

## Tourism Problems Policy in Labuan Bajo Using a Democratic Approach

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### ABSTRACT

Labuan Bajo, one of Indonesia's premier tourist destinations, faces significant challenges despite its growing popularity. Issues such as environmental degradation, economic inequality, and social conflict threaten the sustainability of tourism in the region. This study examines the application of democratic, participatory, and equitable approaches as potential solutions to these problems. The democratic approach emphasizes community involvement in decision-making processes to align tourism development with the needs and interests of local residents. The participatory approach encourages collaboration among stakeholders, including the government, private sector, and local communities, fostering sustainable tourism practices. Meanwhile, the equitable approach seeks to ensure a fair distribution of tourism benefits to prevent social conflicts and promote economic inclusivity. This research employs qualitative descriptive methods, utilizing literature reviews and multimedia sources to analyze tourism challenges and propose sustainable solutions. The findings reveal that incorporating democratic principles, such as establishing community tourism forums and supervisory bodies, can enhance local participation and environmental conservation. Additionally, community-based tourism initiatives provide greater economic benefits to local populations, reducing economic disparities. The results highlight the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach, where government, private entities, and local communities collaborate to address tourism-related challenges. The study concludes that a democratic framework, coupled with participatory and equitable strategies, is vital for achieving sustainable and inclusive tourism development in Labuan Bajo. These approaches not only safeguard environmental and cultural heritage but also ensure long-term economic growth that benefits all stakeholders.

Keyword: Policy, Tourism, Democratic



### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country endowed with abundant natural wealth, rich cultural diversity, and vibrant social life, making it one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world (Itsnaini, 2022). In 2022, Indonesia was named the country with the best natural scenery in the world by the renowned UK media outlet, Money.co.uk, scoring 7.77 out of 10 (Taris, 2022a). This accolade placed Indonesia ahead of countries like New Zealand, Colombia, and Tanzania. With over 17,000 islands teeming with biodiversity and ecosystems such as volcanoes, coral reefs, tropical forests, and glaciers, Indonesia offers unparalleled natural

beauty (Kurnianingsih et al., 2022; Purnomo et al., 2021). Some of the globally renowned attractions include Raja Ampat, Lake Toba, Mount Bromo, Komodo National Park, and Borobudur Temple (Abtadi & Kurniawati, 2023). Additionally, Indonesia is home to numerous UNESCO World Heritage Sites, such as Lorentz National Park, Ujung Kulon National Park, and the Sangiran Early Man Site, reflecting its cultural and historical significance (Meskell, 2018; Mihardja et al., 2023).

Indonesia's abundant natural resources compel the government to harness their potential for increasing national revenue and enhancing economic welfare for local communities around these tourist destinations (Sayrani, 2018). Under President Joko Widodo's leadership, a transformative vision was initiated for Indonesia's tourism sector, focusing on revitalizing the industry by identifying and developing high-value destinations. As part of this initiative, the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf) identified five super-priority destinations (DSPs), located in five different provinces. These DSPs include Lake Toba (North Sumatra), Borobudur (Central Java), Labuan Bajo (East Nusa Tenggara), Likupang (North Sulawesi), and Mandalika (West Nusa Tenggara) (Noname, 2022).

Among these five destinations, Labuan Bajo stands out due to its unique beauty and attractions. Situated on the southwestern tip of Flores Island, Labuan Bajo has rapidly transformed into a prime tourism destination in recent years (Ardin, 2022; Taris, 2022b). Its uniqueness lies in several features: it serves as the gateway to Komodo National Park, home to the rare Komodo dragon, the largest lizard species in the world; it boasts breathtaking underwater wonders, including diverse coral reefs, marine species, and the rare pink sand beach; and it offers mesmerizing landscapes with karst islands rising from the blue sea, as well as cultural richness exemplified by Wae Rebo, a traditional mountain village known for its cone-shaped houses (Ratman, 2016).

The rapid growth of Labuan Bajo's tourism industry has positioned it as a global highlight. However, behind this glittering reputation lies pressing issues that demand immediate attention. Uncontrolled tourism growth has triggered significant negative impacts, particularly on the environment (Simon et al., 2021). The rise in tourist numbers has led to an increase in waste, particularly plastic, polluting water channels and beaches, thereby threatening the integrity of its fragile marine ecosystem (Sukuryadi et al., 2021). Coral reefs, a masterpiece of underwater biodiversity, are also at risk due to harmful practices such as excessive boating activities and careless snorkeling or diving behaviors that damage these natural wonders.

