

Successes in Stakeholder Participation: A Narrative Study of Community-Based Tourism in Mararison Island, Philippines

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Abstract

Community-based tourism (CBT) plays a vital role in promoting sustainable tourism development, with stakeholder participation emerging as a key factor in its success. This qualitative study, employing a narrative inquiry approach, explores the potential for CBT development on Mararison Island, Antique, Philippines, as an alternative to conventional mass tourism. The research focused on understanding the community profile and examining the contributions of various stakeholders toward achieving sustainable tourism on the island. Participants included purposively selected community leaders and representatives, private accommodation and resort owners, tourism frontliners, and local government officials. Data were collected through face-to-face focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted both on the mainland Culasi and Mararison Island, using a semi-structured question guide in English and its Kinaray-a translation. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed. Seventeen (17) themes emerged from the analysis, highlighting

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that the island's tourism success is rooted in a holistic, community-centered approach that integrates environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, economic development, and good governance. Key elements included prioritizing local accessibility and affordability, fostering eco-tourism and cultural appreciation, and protecting natural resources. Additionally, inclusive planning, community empowerment, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits were found to strengthen local resilience and aspirations. Effective governance, infrastructure development, and ongoing capacity-building efforts further contributed to a well-rounded and sustainable tourism model. Collectively, the findings emphasize that a multidimensional, inclusive strategy—grounded in both environmental stewardship and socio-economic development—is essential for sustaining and enhancing CBT initiatives in Mararison Island and similar destinations.

Keywords : Community-Based Tourism (CBT), Mararison Island, Sustainable Development, Stakeholder Participation, Cultural and Environmental Preservation, Inclusive Governance

I. Introduction

Tourism plays a vital role as driver for economic expansion and job creation. Significantly, it has evolved into one of the economic development pillars in the service sector in the Philippines (Villegas, 2017). The Philippines is a popular tourist destination because of its numerous natural landscapes, rich culture and tradition, and hospitality. Hence, its tourism program developments are mostly focused on rural areas which promote the country's environmental and socio-cultural resources. However, huge firms control the majority of the country's tourism activity. The government and local communities recognize the need to empower local communities who expressed their opinions and actively participate in tourism implementations (Laire & Gutierrez, 2019) to promote sustainable tourist practices.

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is seen as an alternative to mainstream tourism and is critical to destination sustainability (Zielinski, Jeong, & Milanés, 2021). CBT is one of the most supported and effective platforms towards sustainable tourism. The term CBT is defined as “tourism owned and/or

managed by communities and intended to deliver wider community benefit, benefiting a wider group than those employed in the initiative” (Goodwin & Santilli 2009). It is characterized by collective participation and decision making by involved stakeholders, from government officials to community residents, developers, and planners (Haywood, 1988). Communities are frequently overlooked in tourism. Many tourist locations ignore the locals or, unfortunately, misuse the destination as a source of entertainment and labor for outsiders. Instead, tourism could be a supporting avenue to enhance local quality of life and destination development (Nair & Hamzah, 2015; Zivrali, 2023). The goal is to enhance community empowerment to build vibrant, self-sufficient communities that make decisions for their own well-being (Dodds, Ali, & Galaski 2018; Goodwin & Santilli 2009; Vafadari & Say, 2021)

As a promising substitute for conventional mass tourist approaches, CBT at the Mararison Island is implemented. Mararison Island in the province of Antique is one of the gems hidden in the province of Antique boasts its pristine waters and Boracay-like white sand shore and sand bar, and Batanes like hills with 360-view of the mainland Antique and the vast Sulu Sea. The attractiveness of the island was featured in several online and offline media platforms, like vogue magazine, online blogs, and on social media accounts (Jaypeeneutron, 2022). To support more sustainable electricity for the locals, and the tourism establishments in the island, the local government built solar energy towers to provide power sources for the whole island. Also, locals directly participating in the island’s tourism programs were given skills trainings and marketing support. These initiatives developed a more established income generating tourism program in the island, especially in the year 2016–2018. However, the decline in number of visitors was largely observed during the Covid-19 outbreak. This affected the locals and made them resort to survival mode focusing individually on their personal economical needs.

