

The Implementation of Sustainable Tourism Policies in Labuan Bajo: Assessing the Distribution of Tourism Benefits between Investors and Local Communities

Aditya Wiguna* 

Politeknik eLBajo Commodus, Labuan Bajo, Indonesia
adityawiguna@gmail.com

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*Corresponding Author

Abstract

Labuan Bajo has been designated as one of Indonesia's priority tourism destinations, attracting substantial public and private investment. While tourism development has generated new economic opportunities, questions remain concerning the extent to which local communities benefit from the growing tourism economy. This article examines the implementation of sustainable tourism policies in Labuan Bajo, focusing on the distribution of economic benefits between tourism investors and local communities. Using normative juridical and policy analysis, the study evaluates tourism governance, local economic participation, licensing, investment policies, and community development mechanisms. The article argues that sustainable tourism cannot be measured exclusively through environmental indicators or visitor growth but must also incorporate distributive justice. Local communities should have meaningful opportunities to participate in tourism supply chains, employment, entrepreneurship, and decision-making. The study proposes a community benefit framework incorporating local procurement, employment targets, community enterprises, transparent investment obligations, and participatory destination governance. Particular attention is given to the risk of economic leakage, where tourism revenue generated in Labuan Bajo flows disproportionately to external investors. Strengthening local economic participation would ensure that tourism development contributes to inclusive growth and improves community welfare. The article concludes that sustainability in Labuan Bajo requires integrating environmental management with explicit mechanisms for economic justice.

[Labuan Bajo telah ditetapkan sebagai salah satu destinasi wisata prioritas Indonesia, yang menarik investasi publik dan swasta yang substansial. Meskipun pengembangan pariwisata telah menghasilkan peluang ekonomi baru, pertanyaan tetap muncul mengenai sejauh mana masyarakat lokal mendapat manfaat dari pertumbuhan ekonomi pariwisata. Artikel ini mengkaji implementasi kebijakan pariwisata berkelanjutan di Labuan Bajo,

dengan fokus pada distribusi manfaat ekonomi antara investor pariwisata dan masyarakat lokal. Dengan menggunakan analisis yuridis normatif dan kebijakan, studi ini mengevaluasi tata kelola pariwisata, partisipasi ekonomi lokal, perizinan, kebijakan investasi, dan mekanisme pengembangan masyarakat. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa pariwisata berkelanjutan tidak dapat diukur secara eksklusif melalui indikator lingkungan atau pertumbuhan pengunjung, tetapi juga harus mencakup keadilan distributif. Masyarakat lokal harus memiliki peluang yang berarti untuk berpartisipasi dalam rantai pasokan pariwisata, lapangan kerja, kewirausahaan, dan pengambilan keputusan. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka manfaat masyarakat yang mencakup pengadaan lokal, target lapangan kerja, usaha masyarakat, kewajiban investasi yang transparan, dan tata kelola destinasi partisipatif. Perhatian khusus diberikan pada risiko kebocoran ekonomi, di mana pendapatan pariwisata yang dihasilkan di Labuan Bajo mengalir secara tidak proporsional kepada investor eksternal. Penguatan partisipasi ekonomi lokal akan memastikan bahwa pengembangan pariwisata berkontribusi pada pertumbuhan inklusif dan meningkatkan kesejahteraan masyarakat. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa keberlanjutan di Labuan Bajo membutuhkan integrasi pengelolaan lingkungan dengan mekanisme eksplisit untuk keadilan ekonomi.]

Keywords: Labuan Bajo, sustainable tourism, local communities, benefit distribution, tourism justice

Introduction

Tourism has become an important instrument of regional development in Indonesia, particularly following the government's decision to accelerate several destinations through the Super Priority Tourism Destination programme. Labuan Bajo occupies a distinctive position within this strategy because it combines international tourism, marine and nature-based attractions, the gateway function to Komodo National Park, and substantial infrastructure and investment intervention. The development trajectory has consequently transformed the local economy from one historically associated with fishing, small-scale trade, and community-based livelihoods toward a service economy increasingly oriented toward accommodation, transportation, food services, guiding, marine tourism, and other visitor-related activities. Empirical research confirms that communities in Labuan Bajo have adapted to this transformation and that tourism provides new economic opportunities, while simultaneously creating pressure to strengthen the role of local people within the expanding tourism economy (Islahuddin et al. 2022).