Beyond environmental challenges, tourism growth in Labuan Bajo has also created economic disparities (Ridwan, 2017). The benefits of tourism tend to concentrate on resort owners and tour operators, while local communities often fail to experience substantial positive impacts. This imbalance highlights the need for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to tourism development (Moayerian et al., 2022; Sharpley & Telfer, 2002). Addressing these challenges requires implementing strict waste management policies, protecting coral reefs, and establishing programs that ensure economic benefits reach local communities. Education and environmental awareness must also play a central role. Tourists should be informed about the impact of their activities on the local environment and culture, while local communities should be empowered to participate in decision-making processes affecting their destination (Hussin et al., 2009; Sharpley, 2018).

Close collaboration between the government, tourism industry stakeholders, NGOs, and local communities is essential to achieve sustainability in Labuan Bajo. By working together to protect the environment, preserve local culture, and ensure fair economic distribution, Labuan Bajo can maintain its reputation as an exceptional tourism destination for current and future generations. A democratic approach is fundamental to addressing these challenges. Empowering local communities to actively participate in tourism development decision-making ensures that their valuable knowledge and rights are recognized and protected. Mechanisms such as public consultations, community discussions, and participatory

planning are essential for ensuring that tourism growth in Labuan Bajo benefits everyone equally. This approach must also focus on ensuring the fair distribution of economic benefits, promoting local job creation, community ownership of tourism enterprises, and royalty-sharing schemes.

To tackle critical issues effectively, specific strategies and solutions must be developed. These could include setting regulatory guidelines to promote sustainability, implementing training programs for local communities, and adopting responsible tourism practices. By embracing democratic, participatory, and equitable approaches, Labuan Bajo can continue to thrive as a premier tourism destination. Striking a balance between economic growth, environmental protection, and cultural sustainability is at the heart of this collective effort. Ultimately, engaging all stakeholders, from government officials to local residents, is crucial for preserving Labuan Bajo as an example of successful sustainable and inclusive tourism. Through collaborative efforts, Labuan Bajo can serve as a model for eco-friendly and socially just tourism, benefiting not only the present but also future generations.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research in this journal employs a descriptive qualitative method. Data collection was conducted through a literature review, where information was gathered from various written sources such as journals, news articles, academic papers, tabloids, and online media. In addition to written sources, data was also obtained through video content, including news broadcasts on YouTube channels and documentary videos (Clark, 1998; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The collected data was then analyzed in-depth and comprehensively using qualitative data analysis methods. The subjects of this research are individuals and groups directly involved in tourism issues in Labuan Bajo. These include local communities in Labuan Bajo, central and regional governments, the Labuan Bajo Flores Authority (BPOLBF), private institutions, and NGOs.

The objects of the research focus on aspects related to democracy, participation, and justice within the framework of network governance. The research is grounded in tourism theory by Kraft and Hunziker, which defines tourism as a social process involving interactions between humans, the natural environment, and cultural contexts. This theory emphasizes the significant role of the state in managing and developing tourism to align with the interests of local communities. Using Kraft and Hunziker's tourism theory, the research examines the interactions between policymakers and their impact on local communities within a democratic framework.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Labuan Bajo: Development and Challenges in Tourism Industry

Labuan Bajo is one of Indonesia's most popular tourist destinations, especially for nature and adventure enthusiasts. It offers a diverse range of attractions, from stunning natural landscapes to unique cultural experiences and extraordinary wildlife. The destination's popularity is evidenced by the increasing number of visitors, rising from 60,439 in 2021 to 158,817 in 2022. This growth reflects the government's commitment to developing Labuan Bajo as a premium tourist destination capable of competing with other global tourist hotspots. Several efforts have been made to achieve this goal, such as declaring Labuan Bajo as one of the five super-priority tourism destinations in Indonesia, establishing the Labuan Bajo Flores Authority (BPOLBF), allocating significant budgets for infrastructure development, and improving the quality of human resources involved in the tourism sector.

Moreover, the government has undertaken international promotional efforts to increase Labuan Bajo's appeal. Notable initiatives include integrating the destination into the 42nd ASEAN Summit, hosting the Labuan Bajo Maritime Festival 2023, and organizing the Asia International Water Week in 2023 (Adila et al., 2023). These efforts have successfully elevated Labuan Bajo's status as a highly sought-after destination. However, to further establish

Labuan Bajo as a premium destination, there remains a need to enhance the management quality of tourist sites, improve cleanliness and safety standards, elevate service quality for both domestic and international visitors, and raise local community awareness of environmental preservation.

Despite these developments, the tourism industry in Labuan Bajo still faces several challenges. One significant issue lies in its connectivity, particularly limited air and sea transportation. The high cost of airline tickets, due to limited flight routes and frequencies, and restricted airport capacities have hindered tourist accessibility. Similarly, insufficient maritime connectivity, including the lack of efficient ferry routes and limited port infrastructure, has restricted the flow of goods and people between islands, impacting both tourism and local economic activities. These issues significantly reduce the destination's accessibility for budget-conscious travelers, potentially causing a loss of market share in broader tourism segments.

