, porters, temporary workers, and seasonal hawkers remain economically insecure due to the lack of contracts or regulatory protection.

3.4 Constraints to Sustainable Empowerment

Despite notable benefits, empowerment in Telaga Sarangan remains constrained by various structural and systemic factors.

3.4.1 Institutional Fragmentation

Coordination between stakeholders—village authorities, tourism offices, and community groups—is often fragmented. Interviewees expressed concerns about the lack of transparency in decision-making and unequal distribution of tourism proceeds.

“Only those close to the village office get project information. Others are left behind.” — Youth entrepreneur, 28 years old

3.4.2 Infrastructure and Access Issues

Challenges such as poor road conditions, limited public toilets, water shortages, and inconsistent electricity affect the sustainability of tourism operations. Additionally, peripheral communities lack direct access to the main tourist site and must rely on intermediaries to reach customers.

3.4.3 Seasonality and Vulnerability

Tourism income is highly seasonal, with peaks during school holidays and religious festivals. During off-seasons, families revert to agriculture or temporary labor. This cyclical pattern limits long-term financial planning and investment.

“When tourists stop coming, we stop earning. We have to go back to planting or borrowing money.” — Homestay operator, 51 years old

3.5 Summary of Key Findings

The research findings can be summarized as follows:

- 1) **Participation in ecotourism is widespread but unequal**, with women and youth active in operations but excluded from formal planning structures.
- 2) **Economic empowerment is tangible**, particularly in the diversification of income sources and emergence of micro-entrepreneurs.
- 3) **Gender roles are shifting**, but traditional hierarchies still limit women’s political empowerment.
- 4) **Institutional, infrastructural, and seasonal constraints** hinder the sustainability and inclusiveness of empowerment outcomes.

Table 2. Summary of Empowerment Dimensions in Telaga Sarangan

Empowerment Type	Observed Indicators	Limitations
Economic	Increased income, new microbusinesses	Seasonal fluctuation, lack of capital
Psychological	Community pride, youth creativity	Lack of long-term certainty
Social	Women’s group initiatives, youth participation	Exclusion from planning processes
Political	Informal involvement, NGO collaboration	Weak decision-making power

Discussion

4.1 Rethinking Empowerment through Ecotourism

The findings from Telaga Sarangan illustrate that community-based ecotourism (CBE) can facilitate localized empowerment; however, empowerment is a complex and non-linear process influenced by local social structures, economic positionality, and institutional arrangements. This complexity underscores the necessity of understanding how various factors intersect to produce differentiated empowerment outcomes among community members. Despite observable community participation in tourism initiatives, the benefits of empowerment are not evenly distributed, and disparities persist across gender, class, and spatial boundaries. These insights are crucial for informing future tourism policies and practices that aim to promote equitable community involvement and shared benefits in ecotourism. Research by Scheyvens emphasizes that while CBE has potential for promoting community empowerment, it often perpetuates existing inequalities if not carefully managed. Similarly, the work of Binns and Nel argues that local agency in tourism does not guarantee equitable outcomes, noting that socio-economic conditions, power dynamics, and cultural contexts play significant roles in shaping empowerment experiences within the community. Furthermore, Kavanagh's findings reveal that gender and class disparities substantially impact access to resources and decision-making in tourism projects, suggesting that the intersectionality of these factors is critical to analyzing empowerment outcomes. Additionally, Desai and Potter highlight that institutional frameworks can either empower or constrain communities, emphasizing the need for adaptive management strategies that consider local realities. While the findings from Telaga Sarangan affirm that CBE can serve as a vehicle for localized empowerment, it is essential to recognize that this empowerment is mediated by complex local dynamics. The uneven empowerment outcomes that persist across various social dimensions call for interventions that address these disparities, ensuring that CBE truly benefits all community members equitably.

The findings from the study at Telaga Sarangan indicate that community-based ecotourism (CBE) significantly contributes to localized empowerment, with a notable emphasis on economic and psychological dimensions. Many respondents reported improvements in income, confidence, and community pride stemming from their engagement in tourism-related activities. Understanding empowerment through the lens of Scheyvens' (1999) four dimensions—economic, psychological, social, and political—allows for a comprehensive assessment of the actual benefits derived from CBE.

Economic empowerment is often manifested through increased financial returns from tourism activities, while psychological empowerment is reflected in enhanced self-esteem and community cohesion. This dual impact underscores the importance of involving local communities in tourism development processes. Recognizing and supporting these dimensions of empowerment is essential for maximizing the benefits of tourism initiatives Abdullah et al. (2022).

