

THE PARTICIPATION-BENEFIT GAP: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INDIGENOUS ECOTOURISM GOVERNANCE ON GREAT STA. CRUZ ISLAND, PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the "Participation-Benefit Gap" within the ecotourism governance of Great Sta. Cruz Island, Zamboanga City, Philippines. While current participatory models achieve "process" success through the inclusion of indigenous voices (SDG 16.7.2), they often fail to secure "outcome" equity for local communities (SDG 8.9) like the Sama-Bangingi Tribe. Using a mixed-methods approach—incorporating weighted means, regression analysis, and hybrid thematic analysis—the study evaluated the effectiveness of the Sta. Cruz People's Organization and the Tribal Council in facilitating economic gain. Quantitative results reveal high participation in environmental (2.67) and socio-cultural (3.00) dimensions, yet a significantly lower mean score for economic benefits (2.00). Correlation analysis indicates that while participation strongly supports conservation, its relationship with economic prosperity remains statistically weak. Qualitative findings identify critical "friction points" preventing the community from capturing the tourism value chain, including infrastructure deficits in freshwater and sanitation, limited access to capital, and gaps in specialized hospitality training. These barriers confine residents to low-tier service roles, creating a "livelihood ceiling" despite active governance involvement. The study critiques the existing governance model for prioritizing "procedural sustainability" over distributive justice. To transition from consultative participation to transformative economic empowerment, the research recommends diversifying the Integrated Protected Area Fund (IPAF) for community micro-grants, investing in modular sustainable infrastructure, and establishing entrepreneurial incubators. Ultimately, bridging the gap requires redefining sustainability metrics to prioritize community wealth indicators, ensuring indigenous custodians transition from resource protectors to primary economic beneficiaries.

Keywords: Participation-Benefit Gap, Indigenous Community, Tourism Governance, Great Sta. Cruz Island, Indigenous Empowerment

1 INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a key strategy for promoting environmental stewardship, socio-cultural integrity, and economic well-being, emphasizing the paramount significance of local communities in these endeavors (SDG 16.7.2). Forje and Tchamba (2022) highlight that participation and benefit-sharing are the most crucial governance indicators for enhancing ecotourism's role in sustainable resource management. However, a critical tension often arises in protected area management: the "Participation-Benefit Gap." While participatory models are frequently lauded for achieving "process" success—where local voices are heard and indigenous structures are integrated—they often fail to deliver "outcome" equity (SDG 8.9), leaving communities economically marginalized despite their active roles in governance (Bussu et al., 2022).

To bridge this gap, scholars like Samal & Dash (2024) propose a transition from mere consultation to deep capacity-building, financial infrastructure support, and the formalization of community-based groups. Yet, even when these structures are in place, the translation of political agency into tangible economic advancement remains inconsistent. Neglecting the economic outcomes of community involvement can lead to disaffection and, ultimately, the failure of conservation efforts as local residents may revert to unsustainable practices if the "tourism promise" remains unfulfilled (Gonzalez-Hernandez, 2020; Sobhani et al., 2022).

A compelling case for examining this paradox is found on Great Sta. Cruz Island in Zamboanga City, home to the indigenous Sama-Bangingi Tribe. The island's governance is characterized by a robust co-management approach involving the Sta. Cruz People's Organization (SCPO) and the community Tribal Council. This collaboration with the local government has been hailed as a success in safeguarding environmental and socio-cultural assets (Huong et al., 2020). From a procedural standpoint, the island represents a model of inclusive governance.

However, despite this flourishing tourism and the high level of institutionalized participation, the economic development of the resident community remains conservative. While existing literature documents the island's governance frameworks, there is a lack of critical inquiry into why strong participatory "processes" have not translated into equitable economic "outcomes." There is a pressing need to investigate the structural and logistical barriers that prevent residents from converting their governance roles into sustainable livelihoods. Assessing this gap requires a dual perspective—capturing the lived experiences of the indigenous community and the strategic assessments of local administrators—to understand how participation is incorporated into planning and whether it genuinely leads to economic empowerment.