The expansion of tourism investment, however, does not necessarily mean that the economic value generated by tourism remains in the destination. Tourism destinations can experience economic leakage when profits, ownership, procurement, specialized services, and capital returns flow to external companies

rather than circulating within local economies. This distinction is crucial in Labuan Bajo because investment-led tourism tends to require substantial capital, specialized managerial expertise, internationally connected marketing networks, and standardized tourism infrastructure. Local residents may consequently enter the industry primarily as employees or small-scale suppliers while higher-value activities remain controlled by investors with greater financial and institutional capacity. A destination can therefore record rising tourist expenditure while local communities capture only a limited proportion of the resulting value.

The literature on Labuan Bajo presents a mixed picture. Benu et al. (2020) found that community perspectives toward sustainable tourism are connected to economic prosperity, social equity, cultural vitality, and environmental sustainability, suggesting that local support cannot be separated from the distribution of tourism benefits. Khan et al. (2020) similarly identified the importance of community participation in sustainable marine tourism and examined local perceptions concerning tourism policy and resource management. Meanwhile, Sianipar and Suryawan (2024) show that rapid tourism growth in Labuan Bajo and Komodo National Park generates both opportunities and social-ecological pressures, requiring stronger adaptation by local communities.

Other research highlights the importance of local economic participation. Ismowati et al. (2022) demonstrate that community participation is particularly relevant for maximizing the economic potential of Labuan Bajo, including through small and medium-sized enterprises. Research on local gastronomy also suggests that local cultural resources can diversify tourism products, although gaps remain in collaboration, promotion, infrastructure, and the commercialization of grassroots initiatives. These findings suggest that the principal challenge is not the absence of local economic activity but whether local enterprises can move beyond peripheral participation toward positions capable of capturing greater tourism value.

This article therefore approaches sustainable tourism from a distributive perspective. Rather than asking only whether tourism creates employment or whether visitor numbers increase, it asks how tourism value is distributed across investors, government institutions, large tourism enterprises, local businesses, workers, and households. This approach is consistent with emerging tourism justice scholarship, which argues that sustainability must address distribution, participation, recognition, and restoration rather than treating environmental sustainability as sufficient in itself (Rastegar 2025; Rastegar et al. 2022).

The article contributes to the literature by connecting tourism sustainability with the governance of economic value. In the context of Labuan Bajo, sustainable tourism should mean more than protecting Komodo National Park or controlling environmental pressures. It should also ensure that the economic value created through tourism is sufficiently embedded in the local economy. The central argument is that tourism policy becomes distributively sustainable only when local communities possess institutional and economic mechanisms through which they can capture a meaningful share of tourism-generated value.

Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

1. Sustainable Tourism and the Distribution of Economic Value

The conventional concept of sustainable tourism rests on the integration of environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Such an approach requires tourism to meet present needs without undermining the ability of future generations and host communities to benefit from tourism resources. Yet economic sustainability is frequently interpreted as destination competitiveness, investment growth, employment generation, or increased tourist expenditure. These indicators are insufficient if the economic benefits of tourism are concentrated among actors with greater capital and bargaining power.

The distributive dimension of sustainability requires attention to the circulation of tourism value. Tourism expenditure does not automatically become local income. A tourist may spend money in a hotel, restaurant, transport company, tour operator, or attraction, but the proportion retained locally depends upon ownership structures, procurement patterns, wages, taxes, imported inputs, and profit repatriation. Tourism therefore has a multiplier potential, but the magnitude of that multiplier depends on how strongly the destination's economy is connected to tourism supply chains. Croes and Rivera (2017), for example, demonstrate that tourism can generate significant distributional benefits for lower-income groups, but the benefits depend on the structure through which tourism expansion is transmitted throughout the economy.

The implication is that destination sustainability should be measured through economic embeddedness rather than aggregate tourism performance. A destination where hotels, restaurants, transportation operators, food suppliers, handicraft producers, and cultural businesses are locally connected can generate wider multiplier effects than a destination in which tourism relies heavily on externally sourced goods, external ownership, and imported expertise.