Beyond the disadvantages and challenges of tourism development in rural areas, it is seen by community and stakeholders that CBT is an effective and sustainable platform to eliminate poverty and strengthen economic income. With the negative impacts of CBT initiatives such as cultural disrespect, crimes, destruction of nature, higher cost of living, and leakage of income (Arnstein 1969;

Goodwin & Santilli 2009; Mayaka, Croy, & Cox, 2018; Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1990) success of these highly invested projects under CBT platform, especially in developing countries, has not been widely monitored and actual benefits to local communities are still unclear. In addition, stakeholders' collaboration and partnerships are essential for successful CBT projects. Though stakeholder collaborations' effectiveness is being challenged by differences of intent, conflicts and lack of trust (Jung, 2022). Nevertheless, as CBT plays a vital role in promoting sustainable tourism development, and with stakeholder participation emerging as a key factor in its success, local communities are given more control, cultural heritage is preserved, and the environment is safeguarded (Byrd, 2007; Goodwin & Santilli 2009; Jung, 2022). CBT helps with the general growth and well-being not just of the residents but also of the nearby communities.

Hence, this qualitative study explores the potential for CBT development of Mararison Island, Culasi, Antique, Philippines, as an alternative to conventional mass tourism. The research focused on understanding the community profile and examining the contributions of various stakeholders toward achieving sustainable tourism on the island. Specifically, this study aimed to seek answers to each of the following questions:

1. What is the profile of the community based on documents available, and the data published in terms of the following: a) tourism stakeholders, b) tourism services, and b) tourist arrivals?
2. Who are the key community stakeholders that significantly support CBT development and sustainability?
3. What are the successes of stakeholders' participation towards CBT in Mararison Island?

II. Review of Related Literature

1. Community Based Tourism

Community participation in the tourism planning process is advocated as a way to implement sustainable tourism. There are theories used to discuss community participation, including the "ladder of civic participation," the redistribution of power, collaborative processes, and the creation of social capital. These theories form the basis for defining a community based tourism (CBT) model (Okazaki, 2008). Wherein, in CBT, the tourism programs are initiated and led by the community members so that service authenticity and socio-economic benefits will be managed by the locals themselves (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Although conceptual models have been extensively researched, the development of practical CBT models in field studies has been limited (Bittar Rodrigues & Prideaux, 2018). CBT owned and managed by the community as a whole is "the purest model" of CBT. That could lead to cited barriers towards success of CBT, from lack of financial skills, unreached marketing network, to land management concerns (Dodds et al., 2018). However, the success factors of CBT are undeniable and national/international governments/organizations continue to support the CBT programs (Hamzah & Khalifah 2009; Nair & Hamzah, 2015).

CBT is believed to have a major impact on rural communities in the Philippines and many other countries. It is well known for its impact on the poor, bringing socio-cultural, environmental, and economic benefits to the governance of a community when guided with sound policies. CBT has great potential to enhance such aspects of a place for community development (Andelecio & Martin, 2022). The development of CBT projects can follow different trajectories. CBT projects can be initiated within and outside the community by the private, public and non-governmental sectors or a combination of these, using a top-down or bottom-up approach. It is also noted that CBT projects can take on a formal or informal nature depending on the

conditions that led to their implementation (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli, 2016).

One of the issues in CBT that has not been adequately addressed concerns the sustainability of community tourism as a model based on the use of local indigenous resources and sustainability as a resource for the conservation of nature that serves as a habitat for developed tourist activities (Naranjo Llupart, 2022). Hence, the concern about too much dependency of the community to the tourism program alone, and mismanaged development initiatives due to lack of community empowerment and capacity skills is suggested for further studies by previous research (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Juma & Khademi-Vidra, 2019).

2. The Tourism Industry in the Philippines

Philippines is an archipelago of more than 7,100 islands, depends on low tide or high tide. The country is one of the competitive tourist destinations in Southeast Asia especially with regards to rural community based tourism (RCBT) experience (Lacson, 2023). In competition against Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand when it comes to nature and beach destination, the Philippines' Department of Tourism (DOT) sets Tourism Development Plans (2016-2022) along with a Tourism Rapid Assessment Manual in order to strategically develop its tourism products to be competitive.

Tourism's contribution to the economy continued to increase as the economy returned to normality and there were no further major lockdowns from 2022, post COVID-19. Though with this is a wave of tourist intention to relax and enjoy nature in the rural areas with genuine interaction with the locals, hence, community empowerment and capacitation is highly encouraged for the community to continue dependence in delivering tourism programs in the destination, or else the CBT projects are seen lead to failure (Ruiz, Mandigma, & De Vero, 2018).

III. Methodology

This qualitative study employs a narrative inquiry approach, where the participants shared their experiences in relation to CBT.

