

The Active Role of the Community in the Development of Sustainable Tourism in Binjai City

Rahmad Suryadi Hutabarat

e-mail: rahmadhutabarat@gmail.com

Cut Nuraini

e-mail: cutnuraini@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id

Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi, Indonesia

Abstract

Sustainable tourism has become a crucial aspect of regional development, particularly with the growing awareness of the need to balance economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This study aims to analyze the active role of the community in the development of sustainable tourism in Binjai City using a SWOT analysis approach. The research was conducted from May to December 2024, involving 200 respondents consisting of tourism business actors, local residents, and key stakeholders. The findings indicate that community participation is more dominant in the implementation phase (55%), while involvement in the planning (25%) and evaluation (20%) phases remains relatively low. Supporting factors for community participation include awareness of tourism potential and government support, while the main barriers are a lack of managerial skills and limited opportunities to engage in planning and policy evaluation processes. These findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight the importance of community involvement in all stages of tourism development. The implications of this study underscore the need to enhance education and training for the community, strengthen the role of local institutions such as tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis), and implement more inclusive participatory policies to improve community engagement in sustainable tourism management.

Keywords: Community Participation, Sustainable Tourism, SWOT, Binjai City.

Introduction

Sustainable tourism is a concept that emphasizes the balance between economic, socio-cultural, and environmental aspects in the development of tourist destinations. This concept aims to ensure that tourism not only provides short-term economic benefits but also preserves natural and cultural resources for future generations (Nuraini, 2017, 2021). In this context, the active participation of the local community is a crucial element that can determine the success of sustainable tourism (Nuraini, 2017; Sugiarto & Kustiah Ramadania, 2024). The local community is not merely a recipient of benefits from the tourism industry but also plays a central role in preserving the environment and cultural heritage of the region.

Binjai City, as part of the strategic Mebidangro region (Medan, Binjai, Deli Serdang, and Langkat), holds significant potential in the tourism sector. Its strategic location, near Medan—the economic center of North Sumatra—positions Binjai as a promising area for the development of various tourist destinations. Attractions in Binjai include natural tourism such as urban parks, distinctive culinary tourism, and various community-based activities that have the potential to attract both domestic and international tourists (Aini et al., 2023; Linda et al., 2024; Nuraini et al., 2023). However, the development of tourism in Binjai still faces numerous challenges, particularly concerning community involvement in the sustainable management and utilization of tourism resources.

In recent years, various programs have been initiated by the local government to encourage community participation in the tourism sector. These include training and support for small and medium-sized tourism enterprises, digital tourism promotion, and the strengthening of village tourism institutions. However, according to research by Wibowo and Belia (2023), a gap still exists between policy formulation and its implementation in the field, where community participation remains suboptimal (Nuraini, 2024). Many residents are still unaware of their strategic role in maintaining the sustainability of tourism environments, leading to instances of excessive exploitation of natural resources and a lack of awareness in maintaining the cleanliness and aesthetic quality of tourist sites (Nuraini, 2021, 2024). Moreover, socio-cultural factors also play a vital role in the development of sustainable tourism. A portion of the community still perceives tourism as solely economically driven, without considering its long-term environmental and cultural impacts. This mindset has led to resistance against sustainability-based tourism policies, particularly among community groups that do not yet understand the importance of balancing economic growth with environmental conservation. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the extent of community involvement in the development of sustainable tourism in Binjai City and the factors that influence it.

Literature Review

A. Definition of Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is a concept of tourism development that takes into account the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts, both in the present and for the future. Its goal is to meet the needs of tourists and the tourism industry today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. According to Wibowo and Belia (2023), sustainable tourism emphasizes the importance of balancing economic growth, environmental conservation, and socio-cultural sustainability.

B. Community Participation in Tourism Development

Community participation is a key element in the development of sustainable tourism. The active involvement of local communities can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility toward tourism destinations, while also ensuring that the economic benefits generated are directly experienced by the local population. Ira and Muhammad (2020) highlight that

community participation in tourism development may include involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of tourism-related programs.

