

Community Participation and Rural Transformation: Local Empowerment in Tourism Development at Sekapuk Village, Gresik, Indonesia

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Abstract

Tourism-based rural development has emerged as a promising pathway for economic and social transformation in Indonesia. This study examines the participation of local residents in the empowerment of Sekapuk Village, Ujungpangkah, Gresik, which successfully transformed from a former limestone mining area into a vibrant tourist destination managed through community investment. Using a qualitative approach based on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), the research explores the forms, levels, and impacts of community involvement in planning, investment, implementation, and sustainability of the tourism enterprise. Findings reveal that local participation extends beyond conventional labor contributions to include financial investment, collective decision-making, and shared responsibility through the village-owned enterprise (BUMDes). Community members contributed capital, skills, and voluntary labor, enabling the establishment of Setigi tourism object as a sustainable village asset. The results highlight how community participation not only enhances local ownership and pride but also strengthens social capital, creates employment opportunities, and improves household income. Challenges remain, particularly in balancing tourism growth with environmental sustainability and ensuring equitable benefit distribution. The study contributes to the literature on community-based tourism (CBT) by providing empirical evidence of how participatory investment models foster rural empowerment in Indonesia. It also underscores the importance of institutional support, capacity building, and inclusive governance to sustain such initiatives. Policy implications suggest that village-level tourism development should prioritize community ownership and participatory mechanisms to achieve long-term sustainability and resilience.

Keywords: *Community participation, empowerment, rural tourism, BUMDes, Sekapuk Village*

Introduction

Tourism has increasingly been recognized as a catalyst for rural development and community empowerment. In many developing countries, tourism contributes not only to economic growth but also to social transformation by diversifying livelihoods, strengthening local identity, and fostering collective pride (Scheyvens, 2011; Salazar, 2012). For Indonesia, where rural poverty and underemployment remain pressing issues, tourism development represents a strategic avenue to stimulate local economies, particularly in villages endowed with natural and cultural resources.

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In the past decade, community-based tourism (CBT) has gained prominence as an alternative model that emphasizes participation, sustainability, and equity. Unlike conventional top-down tourism projects, CBT prioritizes the active involvement of local residents in planning, decision-making, and management (Okazaki, 2008). This approach not only improves economic outcomes but also enhances community ownership, resilience, and sustainability (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2014).

Sekapuk Village, located in Ujungpangkah District, Gresik Regency, East Java, exemplifies this transformation. Once known primarily as a limestone mining site, the village faced environmental degradation and limited livelihood opportunities after mining activities ceased. In response, local leaders and residents initiated a collective effort to convert the abandoned mining area into a tourist destination, popularly known as Setigi (Selo, Tirto, Giri). The initiative, managed by the village-owned enterprise (BUMDes), combined local investment with voluntary labor, creating a model of participatory rural tourism.

While numerous studies have examined rural tourism in Indonesia (Astuti & Wibowo, 2018; Fitriani, 2020), much of the literature tends to focus on potential attractions, visitor satisfaction, or economic outcomes. Fewer studies critically analyze the forms and levels of community participation, particularly in relation to financial investment and governance mechanisms. Moreover, the case of Sekapuk is unique in that it demonstrates how a community leveraged collective investment and social capital to transform a post-mining landscape into a sustainable tourism asset. This represents a valuable contribution to debates on sustainable development, local economic empowerment, and grassroots-led transformation.

The research gap addressed in this study lies in the limited empirical exploration of participatory investment models in rural tourism development. Whereas community participation is often conceptualized in terms of labor or consultation (Arnstein, 1969), Sekapuk's experience highlights the role of financial contributions, collective risk-sharing, and governance through BUMDes. Understanding these dynamics is critical for designing policies that support inclusive and sustainable rural tourism across Indonesia.

The importance of this study is threefold. First, it enriches the academic literature by integrating theories of participation and empowerment with empirical evidence from rural Indonesia. Second, it provides practical insights into how local communities can mobilize resources to create sustainable tourism ventures. Third, it informs policymakers and practitioners about the conditions under which participatory tourism initiatives can thrive, particularly in post-extractive and disadvantaged rural contexts.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on community participation, empowerment, and rural tourism. The methodology section outlines the qualitative PRA approach. The findings section presents the forms and levels of participation observed in Sekapuk Village. The discussion interprets these findings in light of existing theories and comparable cases. Finally, the conclusion summarizes key contributions and implications for future research and practice.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach using the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) method. PRA is well-suited for exploring community participation as it emphasizes local perspectives, participatory observation, and interactive data collection (Chambers, 1994).

Research Site and Informants

The research was conducted in Sekapuk Village, Ujungpangkah, Gresik Regency, East Java. Informants included village leaders, BUMDes managers, community investors, tourism workers, and ordinary residents. Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation of diverse roles in the tourism initiative.

Data Collection

Three primary techniques were applied:

1. Interviews – Semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants explored perceptions of participation, empowerment, and benefits.
2. Observation – Direct observation of tourism facilities, community meetings, and investment activities provided contextual understanding.
3. Document Analysis – Village records, BUMDes reports, and relevant policy documents were reviewed.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Themes were coded around forms and levels of participation (planning, investment, implementation, monitoring) and empowerment dimensions (economic, social, psychological, political). Triangulation across sources ensured validity and reliability.

Ethical considerations were observed by obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring confidentiality.