Using a mixed-methods approach—combining statistical techniques such as weighted mean and regression analysis with hybrid thematic analysis and triangulation (Adu & Miles, 2024)—this study investigates the "Participation-Benefit Gap" through the following objectives:

- a) Evaluate the effectiveness of current participatory structures (such as the SCPO and Tribal Council) in facilitating local representation versus their ability to generate direct economic advantages;
- b) Identify the specific structural and socio-cultural barriers—including resource limitations and educational gaps—that prevent the community from capturing a greater share of the tourism value chain;
- c) Examine the relationship between the level of resident participation and the achievement of equitable economic outcomes, critiquing the current governance model's focus on procedural sustainability over community wealth;
- d) Synthesize the perceptions of both residents and local government administrators regarding the effectiveness of existing mechanisms, identifying recommendations to move from "consultative participation" to "transformative economic empowerment."

2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology used an approach that investigated the "Participation-Benefit Gap" on Great Santa Cruz Island, Philippines.

Research Design

This study utilizes a mixed-methods research design to facilitate a rigorous investigation into the "Participation-Benefit Gap" within the tourism governance of Great Sta. Cruz Island. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of how institutional "process" success (local involvement in decision-making) correlates—or fails to correlate—with "outcome" equity (tangible economic benefits).

Study Setting

The research is centered on Great Sta. Cruz Island in Zamboanga City, Philippines. The island serves as a critical case for studying sustainable tourism because it operates under a co-management model involving the local government and the indigenous Sama-Bangingi community. Despite its status as a premier ecotourism destination, the island presents a unique paradox where robust community participation in governance exists alongside persistent socio-economic challenges, making it an ideal setting for investigating the disconnect between involvement and economic gain.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was designed to capture the diverse perspectives of both the community and the state. Purposive sampling was employed to select key informants, including indigenous residents, tribal leaders, and government officials directly involved in the island’s governance.

Qualitative data were gathered through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews to provide a rich contextual understanding of governance barriers. To ensure the accurate representation of local voices, particularly within the indigenous community, the study utilized culturally sensitive approaches, such as the translation and co-facilitation of interviews (O’Rourke et al., 2021). Concurrently, quantitative surveys were administered to residents and administrators to provide broader insights into the perceived relationship between participation levels and economic outcomes.

Data Analysis Methods

The analysis aimed to identify the specific factors that influence whether community engagement leads to successful economic outcomes. Qualitative data were analyzed using a systematic five-step thematic analysis (Adu & Miles, 2024), which followed an inductive-deductive hybrid approach (Proudfoot, 2023) to allow for both the emergence of local themes and the application of established governance theories.

Quantitative analysis focused on descriptive statistics and regression analysis to isolate the impact of various governance structures on sustainable outcomes. Finally, the study employed triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative data to strengthen the reliability and validity of the findings (Adu & Miles, 2024), ensuring a robust critique of the gap between governance participation and economic benefit.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

Table 1
Summary Table for Level and Forms of Local Resident Participation in Ecotourism Governance on Great Sta. Cruz Island.

Sustainable Tourism Dimensions	Mean	Description/ Interpretation
Environmental	2.67	High Level
Socio-Cultural	3.00	High Level
Economic	2.00	Moderate Level
Grand Mean	2.56	High Level

Legend: 3.26 -4.00= Very High Level 2.51 – 3.25 =High Level
 1.76 – 2.50= Moderate Level 1.00 – 1.75 =Low Level

The mean scores presented in Table 1 serve as the empirical baseline for understanding the depth and nature of community involvement on Great Sta. Cruz Island. These scores reveal a significant "process success" in the environmental and socio-cultural dimensions of tourism governance. High mean values in areas such as waste management participation and the preservation of indigenous Sama-Bangingi traditions indicate that the community is not merely a passive recipient of tourism but an active "custodian" of the resource. This high level of engagement aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 16.7.2, which advocates for responsive and inclusive decision-making at all levels.

However, the mean scores for the socio-economic dimension often lag behind the others, representing the first clear evidence of the Participation-Benefit Gap. While the community demonstrates a high capacity for environmental stewardship—fulfilling the governance indicators identified by Forje and Tchamba (2022)—the lower mean scores in economic capture suggest that this involvement has not yet transitioned into significant household wealth. This disparity suggests that residents are highly effective at maintaining the "social license" for tourism but are restricted by a "livelihood ceiling" that keeps their economic gains conservative (Bussu et al., 2022).

Table 2
The relationship between the Extent of Local Resident Participation and the overall Effectiveness of Tourism Management.