C. Forms of Community Participation

Community participation in sustainable tourism development can be categorized as follows:

1. **Participation in Planning:**
Communities are involved in identifying tourism potential, formulating visions and missions, and making decisions regarding tourism destination development. This ensures that tourism development aligns with the needs and desires of the local population. Wibowo and Belia (2023) argue that participation in planning enables communities to provide valuable input and ensures that tourism development is in harmony with local values.
2. **Participation in Implementation:**
Communities actively participate in the operation of tourism destinations, such as by serving as tour guides, managing homestays, or running tourism-related businesses. Khalim and Hernawati (2023) found that participation in implementation can enhance community skills and capacities while providing direct economic benefits.
3. **Participation in Monitoring and Evaluation**
Communities are involved in monitoring and evaluating the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of tourism, as well as in providing feedback for continuous improvement. Ira and Muhammad (2020) stress the importance of participatory evaluation to ensure that tourism development remains on a sustainable path and aligns with community expectations.

D. Factors Influencing Community Participation

Several factors influence the level of community participation in the development of sustainable tourism, including:

1. **Awareness and Knowledge:**
The community's understanding of the benefits and impacts of sustainable tourism significantly affects their motivation to participate. Wibowo and Belia (2023) argue that education and outreach efforts regarding the importance of sustainable tourism can enhance community involvement.
2. **Capacity and Skills:**
The technical and managerial capabilities of community members in managing tourism destinations determine how effectively they can engage. Khalim and Hernawati (2023) found that training and mentoring programs can enhance community capacity in tourism development.
3. **Government Support and Policy:**
Supportive policies and facilitation from local governments can encourage greater community participation. Ira and Muhammad (2020) emphasize that collaboration between government authorities and communities is essential to achieving sustainable tourism goals.
4. **Social and Cultural Structure:**
Norms, values, and the social structure within a community influence participation levels. Mulyan and Isnaini (2022) found that local traditions of mutual cooperation (gotong royong) and community solidarity serve as forms of social capital that support community involvement in tourism development.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the approach adopted in this study, the conceptual framework can be illustrated as follows:

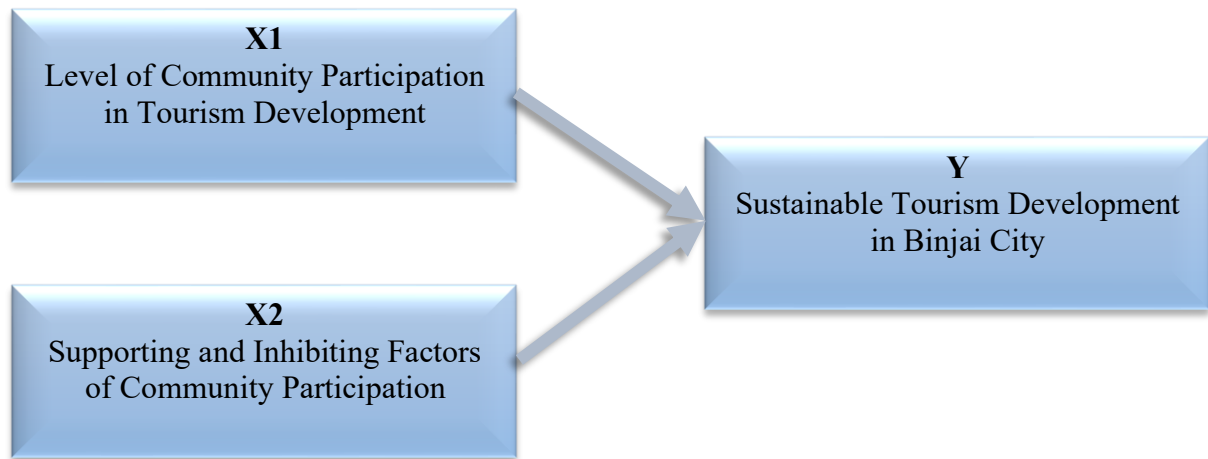


Figure 1. Research Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between community participation, supporting and inhibiting factors, and the development of sustainable tourism. The higher the level of community participation and the stronger the supporting factors, the more optimal the development of sustainable tourism will be. Conversely, the greater the number of inhibiting factors faced by the community, the more likely it is that the sustainability of the tourism sector will be hindered.