2. Tourism Justice and Distributive Governance

Tourism justice provides a second theoretical foundation. Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned tourism models that frame economic growth as inherently beneficial while treating social costs as secondary considerations. Rastegar et al. (2022) conceptualize tourism justice through multiple dimensions, including distribution, procedure, recognition, and restoration. Their framework is useful for Labuan Bajo because economic distribution cannot be separated from participation and recognition. A community that receives a small number of low-paid jobs while having little influence over destination planning is not necessarily experiencing an equitable tourism system. ([ScienceDirect](#))

Distributive justice in tourism concerns who obtains benefits and who carries costs. Procedural justice addresses who participates in decisions. Recognition concerns whether local identities, knowledge, and livelihood systems are recognized within tourism governance. These dimensions are interconnected. If communities have limited participation, they may have limited ability to influence

the distribution of tourism resources. If their livelihood systems are not recognized, tourism planning may privilege investment and visitor needs over existing community economic practices.

Rastegar (2025) further argues for regenerative justice, which moves beyond merely restoring communities after harm has occurred toward transforming the structures that generate unequal outcomes. Applied to Labuan Bajo, this perspective means that tourism governance should not simply compensate communities for negative impacts but should create institutional arrangements enabling them to become stronger economic actors within the destination.

3. Community Participation and Local Economic Empowerment

Community-based tourism scholarship emphasizes that participation is meaningful when communities possess real influence over tourism development and receive tangible economic benefits. However, participation can vary substantially in depth. Communities may be informed about tourism plans, consulted regarding projects, involved in implementation, or empowered to control tourism enterprises. These forms of participation produce different distributive consequences.

Research in Labuan Bajo indicates that local communities have undergone an economic transition from fishing-based livelihoods toward tourism-related activities (Islahuddin et al. 2022). This transformation should not automatically be interpreted as empowerment. Economic adaptation may also reflect structural pressure when traditional livelihood opportunities decline while tourism becomes increasingly dominant. The crucial issue is whether communities control the terms of this transition.

Benu et al. (2020) demonstrate the importance of community participation in the sustainable tourism development of Komodo National Park and its surrounding areas. Their findings connect participation with social equity, cultural vitality, environmental sustainability, and economic prosperity. This provides an important theoretical basis for viewing local participation not as a supplementary component of tourism governance but as a mechanism through which distributive outcomes can be improved.

Methods

This study employs normative juridical research supported by socio-legal and policy analysis. The normative component examines the Indonesian legal framework governing tourism, investment, destination development, local economic participation, environmental protection, and community involvement. Relevant legislation includes Law No. 10 of 2009 on Tourism, Law No. 25 of 2007 on Investment, Law No. 23 of 2014 on Regional Government, Law No. 32 of 2009 on Environmental Protection and Management, and Government Regulation No. 50 of 2011 concerning the National Tourism Development Master Plan.

The socio-legal dimension is used to examine how formal tourism policies interact with community economic participation. This component is important because the existence of legal recognition of community involvement does not necessarily demonstrate that communities receive an equitable proportion of tourism value. Empirical studies concerning Labuan Bajo, Komodo National Park, community participation, local livelihoods, and tourism development are therefore examined to identify patterns concerning employment, entrepreneurship, participation, environmental pressures, and economic distribution.

The analysis adopts a qualitative interpretive approach. Sources were selected according to their relevance to four analytical variables: local participation in tourism decision-making, community access to tourism supply chains, distribution of tourism-generated economic benefits, and institutional mechanisms for preventing economic leakage. The analysis does not attempt to estimate a precise percentage of tourism revenue retained by local communities because sufficiently comprehensive destination-level leakage data are not consistently available. Instead, it assesses the institutional conditions that influence whether tourism expenditure can circulate within the local economy.

The study also applies a comparative literature approach. Findings from Labuan Bajo are interpreted alongside broader scholarship concerning sustainable tourism, community-based tourism, pro-poor tourism, tourism justice, and local economic development. This comparative approach allows the article to identify structural mechanisms that may influence benefit distribution without treating Labuan Bajo as identical to other tourism destinations.