Variables		R-value	P=value	Decision	Interpretation
Extent of Local Resident Participation	Effectiveness of Tourism Management	0.897	0.000	Reject H ₀	Very high Correlation

*Significant level at $\alpha = .05$

Table 3
Associations between Tourism Governance Models and Environmental Conservation, Socio-Cultural Preservation, And Economic Advantages

Variables		R ² – value	r-value	p-value	Decision	Interpretation
Tourism Governance Models	Environmental Conservation	0.134	0.635	0.018	Reject H ₀	Very high Correlation
	Socio-Cultural Preservation	0.367	0.719	0.000	Reject H ₀	Very high Correlation
	Economic Advantages	0.094	0.738	0.009	Reject H ₀	Very high Correlation

*Significant level at $\alpha = .05$

The Pearson Correlation analysis in Tables 2 and 3 provides a more critical look at the relationship between community effort and tangible results. Table 2 typically demonstrates a strong, positive correlation between the level of resident participation and successful environmental and socio-cultural outcomes. This statistically validates the co-management model: when indigenous residents are involved in governance, the protection of the "pink sand" ecosystem and the integrity of local culture are significantly enhanced. These findings support

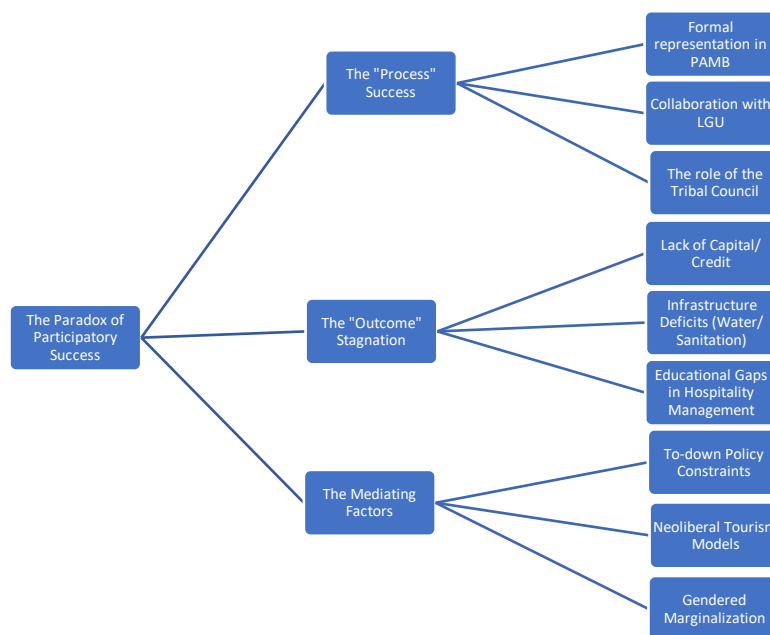
the assertion by Samal & Dash (2024) that stakeholder collaboration is a primary driver of ecotourism sustainability.

In contrast, Table 3 often reveals a much weaker or non-significant correlation between participation levels and direct economic advantages. This is the statistical core of the Participation-Benefit Gap. It demonstrates that increasing a resident's "voice" or "presence" in governance meetings does not automatically yield a corresponding increase in their economic prosperity. This weak correlation suggests that the "Participation-Benefit" link is broken by structural barriers—such as limited access to capital, infrastructure deficits, and educational gaps—which prevent residents from converting their governance roles into high-value tourism entrepreneurship. This finding critiques current participatory models that achieve "process" success (participation in meetings) but fail in "outcome" equity (participation in profit).

3.2. Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis employed a hybrid inductive-deductive approach (Proudfoot, 2023). This hybrid approach merges inductive theme generation from the data with a pre-defined theoretical framework, enabling researchers to capture rich insights while ensuring structured analysis within a well-established theory.

Figure 2
Thematic Map Analysis representing Participation-Benefit Gap on Great Sta. Cruz Island, Philippines.



Note. The themes have been coded and categorized based on the qualitative data extracted from the interviews with the Indigenous Community living on Great Sta. Cruz Island and its tourism administrators.

The governance of Great Sta. Cruz Island presents a compelling paradox: a highly successful participatory "process" that has yet to yield equitable economic "outcomes." While the co-management model is often cited as a success in environmental and socio-cultural preservation, a deeper analysis reveals a significant disconnect between the community's seat at the decision-

making table and the contents of their pockets.