Results and Discussion

A. Respondent Characteristics

This study involved 200 respondents from various groups engaged in the tourism sector in Binjai City. The distribution of respondents is presented below:

Table 1. Respondent Distribution by Category

Respondent Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Tourism Business Actors	80	40
Local Residents	90	45
Stakeholders	30	15

Source: Researcher, 2025

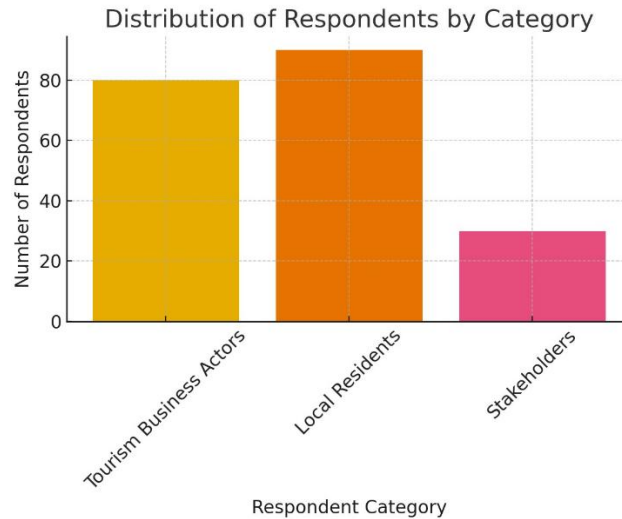


Figure 2. Flowchart of Respondent Distribution by Category

From the table and figure above, it can be observed that the majority of respondents are local residents living near tourist destinations (45%), followed by tourism business actors (40%), and stakeholders (15%). This indicates that most members of the local community are directly or indirectly involved in the tourism industry in Binjai City.

B. Level of Community Participation in Tourism Development

The level of community participation in the development of sustainable tourism is categorized into three main aspects: planning, implementation, and monitoring & evaluation. The participation data is presented below:

Table 2. Level of Community Participation in Tourism Development

Participation Aspect	Participation Aspect	Participation Aspect
Planning	50	25
Implementation	110	55
Monitoring & Evaluation	40	20

Source: Researcher, 2025

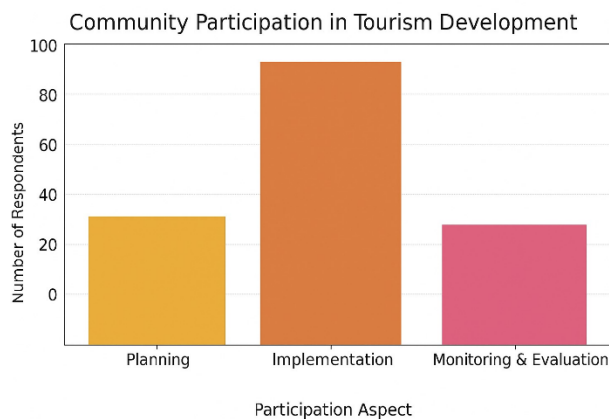


Figure 3. Flowchart of Community Participation in Tourism Development

From the table and figure above, the following can be observed:

- 55% of respondents participate in the implementation phase (e.g., as tourism business actors, tour guides, or service providers).
- 25% of respondents are involved in planning, including contributing to local tourism policy-making and infrastructure development.
- 20% of respondents participate in monitoring and evaluation, for instance, through tourism awareness groups (*Pokdarwis*).

These results indicate that community involvement is predominantly concentrated in the implementation phase, while participation in planning and monitoring remains relatively low and requires further improvement.

C. SWOT Analysis

Based on the collected data and interviews with stakeholders, a SWOT analysis was conducted to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the development of sustainable tourism in Binjai City.

Table 3. SWOT Analysis of Community Participation in Tourism Development

Factor	Findings
Strengths	Community awareness of tourism potential; presence of tourism communities such as Pokdarwis; support from local government.
Weaknesses	Limited community involvement in planning and evaluation; lack of managerial skills in tourism management.
Opportunities	Increasing number of tourist visits; government and private sector program support; rising trend of community-based tourism.
Threats	Negative impacts of mass tourism; low environmental awareness; competition from other tourist destinations.