1. Research Settings and Participants

This study was conducted at Mararison, Island, Culasi, Antique in the Philippines. The participants for this study included purposively selected community leaders and representatives, homestay owners, resort owners and staff, boatmen, site guides, cook, masseuse, hair braiders, and local government officials. The data is presented in Table 1.

〈Table 1〉 The participants

Types of participants	Number	Percentage
A. Entire Group	80	100.00%
B. 1. Municipal officials, and office heads	5	6.25%
2. Staff of the Municipal Tourism Office	9	11.25%
3. Boatmen only, and boatmen and site guides	11	13.75%
4. Cook	5	6.25%
5. Homestay service providers	8	10.00%
6. Masseuse only, and homestay service provider and masseuse	2	2.50%
7. Private accommodation owner, resort owner, and resort staff	4	5.00%
8. Site guides	11	13.75%
9. Site guides; and cooks, hair braiders, homestay service providers, or masseuses	13	16.25%
10. Souvenir maker or vendor, and homestay service provider	1	1.25%
11. Brgy. officials who are also a boatman, homestay service providers, or site guides	6	7.50%
12. Representatives of the residents of Barangay Mararison	5	6.25%

These participants were purposefully selected because these are the main participating community stakeholders that support CBT success (Witchayakawin, Aziz, Mahomed, & Abdullah, 2022).

2. Data Collection Methods

The data were gathered through face-to-face focus group discussions (FGDs) to the different groups of stakeholders conducted both in mainland Culasi with the Local Government Unit officials and a resort owner; and in the Island with the selected community leaders and representatives, homestay owners, and tourism frontliners. A questionnaire in English, and its translated version in Kinaray-a was used during the focus group discussions. The FGDs were recorded, and the discussions were transcribed accordingly and were translated into English. Member checking was done with the participants, and co-author review of the data gathered was then conducted.

The questionnaire was prepared by one of the lead researchers based on the three dimensions of sustainable tourism development theory (United Nations General Assembly, 2019). The questions were written to fit the local CBT culture of the Philippine rural tourism community programs developments (Gonzales, 2023); and the instrument was subjected to jury validation.

Sustainable tourism development emphasizes balancing environmental protection, economic viability, and socio-cultural preservation (Dwyer, 2023; United Nations General Assembly, 2019). In line with this, data for the study were collected to examine how community participation and empowerment influence sustainable tourism outcomes. Specifically, participants were selected based on their involvement in CBT initiatives, ensuring that the sample could provide insights into resource protection, cultural heritage promotion, and responsible tourism practices. These data collection procedures allowed the study to capture meaningful information on behaviors that support the socio-economic and environmental pillars of sustainable tourism.

3. Data Analysis

The researchers utilized the Braun and Clarke (2006) Framework. The following are the steps: 1) Familiarization with the data, 2) Generating initial codes, 3) Searching for themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5) Defining and naming themes, and 6) Producing the report.

IV. Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses briefly the tourism-related profile of Mararison Island, the key community stakeholders that significantly support CBT development and sustainability, and the successes in stakeholder participation.

1. Tourism-related Profile of Mararison Island

The tourism-related profile includes the data on the tourism stakeholders, the tourism services, and the tourist arrivals.

1) Tourism Stakeholders.

Based on the data provided by the Municipal Tourism Office, the tourism stakeholders include the following: 1) boatmen 2) souvenir makers and/or vendors, 3) health and wellness workers (such as masseurs/masseuses), 4) site guides, 5) homestay service providers, 6) private accommodation owners/staff, 7) resort owners, and 8) Municipal Tourism Office staff.

The list of stakeholders, the number of persons, and its percentage are presented in Table 2.