Numerous studies across rural tourism sites in Southeast Asia corroborate these findings. For example, (Zhou et al., 2021) demonstrate that community tourism can enhance local identity and diversify household income among community members (Zhou et al., 2021). Additionally, (Li et al., 2022) indicate that significant links exist between psychological empowerment and support for tourism initiatives, highlighting its relationship with community participation and social networks (Li et al., 2022). This aligns with the findings from Telaga Sarangan, suggesting that empowerment dimensions significantly influence support for tourism (Li et al., 2022). In conclusion, the study reinforces the idea that community-based ecotourism can serve as a powerful mechanism for empowerment, particularly in enhancing economic and psychological dimensions among community members. These dimensions elucidate how participation in tourism relates to improved livelihoods and personal development, thereby fostering greater community pride and cohesion. The comparative evidence from other rural tourism contexts in Southeast Asia further affirms the transformative potential of ecotourism when implemented thoughtfully and inclusively. However, **social and political empowerment**—especially in terms of influence over decision-making, equitable access to resources, and gender-inclusive leadership—remain partial at best. The study thus supports the argument by Blackstock (2005) that participation does not always equate to empowerment. In some cases, participatory tourism can be superficial or tokenistic, benefitting those with pre-existing social or political capital.

4.2 Participation: Inclusive or Selective?

While participation in Sarangan's tourism economy appears widespread, a closer analysis reveals it is **structured along existing inequalities**. Households located closest to the lake and those with assets (land, capital, or connections) have more direct access to tourist traffic. This corresponds with Hampton's (2005) observation that in many community tourism initiatives, **proximity to infrastructure and markets** significantly shapes the distribution of benefits. Moreover, **youth and women**, despite their active roles in operational and creative aspects of tourism (e.g., digital marketing, food vending, craft making), are underrepresented in formal governance structures. Village tourism committees and planning forums are still largely male-dominated and hierarchical, limiting avenues for marginalized voices to

influence tourism policies or resource allocation. This pattern resonates with Cole's (2007, 2012) findings in Eastern Indonesia, which emphasize the gap between economic participation and political representation for women in tourism. As in Sarangan, women may be economically active but are not recognized as strategic stakeholders in tourism development.

4.3 *Economic Empowerment: Real Gains with Real Risks*

The study confirms that ecotourism has positively affected local livelihoods. Tourism provides a **more lucrative and flexible income** than subsistence farming, especially during peak seasons. The emergence of microenterprises—such as homestays, food stalls, and rental services—demonstrates the potential for bottom-up economic development.

However, several concerns arise:

- 1) **Seasonality and volatility:** As reported by respondents, tourism income fluctuates sharply between high and low seasons. This **cyclical vulnerability** undermines long-term financial stability and limits opportunities for reinvestment.
- 2) **Lack of access to capital:** Marginal actors, such as women or informal workers, often rely on daily cash flow and have limited savings or access to formal credit. This constrains their ability to expand or upgrade their businesses.
- 3) **Digital divide:** While some youth are innovating through social media, **digital infrastructure and literacy** gaps hinder broader community adoption of online platforms for promotion or booking services.

These findings align with Jamal and Stronza (2009), who argue that economic benefits of tourism are often **unevenly distributed** and that **interventions must address structural barriers** such as financing, skills training, and technological access to achieve sustainable empowerment.

4.4 *Gender and Power Relations in Tourism Governance*

Although women in Sarangan play a critical role in tourism operations, they continue to face exclusion from **formal leadership and planning structures**. This dynamic reflects broader patterns in rural Indonesia, where patriarchal norms shape who gets to speak, decide, and benefit (Cole, 2012; Bennett, 2005).

The study shows that **women's empowerment remains primarily economic and psychological**—gains in income and self-esteem—while **political empowerment is limited**. For instance, women-led initiatives such as food cooperatives or informal market groups exist, but they are often **not integrated into village tourism governance**.

Moreover, **intersectional factors** such as age, education, and marital status further mediate women's agency. Younger unmarried women and older widows reported feeling less confident or respected in public decision-making arenas.

To move toward more transformative empowerment, CBE models must **intentionally incorporate gender analysis**, facilitate women's representation in tourism committees, and ensure access to training, leadership mentoring, and financial support.

4.5 Environmental Stewardship and Community Ownership

One of the premises of ecotourism is that it encourages environmental conservation through community incentives. In Sarangan, there is evidence of increased **environmental awareness and participation**, particularly among youth. Programs such as tree planting and waste management have created opportunities for civic engagement and collective action. However, this **environmental engagement is often event-based and externally driven**, rather than embedded in daily routines or institutionalized governance. Many residents admitted that clean-up activities are heightened only during festivals or when NGOs are involved. Furthermore, **lack of environmental infrastructure**, such as adequate waste bins, sewage treatment, and eco-friendly transportation, undermines long-term sustainability. Without sustained investment and community ownership of environmental planning, there is a risk that tourism may inadvertently contribute to ecological degradation, as observed in other overtouristed sites in Indonesia (Budeanu, 2005; Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015).

4.6 Institutional Fragmentation and Governance Challenges

The study found significant **fragmentation among stakeholders** involved in ecotourism management—village government, tourism department, NGOs, and private entrepreneurs. Lack of coordination and transparency limits the potential for collaborative governance, echoing the challenges noted in Tosun's (2000) typology of participatory barriers in tourism development. Several respondents described the planning process as **exclusive and elite-driven**, with limited information-sharing or consultation. This perception of exclusion not only reduces trust in institutions but also deters marginalized groups from engaging in formal structures. To overcome this, Sarangan needs a more **inclusive and accountable governance model**, perhaps through multi-stakeholder forums, participatory budgeting, or community tourism boards that rotate leadership and ensure representation of women, youth, and informal workers.