Source: Researcher, 2025

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that community participation in the development of sustainable tourism in Binjai City remains concentrated at the implementation stage, accounting for 55%. In contrast, involvement in planning reached only 25%, and evaluation stood at 20%. These results suggest that the community is more engaged in operational activities—such as managing tourism businesses and providing services to tourists—than in decision-making and monitoring the sustainability of the tourism sector. This aligns with the study by Wibowo and Belia (2023), which found that in many community-based tourism destinations, local communities tend to participate more actively in the implementation of tourism activities, while planning and evaluation processes are often dominated by government and private sector stakeholders.

Furthermore, this study identifies that the main supporting factors for community participation in tourism development include the awareness of tourism's economic potential and support from local government—such as training programs and digital tourism promotion initiatives. The study by Khalim and Hernawati (2023) confirms that the success of a tourism destination is not solely determined by its natural beauty or cultural uniqueness but also by the degree of community involvement in maintaining and managing those attractions. In the context of Binjai City, the presence of community-based organizations such as *Pokdarwis* (tourism awareness groups) plays an important role in building collective awareness around sustainable tourism management.

However, a key challenge identified in this study is the lack of managerial skills among local communities in managing tourism resources, as well as the limited opportunities for them to participate in planning and policy evaluation. This is supported by Mulyan and Isnaini (2022), who found that in the development of tourism villages, a lack of managerial capacity and restricted access to training are among the main barriers to broader community involvement.

The SWOT analysis conducted in this study reveals that, in addition to internal strengths such as community awareness and institutional support, Binjai City has significant opportunities for sustainable tourism development—such as increasing tourist visits and support programs from government and private sectors. However, there are also threats that could hinder sustainable tourism management, such as the negative impacts of mass tourism and competition with other destinations in North Sumatra. Rifdah and Kusdiwanggo (2024) emphasize that rapidly growing destinations without proper regulations and management systems often face declining attractiveness due to the overexploitation of natural resources and conflicts of interest between communities and tourism operators.

This study also confirms that increasing community participation in planning and evaluation stages can be achieved through community empowerment and capacity building. Santoso and Ramdhan (2023) argue that training and education related to sustainable tourism governance can improve public understanding of the importance of their involvement in planning and monitoring tourism policies. In Binjai City, such strategies could be implemented by strengthening the role of *Pokdarwis* and involving communities in village forums or strategic tourism planning led by the local government.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce earlier research on the importance of community participation across all stages of tourism destination management. However, it also highlights ongoing challenges in increasing involvement in planning and evaluation, which can be addressed through inclusive policy development, enhanced community managerial skills, and continued support from both the government and private sector to build a more sustainable, community-based tourism ecosystem.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that community participation in the development of sustainable tourism in Binjai City is still largely concentrated in the implementation phase, while involvement in planning and evaluation remains limited. Public awareness of tourism potential and government support are the primary factors driving community engagement in the sector. However, several challenges continue to hinder participation, such as limited opportunities for involvement in policy planning and a lack of managerial skills in tourism management.

The SWOT analysis reveals that, although Binjai City has significant opportunities to enhance community-based tourism—such as increased tourist visits and institutional support—there are still threats to sustainability, including overexploitation of natural resources and the lack of clear regulations governing the sustainable management of tourism destinations.

Based on these findings, the study recommends several strategic measures to improve community participation in tourism management. The local government should develop ongoing training programs to build community capacity in tourism management and leadership. Additionally, the role of tourism awareness groups (*Pokdarwis*) should be strengthened as a primary platform for active community participation in decision-making and policy evaluation. The adoption of more inclusive participatory policies is also essential

to ensure that the community is directly involved in tourism planning—not merely as passive actors but as stakeholders with control over the management and conservation of tourism in their region. With strong collaboration between government, community, and the private sector, sustainable tourism in Binjai City is expected to develop optimally and deliver economic, social, and environmental benefits to all involved stakeholders.

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