〈Table 2〉 Tourism stakeholders

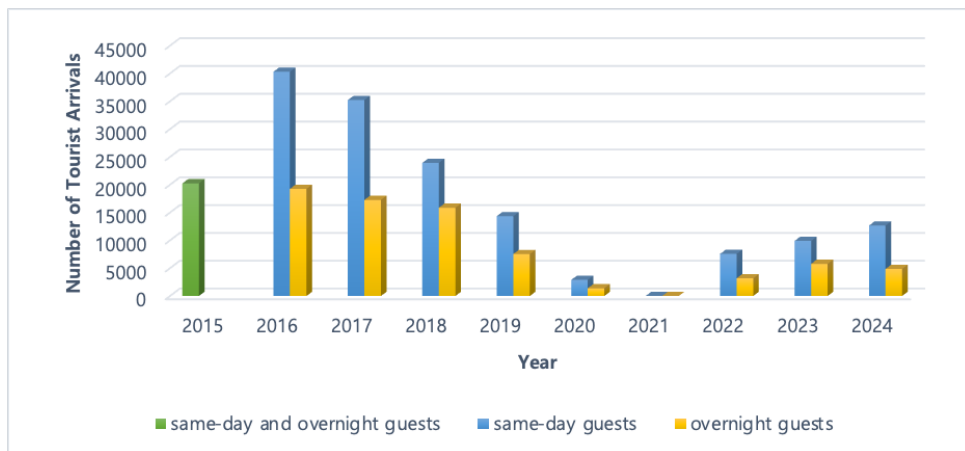
Types of participants	Number	Percentage
A. Entire Group	259	100.00%
B. 1. Boatmen	135	52.12%
2. Souvenir Makers and/or Vendors	3	1.16%
3. Health and Wellness Workers	4	1.54%
4. Site Guides	77	29.73%
5. Homestay Service Providers	15	5.79%
6. Private Accommodation Owners	10	3.86%
7. Resorts Owners	2	0.77%
8. Tourism Office Staff	13	5.02%

2) Tourism Services

As revealed in Table 2, also supported by the data in Table 1 and from the focus group discussions, the services provided in Mararison Island include the following: 1) transportation, 2) accommodation, 3) food, 4) guided tours, 5) wellness, and 6) cultural services.

3) Tourist Arrivals

Figure 1 presents the data on tourist arrivals at Mararison Island for ten years, from 2015 to 2024, for both the same-day visitors and overnight guests. The highest number of tourist arrivals is in 2016 with 40,307 same-day visitors and 19,257 overnight guests, while there was none in 2021.



〈Figure 1〉 Tourism Arrivals at Mararison Island

2. Key Community Stakeholders that Significantly Support CBT Development and Sustainability

The data from the focus group discussions and the profile of Mararison Island reveal that CBT development and sustainability is significantly supported by the

key community stakeholders that include the government officials and Tourism Office heads and staff; and the frontliners such as the resort owners and staff, homestay owners and staff, boatmen, site guides, cook, masseuse, souvenir makers and/or vendors, and hair braiders.

3. Successes in Stakeholder Participation

Based on the analysis of the textual data from the focus group discussions and numerical data such as participants' age, gender, occupation, and household income collection from the community profile, seventeen (17) themes emerged that explain the successes of stakeholders' participation towards sustainable tourism development in the Island. Each of the themes is discussed briefly in the succeeding paragraphs.

1) Accessibility and Affordability for Locals.

At present, senior citizens are exempted from paying the terminal fee and the environmental fee. Moreover, the existence of proposals for discounts and fee exemptions for residents of Culasi reflect awareness of equity. The recognition of the equity issue has led to open community discussion.

2) Generational and Social Shifts.

The use of social media is empowering the youth to engage in tourism promotion.

3) Equitable Distribution of Tourism Benefits.

There is also the recognition of need for inclusive support to stakeholders, such as small-scale boat operators and homestays.

4) Economic Diversification and Community Resilience.

The data on tourist arrival in Figure 3 reveal how CBT in the Island recovered after the devastation of a super typhoon in 2013, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019–2021. The stakeholders also manifest a strong desire for “kapit-bisig” (solidarity) in development. They also express a hopeful vision for sustainability

rooted in local culture.

The focus group discussion also highlighted the calls for diversification into crafts, food, and local drinks. There is also a recognition of the need for cooperative revival and enterprise support.

5) Cultural Preservation and Respect.

The residents in the island have strong adherence to traditional beliefs and taboos. An example of which is not taking sand from the Island. Moreover, there is that desire to embed cultural superstitions and stories, through local storytelling, into tourist education.

6) Link Between Tourism and Natural Resource Protection.

Healthy marine systems directly support livelihoods, specifically fishing and tourism. Moreover, the community-led marine protected areas (MPAs) and sanctuary management are operational.

7) Environmental Protection and Regulations.

Local bans on plastics and extraction activities are implemented. Moreover, ordinances exist and reflect local environmental commitment.

8) Marine and Natural Resource Management.

The stakeholders take pride in biodiversity and marine areas as key tourist draws. The comparison to major dive sites, such as the Tubbataha Reef, shows high conservation value.

9) Environmental Degradation and Management.

The stakeholders manifest their strong awareness of the value of a clean environment. Their active community participation in waste education and clean-ups also contributes to the success of community-based tourism in Mararison Island.