Results and Discussion

1. Tourism Growth and the Unequal Capture of Destination Value

The transformation of Labuan Bajo demonstrates that tourism growth can simultaneously create opportunities and intensify distributive challenges. The expansion of hotels, restaurants, marine tourism, transportation, tour operations, and related services has broadened the local economic base. For residents, this transformation creates new employment opportunities and possibilities for entrepreneurship. Yet the expansion of the tourism economy also changes the structure of competition. Businesses requiring substantial capital, sophisticated marketing, international distribution networks, and standardized facilities are more likely to be accessible to investors than to households with limited financial resources.

This creates a distinction between participation and value capture. Local people can participate in tourism without necessarily capturing a significant share of tourism value. A worker employed by an externally owned hotel contributes to the tourism economy but receives only a fraction of the value generated by the enterprise. A local boat operator may receive direct tourism income but remain dependent upon tour companies controlling access to customers. A small food producer may sell to tourists but face competition from larger establishments

capable of purchasing supplies at lower prices or investing more heavily in branding.

The evidence from Labuan Bajo supports this interpretation. Islahuddin et al. (2022) describe the transformation of local communities from predominantly fishing-oriented livelihoods toward tourism-related economic activity and emphasize the need to increase their role so that they do not receive only marginal benefits from the broader Super Priority Destination programme. The finding is analytically significant because it suggests that the problem is not simply unemployment but positional inequality within the tourism value chain.

Tourism policy should therefore distinguish between the number of local people involved in tourism and the quality of their economic position. High local employment does not necessarily indicate equitable tourism if most local jobs are low-paid, insecure, seasonal, or concentrated at the bottom of the value chain. Sustainable tourism requires movement toward higher-value participation, including management, ownership, specialized services, digital marketing, guiding, product development, procurement, and tourism entrepreneurship.

This issue also affects the interpretation of investment. Investment is commonly justified through employment creation, infrastructure development, and economic multiplier effects. These benefits are real, but their magnitude depends upon the relationship between investors and local economic networks. If investors import food, equipment, managerial expertise, digital services, and other inputs from outside the region, a substantial proportion of tourism expenditure may leave Labuan Bajo before producing secondary local economic effects.

The central policy problem is therefore not whether external investment should be rejected. Labuan Bajo requires investment for infrastructure, accommodation, transportation, environmental management, and tourism services. The more appropriate objective is to increase the degree of local economic embeddedness of investment. Investment should become a platform through which local enterprises gain access to markets rather than a self-contained economic enclave.

2. Local Supply Chains as the Missing Link in Sustainable Tourism

The distribution of tourism benefits depends heavily on supply chains. Tourism businesses purchase food, beverages, transportation, maintenance, furniture, handicrafts, cultural services, digital services, construction inputs, and other goods. Every local purchase creates an opportunity for tourism expenditure to circulate within the regional economy. Conversely, external procurement increases economic leakage.

Labuan Bajo possesses significant potential for developing local supply chains because tourism demand is closely connected to food, marine products, cultural products, transportation, handicrafts, guiding, and hospitality services. Research on local gastronomy identifies the potential of culinary heritage and local products to diversify the tourism experience while also revealing limitations in infrastructure,

promotion, and collaboration (Teguh, Pramezwary, and Gajeng 2025). This indicates that local resources exist, but institutional mechanisms are necessary to connect them systematically with larger tourism enterprises.

Local procurement should therefore become a measurable component of tourism policy. Large hotels and tourism operators could be encouraged or required, depending on the relevant legal instrument, to publish procurement strategies and establish targets for locally sourced products and services. Such requirements would be more meaningful than general statements about community empowerment because they directly affect how tourism revenue circulates.

However, local procurement cannot succeed without supply-side capacity. Small enterprises may struggle to meet the quality, quantity, certification, reliability, packaging, or delivery requirements of large tourism businesses. Government policy should therefore combine procurement obligations with supplier-development programmes. Training, financing, certification assistance, digitalization, cooperative organization, and shared logistics can help local enterprises meet tourism-industry standards.