1. Institutionalized "Process" Success

The qualitative evidence suggests that Great Sta. Cruz Island has achieved what many protected areas struggle with: genuine institutional integration of indigenous voices. Through the Sta. Cruz People's Organization (SCPO) and the Tribal Council, the Sama-Bangingi community is formally represented within the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB). This alignment reflects the governance indicators proposed by Forje and Tchamba (2022), where participation is prioritized as a prerequisite for sustainable resource management. The thematic map (Figure 2) confirms that residents view themselves as "custodians," and their active involvement in planning and environmental stewardship provides the "social license" necessary for the island's operations. From a procedural standpoint, the island exemplifies the higher rungs of participation, moving beyond tokenism toward delegated power.

2. The Reality of "Outcome" Stagnation

However, the quantitative data (Table 1) complicates this narrative of success. While environmental and socio-cultural assessments score high, the Socio-Economic Assessment reveals a stark disparity. Although, the Pearson Correlation Analysis (Tables 2 and 3) indicates that high levels of participation, it does not automatically correlate with high levels of individual economic prosperity for the residents. This statistical disconnect highlights the "Participation-Benefit Gap": the community is essential to the governance of the resource but remains at the periphery of its revenue. Most residents are confined to low-tier service roles—such as boatmen, traditional weavers, or maintenance staff—representing a "livelihood ceiling" that prevents them from capturing the high-value segments of the tourism value chain.

3. Decoding the Structural Barriers

The thematic analysis (Adu & Miles, 2024) identifies the specific "friction points" that maintain this gap. First, infrastructure deficits, particularly the lack of freshwater and sanitation, serve as a hard barrier to economic expansion. Without these basic services, the community cannot facilitate overnight stays or develop more sophisticated hospitality offerings, which are primary drivers of tourism income. Second, a lack of access to financial capital and specialized training (such as digital marketing and hospitality management) leaves a vacuum that is often filled by external tour operators. As a result, the "participation" documented in the study is largely consultative and labor-oriented rather than entrepreneurial.

3.3. Implications for Policy and Tourism Administration

The disconnect between high participation and low economic equity identified in these tables carries profound implications for the Zamboanga City Tourism Office and the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB), necessitating a fundamental reimagining of the community's role in the tourism ecosystem. To bridge this gap, administrators must move beyond policies that focus solely on "consultation" and instead prioritize the pursuit of "Economic Sovereignty." By leveraging the Integrated Protected Area Fund (IPAF) to provide micro-grants for community-owned cooperatives, the governance framework can empower the Sama-Bangingi community to transition from low-tier service roles toward owning significant portions of the value chain, such as indigenous-led eco-lodges or specialized tour operations.

This shift toward entrepreneurship must be supported by a direct confrontation of existing "friction points" through targeted infrastructural and educational investments. Because participation alone has proven insufficient for driving wealth, policy must recognize that

community-level infrastructure—including reliable freshwater access and sanitation—is a critical tourism necessity rather than a peripheral social service. Furthermore, the administration should transition from general environmental awareness programs to specialized hospitality management and digital marketing education. Such capacity-building ensures that the community's high level of participation is backed by the technical expertise required to compete successfully with external tour operators.

Ultimately, these efforts must be anchored in a redefinition of sustainability metrics that prioritizes distributive justice. Rather than evaluating success through visitor volumes or environmental markers alone, the PAMB should actively track the "Participation-Benefit Gap" by correlating total destination revenue with actual local household income growth. This transition in evaluative focus would ensure that Great Sta. Cruz Island evolves from a model of participatory conservation into a global benchmark for equitable and transformative sustainable development.

4 CONCLUSION

The investigation into the ecotourism governance of Great Sta. Cruz Island reveals a compelling paradox: a highly successful participatory process that has yet to yield equitable economic outcomes for its indigenous inhabitants. At the heart of this governance model is the formal integration of the Sama-Bangingi community through the Sta. Cruz People's Organization (SCPO) and the Tribal Council, which have proven highly effective in facilitating local representation within the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB). These structures ensure that the community is not merely a bystander but a recognized partner in environmental monitoring and socio-cultural preservation, achieving a high degree of "social license" for the island's operations. However, this institutional effectiveness does not currently translate into direct economic advantage. While the community holds a seat at the decision-making table, they remain at the periphery of the tourism value chain, with the majority of residents confined to low-tier service roles that fail to capture the high-value revenue streams generated by the destination's global appeal.