10) Ecotourism Principles and Education.

Local understanding of eco-tourism vs. mass tourism is strong. Moreover, the

positive use of homestays and photography for cultural appreciation are apparent.

11) Tourism Planning and Coordination.

The community recognizes the need for integrated tourism planning. The presence of various types of tourism stakeholders, as revealed in Table 2, reflects a multi-level structure of participation. With this diversity, the participation of the various sectors of tourism stakeholders ensures balanced development and inclusive planning processes.

12) Governance and Policy Issues.

The Local Government Unit of Culasi forged a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with a university for the crafting of a comprehensive Tourism Development Plan. Moreover, there are calls for community-driven planning and accountability or governance.

13) Community Involvement and Empowerment.

High local engagement through fish wardens, boards, and naming practices are observed. The community also has the Mararison Island Community-based Tourism Organization (MICBETO) that plays a key role in managing its tourism activities.

As revealed by the community profile presented in Table 2, a significant number of active boatmen (135 or 52.12%) and site guides (77 or 29.73%) suggests that tourism is rooted in local labor and community engagement. This widespread involvement indicates a degree of stakeholder buy-in and ownership, which are key indicators of participatory success. The existence of homestays, vendors, and private accommodations also signal local empowerment.

14) Capacity Building and Training.

There are existing training programs to the front liners, such as the site guides, masseur/masseuse, lifeguards, etc. The trainings include lifeguard and basic life support, massage, and even on fish monitoring. The stakeholders' interest in branded service standards and volunteer upskilling is evident.

15) Infrastructure and Comfort Improvements.

There is a consensus on sustainable comfort and zoning improvements, such as the alternative boarding sites, docking zones, and swimming zones.

16) Communication, Signage, and Safety.

The community recognizes and advocates for clear, sustainable signage and safety systems.

17) Energy and Basic Services.

As mentioned in one of the preceding themes, basic health and safety trainings are provided locally. Moreover, there are grassroots initiatives to improve resilience.

V. Conclusion

The island's tourism success is rooted in a holistic, community-centered approach that integrates environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, economic development, and good governance.

Key elements included prioritizing local accessibility and affordability, fostering ecotourism and cultural appreciation, and protecting natural resources. Additionally, inclusive planning, community empowerment, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits were found to strengthen local resilience and aspirations. Effective governance, infrastructure development, and ongoing capacity-building efforts further contributed to a well-rounded and sustainable tourism model. Collectively, the findings emphasize that a multidimensional, inclusive strategy-grounded in both environmental stewardship and socio-economic development is essential for sustaining and enhancing CBT initiatives in Mararison Island and similar destinations.

Hence, the findings of this study offer several theoretical and academic contributions to the field of tourism specifically in CBT and sustainable tourism

development. First, the study reinforces the theoretical premise that successful CBT initiatives rely on multi-level stakeholder participation, encompassing government officials, tourism office staff, frontliners, and local entrepreneurs. The identification of seventeen key themes illustrates how participatory engagement, equitable benefit distribution, and community empowerment collectively contribute to the sustainability of tourism initiatives. These insights extend existing CBT frameworks by demonstrating the interdependence between cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and socio-economic resilience, particularly in small island contexts like Mararison Island.

Academically, the study provides empirical evidence supporting the integration of social, economic, and ecological dimensions within CBT models sustainability, highlighting the value of inclusive governance, capacity-building programs, and community-driven planning in sustaining tourism initiatives. The documented linkage between stakeholder engagement, local empowerment, and long-term sustainability contributes to a more nuanced understanding of participatory tourism development, offering a practical illustration of theoretical constructs in real-world settings. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of contextualizing CBT strategies within local socio-cultural and environmental realities, thereby offering a model for future research in rural and island tourism destinations. Collectively, these contributions deepen theoretical discourse on CBT and provide a robust empirical basis for scholars and practitioners seeking to enhance sustainable, community-centered tourism development.

VI. Recommendation

To sustain the success and enhancement of CBT initiatives in Mararison Island, it is recommended that the stakeholders continue to promote participatory governance and inclusive planning, manifest active participation in capacity- and capability-building activities, implement infrastructure and other development projects, focus on implementing environment-friendly and culturally-rich tourism activities, and encourage equitable sharing of economic returns.

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2025년 7월 21일 원고 접수

2025년 8월 14일 수정본 접수

2025년 8월 26일 최종 수정본 접수 및 게재확정

3인 익명심사 필