This approach is consistent with research emphasizing community economic participation as a foundation for sustainable tourism. Ismowati et al. (2022) identify community participation and SMEs as important mechanisms for maximizing the economic potential of Labuan Bajo. The implication is that local businesses should not be treated merely as informal beneficiaries of tourism growth but as components of the formal tourism supply chain.

The same logic applies to local agriculture and fisheries. Tourism can create stable demand for locally produced food, but only if supply chains are organized so that small producers can meet hospitality-sector requirements. Without such integration, hotels and restaurants may purchase food through external wholesalers even when similar products are available locally. Sustainable tourism policy should therefore connect tourism development with regional food systems rather than allowing tourism to become economically detached from surrounding production.

3. Employment Is Not Enough: From Labour Participation to Economic Mobility

Employment is often used as the simplest indicator of tourism's contribution to local welfare. Yet the quality and mobility of employment matter as much as the number of jobs created. A sustainable tourism economy should provide pathways through which local workers can progress from entry-level positions toward skilled and managerial occupations.

The rapid tourism transformation in Labuan Bajo creates a potential mismatch between investment needs and local human capital. Research on community adaptation suggests that local communities are required to acquire new skills and adapt to the tourism economy (Islahuddin et al. 2022). If training is inadequate, external investors may recruit managerial and specialized personnel from outside the destination, leaving local workers concentrated in lower-paid occupations.

This creates a form of economic leakage that is less visible than profit repatriation. Even when company profits remain partly within the destination, expenditure on external labour, consultancy, technology, and professional services can reduce local multiplier effects. Consequently, human-capital development should be treated as an economic distribution mechanism.

Tourism policy should therefore establish stronger connections between investment licensing, vocational education, and local recruitment. Large tourism projects could be required to develop workforce plans identifying which positions are intended for local workers, what training is necessary, and how workers can progress toward higher-skilled positions. This would convert investment into a mechanism for long-term capacity building rather than simply short-term employment generation.

The distinction is also relevant to women and younger workers. Tourism often expands sectors in which women can participate, including hospitality, food services, handicrafts, guiding, and small entrepreneurship. However, women may remain concentrated in informal or lower-paid activities. A distributive tourism strategy therefore needs gender-sensitive employment standards, access to finance, training, and entrepreneurship programmes.

A similar principle applies to young people. Tourism can reduce migration pressures by creating local employment, but only if employment provides meaningful economic prospects. If young workers perceive tourism jobs as insecure or poorly paid, tourism may fail to generate durable local economic attachment. Skills development should consequently be designed around career mobility rather than merely filling immediate labour shortages.

4. Community Participation and the Governance of Tourism Investment

The distribution of tourism benefits cannot be separated from the distribution of decision-making power. Communities that lack meaningful participation have limited ability to influence investment priorities, infrastructure allocation, environmental management, employment requirements, and local economic programmes.

Research on Labuan Bajo demonstrates that local communities have actively adapted to tourism development, but it also emphasizes the need for stronger collaboration among communities, government, tourism businesses, and academic institutions (Islahuddin et al. 2022). This suggests that community participation should be institutionalized through destination governance rather than left to individual projects.

Benu et al. (2020) similarly connect sustainable tourism in Komodo National Park with social equity, economic prosperity, cultural vitality, and community participation. The relevance of this finding extends beyond the national park itself because Labuan Bajo functions as the principal tourism gateway and commercial hub surrounding the destination.

Participatory governance should therefore include mechanisms through which local communities can monitor tourism investment commitments. Investors should not be evaluated exclusively through capital realization or construction progress. Destination authorities should also monitor local employment, local procurement, community enterprise participation, environmental compliance, and social impacts.

This approach would change the meaning of corporate social responsibility. Instead of treating community programmes as voluntary charitable activities, local benefit obligations could be integrated into investment governance. Tourism enterprises benefiting from destination infrastructure, branding, and public investment should contribute to the economic ecosystem that makes their operations possible.

Such governance is particularly important because the state itself is a major investor in destination infrastructure. Public investment in airports, roads, ports, sanitation, public spaces, and destination branding increases the value of private tourism investment. From a distributive perspective, private investors therefore operate within a value environment partially created through public expenditure. It is reasonable, consequently, for public policy to require that part of the resulting economic value circulate back into the local economy.