Results

In the empowerment of tourism destinations, community participation is a crucial determinant for ensuring that tourism development achieves its intended objectives. Community involvement is required not only in the planning of village government programs through tourism initiatives but also in mobilizing local capital for investment, managing and evaluating tourism operations, and sustaining long-term outcomes. Within the framework of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), communities occupy a central role in supporting village tourism development. Conversely, empowerment initiatives are unlikely to succeed if local residents feel marginalized as passive objects of development or perceive village tourism activities as a threat to their livelihoods (Sugiarti, 2004).

Community participation should not be understood merely as attendance or involvement in activities. It is also expected to evolve into substantive participation, wherein residents critically assess whether village tourism empowerment—particularly through collective savings and community investment programs—aligns with expectations and contributes to improving household and village-level economies. In this regard, local residents act both as subjects and

objects of development, underscoring their pivotal role in ensuring the sustainability of village tourism initiatives.

The development of tourism villages inevitably influences almost every aspect of community life. Therefore, strong support and active participation are required from both the village government and the wider community. Active involvement yields benefits not only for the local economy but also for social well-being. Through collective savings and investment schemes, villagers can derive multiple advantages: the creation of new employment opportunities, the establishment of community-owned enterprises, and the receipt of profit-sharing by participating as investors.

This study examines the extent of local participation in the Sekapuk Village government's efforts to establish an innovative, self-sustaining village tourism enterprise financed through a savings-plus-investment model. Participation occurs at several levels:

1. Participation in Village Government Programs

Community participation is institutionalized in the *Tabungan Plus Investasi Masyarakat* (Community Savings and Investment) program, designed to mobilize capital for tourism development. Village leaders deliberately involved residents in planning to ensure shared ownership of the initiative. The program's objectives included enhancing human resource productivity, generating new employment opportunities, boosting household and village income, strengthening self-reliance, and building multi-sectoral institutional coordination.

High community enthusiasm was reflected in the rapid sale of investment certificates (*piagam saham*), with more than 100 sold within the first month. To ensure equity, the village government limited sales to one share per household. Despite strong participation, challenges emerged, as some residents expressed skepticism due to limited information, lack of trust, or low levels of education.

2. Management of Community Savings and Investments

The funds collected were managed transparently by BUMDes Sekapuk, which reinvested capital into the village tourism enterprise. Two systems were introduced: (a) direct investment through the purchase of shares worth Rp 2,400,000, granting shareholders ownership rights; and (b) incremental savings for lower-income households, allowing daily deposits of Rp 8,000 until the required investment was accumulated within one year. Profits were distributed according to the cooperative system (*Sisa Hasil Usaha* or SHU), enabling both returns on capital and reinvestment.

3. Community Participation in Tourism Empowerment

Beyond financial contributions, villagers engaged in collective labor, such as road repairs, land clearing, and infrastructure development. Youth and women actively contributed, with women managing food stalls and handicraft shops while youth participated in ticketing, guiding, and visitor services. Community

groups such as POKDARWIS (Tourism Awareness Groups) were established to maintain facilities, ensure visitor safety, and enhance tourism promotion.

Through these mechanisms, Sekapuk's tourism initiative generated multiple benefits: increased household income, new employment opportunities, improved skills through regular training, and strengthened community solidarity. Importantly, local enthusiasm reflected a recognition that tourism empowerment was not imposed but designed to promote shared prosperity and self-reliance.

Discussion

The Sekapuk case illustrates how community participation, when extended to financial investment and governance, can drive rural transformation. This aligns with empowerment theory (Scheyvens, 2011), where villagers achieved economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment. By investing their own resources, residents became not just beneficiaries but co-owners of development. Compared with Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, Sekapuk achieved higher rungs—partnership and delegated power—by institutionalizing decision-making through BUMDes. This surpasses many tourism villages where participation remains limited to consultation or labor.

The findings also underscore the role of social capital in facilitating collective action (Putnam, 1993; Ostrom, 1990). Trust, shared identity, and networks enabled residents to pool resources and manage risks. Similar patterns are documented in community forestry and fisheries management, but Sekapuk demonstrates their relevance in tourism.

However, the study also reveals limitations consistent with CBT literature (Cole, 2006; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Elite capture remains a risk if governance transparency declines. Unequal benefit distribution could undermine cohesion. Environmental pressures from visitor growth threaten sustainability.

Policy implications include the need to support capacity building, especially in financial management and marketing, to sustain BUMDes operations. Government facilitation is crucial in providing training, regulation, and infrastructure, while leaving ownership with the community.

Sekapuk's experience contributes to the literature by highlighting participatory investment as a novel dimension of community participation. This suggests that rural development strategies should not only mobilize labor and consultation but also design mechanisms for financial inclusion and shared ownership.

Conclusion

This study examined community participation in the empowerment of Sekapuk Village's tourism development. The findings show that participation occurred across planning, investment, implementation, and governance. Residents contributed not only labor but also financial resources through BUMDes shares, creating a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. The impacts extended across economic, social, psychological, and political dimensions, reflecting comprehensive empowerment.

The Sekapuk model demonstrates that rural communities can transform post-mining landscapes into sustainable tourism assets through participatory mechanisms. The case highlights the importance of social capital, local leadership, and institutional frameworks such as BUMDes. However, challenges remain in sustaining governance capacity, ensuring equity, and protecting the environment.

Theoretically, this research contributes to debates on community-based tourism and empowerment by foregrounding participatory investment as a critical but underexplored dimension. Practically, it offers lessons for policymakers and practitioners seeking to design inclusive rural tourism programs.

In conclusion, Sekapuk illustrates that genuine participation—encompassing financial, labor, and decision-making contributions—can drive rural transformation and resilience. Future research should explore comparative cases across Indonesia to understand the conditions under which participatory investment models succeed, and how they can be scaled to support national rural development strategies.

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