Another major challenge is the lack of effective communication and coordination between the central government, local government, and BPOLBF. Disparities in perspectives, lack of synergy, conflicts of interest, and overlapping authorities have created barriers to the implementation of national priority programs. These issues highlight the need for more streamlined and unified decision-making processes to ensure the success of tourism development initiatives. Environmental sustainability and biodiversity preservation are also critical concerns in Labuan Bajo. The increasing number of tourists has led to various environmental challenges, such as rising waste production, pollution, ecosystem damage, and threats to the Komodo dragon population. The proliferation of plastic waste, air and water pollution, and unsustainable tourism practices like coral mining and destructive fishing have significantly harmed Labuan Bajo's delicate ecosystem. Collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including the government, local communities, NGOs, and tourism industries, are crucial to implementing sustainable tourism practices that balance ecological, economic, and social considerations.

Economic inequality among local communities is another pressing issue. Despite the economic benefits of tourism, many locals remain excluded from its advantages. Limited access to jobs, training, and capital has left many residents with low-level employment opportunities in the tourism sector. Furthermore, unequal distribution of income and lack of access to business opportunities in tourism have widened the economic gap, leaving many locals unable to enjoy the sector's prosperity. The disparity is further exacerbated by inadequate local infrastructure and public facilities. Although tourism has spurred economic growth, local infrastructure such as roads, clean water, and sanitation has struggled to keep up with the rising number of visitors. Many local residents also lack access to essential facilities, creating disparities in daily living conditions compared to tourists.

The growth of tourism has also brought about significant social changes in Labuan Bajo. Cultural shifts and changes in lifestyles have occurred as locals adapt to the demands and preferences of tourists, potentially threatening the preservation of their unique cultural identity. Demographic changes and social stratification have also emerged, creating divides between those directly involved in tourism and those who are not. Labuan Bajo's increasing dependence on tourism poses economic risks. Over-reliance on this sector makes the local economy vulnerable to market fluctuations and global crises. The lack of economic diversification further compounds this issue, limiting opportunities for residents to engage in other sectors and increasing the region's economic instability during downturns in tourism demand.

To address these challenges, a collaborative and comprehensive approach is necessary. This includes improving tourism management, fostering sustainable practices, strengthening infrastructure, and empowering local communities through education and entrepreneurship programs. By taking these steps, Labuan Bajo can not only overcome its

current challenges but also establish itself as a world-class tourism destination capable of sustaining long-term growth and development (Ardiansyah et al., 2023; Hanafi, 2022).

## 2. Democratic Approaches in Resolving Tourism Issues in Labuan Bajo

The democratic approach to addressing tourism-related issues in Labuan Bajo can be achieved by involving all relevant stakeholders, including the government, local communities, the tourism industry, and NGOs. This approach ensures that the development of tourism benefits all parties equitably and promotes sustainability. The government plays a crucial role in ensuring that tourism development in Labuan Bajo is sustainable and advantageous for all stakeholders. The government can achieve this by:

- a. Developing policies and regulations that support sustainable tourism.
- b. Building adequate tourism infrastructure and facilities.
- c. Enhancing tourism promotion for Labuan Bajo.

Furthermore, the government has already established the Labuan Bajo Flores Authority Executing Agency (BPOLBF) under the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf). This agency, established by Presidential Regulation No. 32 of 2018, accelerates integrated tourism development across 11 coordinating districts and 400 hectares of tourism zones in the Bowosie Forest, West Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. Local communities, as the most affected group by tourism development, must be actively involved in decision-making and program implementation. They can contribute by:

- a. Preserving environmental and biodiversity sustainability.
- b. Creating unique and attractive tourism products and services.
- c. Enhancing their understanding of tourism-related opportunities and impacts.

For instance, Kemenparekraf's Floratama Academy program offers incubation for MSME entrepreneurs through training, capacity building, and mentorship in 17 tourism sectors and 13 creative economy fields. Products like the signature sambal Kapten-Se'i Opa Rote exemplify successful outcomes of this initiative. The tourism industry is another vital actor in developing sustainable tourism in Labuan Bajo. The industry can collaborate with local communities to:

- a. Adopt sustainable tourism practices.
- b. Provide training and mentorship for local residents.
- c. Generate employment and business opportunities for the local population.

Collaborations like those between BPOLBF and the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) to enhance MSME marketing efforts, as well as initiatives to showcase Labuan Bajo-based businesses in major tourism fairs such as the Bali and Beyond Travel Fair (BBTF) 2023, highlight how partnerships can drive economic, social, and environmental benefits. NGOs serve as facilitators and mediators in fostering dialogue and cooperation between stakeholders. They can assist by:

- a. Raising awareness about the importance of sustainable tourism.
- b. Supporting local communities in accessing tourism opportunities.
- c. Monitoring the implementation of tourism-related policies and regulations.