5. Toward a Community Benefit Model for Labuan Bajo

The preceding analysis suggests that Labuan Bajo requires a shift from a tourism growth model toward a community benefit model. The objective is not to reduce investment but to restructure the relationship between investment and local economic development. A community benefit model treats local economic participation as a measurable outcome of tourism policy.

The first component should be local procurement. Destination policy should establish transparent mechanisms for connecting hotels, restaurants, tour operators, and other tourism enterprises with local suppliers. Local procurement targets should be accompanied by supplier development so that small enterprises can meet tourism-sector standards.

The second component should be local employment and career mobility. Tourism businesses should be encouraged to develop measurable local recruitment and training targets. Training should prioritize pathways toward skilled and supervisory occupations rather than concentrating local workers in entry-level jobs.

The third component should be community enterprise development. Local residents should have opportunities to establish businesses within tourism supply chains, including transportation, guiding, food production, cultural experiences, marine services, handicrafts, accommodation, and digital tourism services. Community enterprises can retain a greater share of tourism expenditure than wage employment alone.

The fourth component should be transparent benefit measurement. Sustainable tourism indicators for Labuan Bajo should include local procurement

rates, proportion of local employees, local management representation, number of community-owned enterprises, local household income effects, training participation, and environmental costs. This would make distributive justice empirically assessable rather than rhetorical.

The fifth component should be participatory destination governance. Local communities should possess institutional channels through which they can influence tourism planning and evaluate whether investors meet agreed social and environmental commitments. Community participation should extend beyond consultation to monitoring, evaluation, and policy adjustment.

This model is consistent with broader research on pro-poor tourism. Pang et al. (2024) find that community-led income distribution can produce stronger visitor intention and willingness to pay than government- or corporation-led distribution models. Although this evidence comes from another destination, its theoretical implication is relevant: tourists may value tourism systems in which communities visibly and directly benefit from tourism expenditure.

The argument is reinforced by Pang et al. (2025), who find that tourists show a preference for community-led income distribution models in both stated and revealed preference experiments. This suggests that equitable benefit distribution need not be viewed as a constraint on tourism competitiveness. Under appropriate conditions, it can become part of the destination's value proposition. The resulting governance model would therefore redefine sustainable tourism. Environmental conservation remains essential, particularly because Labuan Bajo depends heavily upon marine ecosystems and Komodo National Park. Yet environmental sustainability without economic inclusion risks producing a destination that protects its natural assets while allowing local communities to remain economically peripheral. Conversely, economic growth without environmental protection would undermine the ecological resources upon which tourism depends. Sustainable tourism requires these dimensions to be governed together.

Conclusion

The development of Labuan Bajo demonstrates that tourism growth and sustainable tourism are not synonymous. Investment, infrastructure, and increasing tourism activity have created substantial opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship, and regional economic development, but the existence of these benefits does not establish that they are distributed equitably. The central distributive challenge concerns the position of local communities within the tourism value chain. When local residents remain concentrated in low-value employment or small-scale activities while ownership, procurement, management, and high-value services are controlled externally, tourism may generate substantial economic output without producing proportional local economic empowerment. The evidence from Labuan Bajo indicates that community adaptation and participation are already occurring, but stronger institutional mechanisms are

necessary to ensure that local communities capture a larger and more durable share of tourism value.

Sustainable tourism policy in Labuan Bajo should therefore move beyond visitor growth, infrastructure development, and environmental indicators toward measurable community benefit governance. Local procurement, quality employment, skills development, community enterprises, transparent investment obligations, and participatory destination governance should become integral components of tourism policy. This approach does not require limiting legitimate investment; rather, it seeks to increase the local economic embeddedness of investment. The ultimate measure of sustainability should be whether tourism strengthens the economic capabilities of the communities that host it while preserving the environmental assets on which the destination depends. Labuan Bajo can become an inclusive tourism destination only when local communities are positioned not merely as workers, service providers, or recipients of tourism programmes, but as active economic participants and legitimate stakeholders in destination governance.

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