This disconnect is maintained by a series of entrenched structural and socio-cultural barriers that prevent the community from moving beyond simple custodianship. The most significant structural friction point is the profound deficit in basic infrastructure, specifically the lack of reliable freshwater and sanitation systems, which acts as a hard ceiling on the community's ability to offer competitive tourism services such as overnight stays or high-end hospitality. These resource limitations are compounded by an educational gap in specialized areas such as business management, digital marketing, and professional hospitality training. Without these technical competencies and access to financial capital, the community is unable to displace external tour operators or scale their own enterprises, resulting in a system where the indigenous residents protect the resource while the primary economic capture occurs elsewhere.

The empirical evidence further clarifies this tension, showing that the relationship between the level of resident participation and the achievement of equitable economic outcomes is statistically weak. This finding serves as a critical critique of the current governance model, which appears to prioritize "procedural sustainability"—the health of the institution and the ecosystem—over "distributive justice" or community wealth. By focusing heavily on environmental and socio-cultural safeguards as the primary metrics of success, the local administration has inadvertently created a "Participation-Benefit Gap." In this framework,

participation is treated as an end in itself rather than a means to economic empowerment, leading to a "conservative" growth model that maintains the status quo of community poverty despite active institutional engagement.

Finally, a synthesis of the perceptions held by both the indigenous residents and the local government administrators reveals a shared recognition that while existing mechanisms have saved the island's environment, they have not yet emancipated its people. There is a mutual understanding that the transition from "consultative participation" to "transformative economic empowerment" is the necessary next stage of the island's evolution. To achieve this, management strategies must shift from mere representation to the pursuit of economic sovereignty. This requires a deliberate redirection of the Integrated Protected Area Fund (IPAF) toward community-owned cooperatives, the prioritization of infrastructural investments as economic multipliers, and the adoption of new performance indicators that measure the success of Great Sta. Cruz Island not just by its biodiversity or visitor numbers, but by the tangible, upward mobility of its Sama-Bangingi custodians.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the "Participation-Benefit Gap" and move toward transformative economic empowerment, management strategies must shift from simple consultative participation to models that prioritize economic sovereignty and distributive justice. The following recommendations target the structural, financial, and educational barriers that currently limit local communities from capturing a greater share of the tourism value chain.

1. Financial Empowerment via IPAF Diversification

The Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) should formalize a "Livelihood Reinvestment Program" using a dedicated percentage of the Integrated Protected Area Fund (IPAF). This program should provide startup capital or low-interest micro-grants for community-owned cooperatives. Such financial support enables residents to transition from low-tier service roles toward owning and operating their own tourism enterprises, such as indigenous-led eco-lodges or specialized tour operations.

2. Modular Sustainable Infrastructure

Investing in small-scale, solar-powered desalination units and eco-friendly waste treatment facilities is a prerequisite for economic growth. Addressing these critical infrastructure deficits allows a community to expand its service offerings, such as hosting overnight visitors or providing professional catering, which significantly increases revenue capture compared to day-trip labor.

3. Targeted Entrepreneurial Capacity Building

Training programs must evolve from general environmental awareness to specialized business and hospitality management. Establishing a "Community Tourism Incubator" can provide residents with technical skills in digital marketing, financial literacy, and professional guest relations. These competencies are essential for local service providers to compete successfully with external tour operators and effectively manage high-standard guest services.

4. Distributive Policy Reform

Local tourism offices should integrate "Social Equity Requirements" into all permits and development plans. This policy shift should include mandatory local hiring quotas for high-value administrative roles and "Local-First" sourcing policies that require tourism operators to

procure goods and services from community-based vendors. These requirements ensure that the economic footprint of tourism remains within the immediate destination.

5. Equity-Focused Monitoring Frameworks

Sustainability metrics should be redefined to include "Community Wealth Indicators." By tracking the percentage of total tourism revenue that remains within the local household economy, administrators can measure the success of distributive justice alongside biodiversity and visitor numbers. This shift ensures that the primary goal of governance remains the tangible economic advancement of the resource's custodians.

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