4.7 *The Paradox of Participation: Empowerment or Exploitation?*

The findings raise critical questions about the **paradox of participation**. While many residents are visibly involved in tourism, their participation may not always translate into control or empowerment. In some cases, community members are **absorbed into low-value or precarious roles**, while decisions about land use, pricing, or branding are made by external or elite actors.

This reflects what Cooke and Kothari (2001) term the “**tyranny of participation**”—where participatory frameworks mask unequal power relations or legitimize top-down control under the guise of inclusion.

Therefore, scholars and practitioners must distinguish between **instrumental participation** (used to extract labor or compliance) and **transformative participation** (which builds capacity, voice, and autonomy).

4.8 *Implications for Policy and Practice*

The Sarangan case offers several insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers:

- 1) **Ecotourism can catalyze empowerment**, but only when it is coupled with institutional reform, inclusive governance, and long-term capacity-building.
- 2) **Economic empowerment is not sufficient**; true empowerment must include access to information, decision-making spaces, and policy influence.
- 3) **Gender and youth inclusion** must be proactive, not incidental. Empowerment frameworks should integrate gender-sensitive planning and youth leadership.
- 4) **Support systems** such as digital literacy programs, microfinance access, and infrastructure improvement are essential for equitable participation.
- 5) **Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms** should track not only economic outputs (income, jobs) but also empowerment indicators (agency, voice, control).

4.9 *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

This study, while offering rich qualitative insights, has several limitations:

- 1) It is **site-specific** and may not be fully generalizable to other ecotourism destinations with different cultural, geographic, or institutional contexts.
- 2) The research focused primarily on **community perspectives**; further studies could incorporate perspectives from external investors, government agencies, or tourists.
- 3) The role of **digital platforms** in shaping tourism and empowerment outcomes deserves more exploration, particularly in post-pandemic recovery contexts.

Future research could adopt **longitudinal designs** to assess the sustainability of empowerment over time or employ **mixed-methods approaches** to triangulate qualitative findings with economic impact data.

4.10 Concluding Remarks

The case of Telaga Sarangan illustrates both the **promise and the pitfalls of community-based ecotourism**. While many residents have found new opportunities for income, expression, and environmental stewardship, the journey toward empowerment remains **partial and uneven**. Without structural inclusion, participatory tourism risks becoming yet another form of marginalization.

For ecotourism to truly empower, it must move beyond rhetoric and embrace **redistribution of power, recognition of diverse voices, and reconfiguration of governance**. Only then can tourism fulfill its potential as a pathway to just and sustainable development.

Conclusion

This study has examined how ecotourism development at Telaga Sarangan contributes to the empowerment of marginalized communities. Drawing on in-depth qualitative data, the research reveals that while ecotourism has opened new pathways for economic and psychological empowerment—particularly for women, youth, and informal workers—structural barriers persist in achieving full social and political inclusion. Participation is widespread but often uneven, shaped by proximity to tourist flows, access to resources, and entrenched local power dynamics. The main argument advanced in this paper is that **participation alone is not a guarantee of empowerment**. True empowerment requires not only access to economic opportunities but also inclusion in decision-making, institutional transparency, and capacity-building for marginalized groups. Ecotourism initiatives must be intentionally designed to address issues of gender, class, and spatial inequality if they are to foster sustainable and equitable development.

In practical terms, the findings suggest the need for integrated policies that promote inclusive governance, invest in community infrastructure, and provide training and financial support tailored to the needs of vulnerable populations. Mechanisms for participatory planning—such as rotating leadership structures, community-led tourism boards, and digital capacity-building—should be embedded within local tourism governance. For future research, longitudinal studies are recommended to assess the long-term impacts of ecotourism on empowerment trajectories. Further exploration into the role of digital platforms, social networks, and intergenerational dynamics could also deepen our understanding of empowerment processes in community-based tourism settings. Ultimately, sustainable ecotourism must

be grounded not only in environmental stewardship but also in **social justice, equity, and collective agency.**

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

Rully Khairul Anwar conceptualized the study, led the field research in Sarangan Village, and drafted the initial manuscript. Saepudin Ibrahim contributed to the development of the methodological framework, conducted interviews and data analysis, and revised the manuscript critically. Evi Nursanti Rukmana assisted with literature review, thematic coding, and preparation of visual materials including tables and figures. All authors reviewed, edited, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The study was entirely self-funded by the authors.

Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data that support the findings of this study—such as interview transcripts, field notes, and policy documents—are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with the participants. However, anonymized excerpts and thematic summaries may be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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.

Additional Information

Fieldwork for this study was conducted with the permission and support of the Sarangan Village Office and the Magetan Regency Tourism Department. The researchers are grateful for the hospitality of the local community and the cooperation of all interview participants. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia.

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