Examples include NGOs like the Manggarai Barat Vocational Training Center (Balai Latihan Kerja Manggarai Barat), which provides youth training while advocating for the conservation of Bowosie Forest, and Trash Hero Komodo, which organizes eco-friendly waste cleanup initiatives with support from industry partners. The application of a democratic approach in Labuan Bajo includes the establishment of forums where all stakeholders can engage in dialogue about tourism challenges and solutions. Such forums provide platforms to address diverse interests and collectively design impactful solutions. For example, BPOLBF promotes local content development through initiatives like modern performances such as Animal Pop Komodo and cultural exhibitions like Tari Caci from Liang Ndara Village, as well as culinary highlights such as Manggarai-style nasi liwet and soto manggarai. Collaboration between the tourism industry and local communities fosters the development of sustainable



tourism products and services. These partnerships not only empower the community but also enrich the tourism offerings, benefiting both parties economically and socially. Examples include the creation of locally sourced tourism goods promoted at national tourism expos and the strengthening of cultural tourism assets through industry-community partnerships.

NGOs also play an advocacy role to safeguard local community interests during tourism development. Organizations like Komodo Water, which provide clean water for residents and visitors, also empower communities through life skills training and microenterprise development. This advocacy ensures that economic and environmental priorities align with the needs of residents. In conclusion, adopting a democratic approach to tourism development in Labuan Bajo ensures that sustainability and inclusivity are central to the region's progress. By engaging all stakeholders in a shared vision, Labuan Bajo can emerge as a model of sustainable tourism, offering equitable benefits to the local community, the environment, and the national economy.

### 3. Labuan Bajo Using Kraft and Hunziker's Theory

Using Kraft and Hunziker's tourism theory as a foundation, the development of tourism in Labuan Bajo can be critically analyzed through its interactions between policymakers and local communities within a democratic framework. Kraft and Hunziker define tourism as a social process involving interactions between humans, the natural environment, and cultural contexts, emphasizing the crucial role of the state in managing and developing tourism to align with the interests of local communities. In the case of Labuan Bajo, the region faces several challenges despite its rapid emergence as a global tourism hotspot. Environmental degradation, such as plastic pollution and coral reef damage, has resulted from uncontrolled tourism activities, threatening the fragile ecosystem and undermining the sustainable use of natural resources—a key tenet of Kraft and Hunziker's emphasis on balancing resource utilization and conservation. Additionally, economic disparities have emerged, as the benefits of tourism remain concentrated among resort owners and large operators, leaving local communities with limited access to substantial economic opportunities.

This issue highlights the lack of inclusivity in tourism development, contradicting the principles of equitable benefit distribution advocated by the theory. Further exacerbating the challenges are connectivity issues, including high transportation costs, limited flight routes, and insufficient maritime infrastructure, which restrict accessibility for budget-conscious travelers and hinder economic integration between islands. Cultural shifts and potential erosion of traditional identity also pose risks, as local communities adapt to the preferences and demands of tourists, potentially threatening the uniqueness of their heritage, which serves as one of Labuan Bajo's main attractions (Zhang et al., 2022).

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires the application of democratic governance principles, as emphasized by Kraft and Hunziker. The active involvement of local communities is essential to ensure that their voices are heard and their interests safeguarded. Mechanisms such as public consultations, participatory planning, and the empowerment of local residents to develop unique tourism products and services can enhance inclusivity. For instance, programs like the Floratama Academy have facilitated micro-entrepreneurship training, enabling local businesses to thrive and participate in the tourism economy. Collaboration among stakeholders—including the government, tourism industry, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—is critical in ensuring sustainable tourism practices. NGOs play a vital role in bridging gaps between stakeholders, advocating for community rights, and raising awareness about environmental conservation.

Furthermore, government efforts, such as the establishment of the Labuan Bajo Flores Authority Executing Agency (BPOLBF), must be streamlined to avoid overlapping authorities and enhance coordination between central and local governments (Rosary, 2021). A sustainable approach to tourism development in Labuan Bajo necessitates regulatory frameworks that prioritize environmental preservation, responsible tourism practices, and

equitable economic opportunities. The implementation of strict waste management policies, coral reef conservation initiatives, and education campaigns for tourists and local communities is crucial to safeguarding the region's ecosystem. Infrastructure development, including improved transportation networks and public facilities, is also needed to enhance accessibility while ensuring that the local population benefits from tourism growth. Economic diversification beyond tourism is another critical strategy to reduce over-reliance on the sector, thereby mitigating vulnerabilities to market fluctuations and global crises. The democratic framework proposed by Kraft and Hunziker underscores the importance of fostering collaboration among all stakeholders to design solutions that balance ecological, economic, and social considerations.

Ultimately, Labuan Bajo's potential as a model for sustainable tourism lies in its ability to integrate democratic principles into its development strategies. Empowering local communities, protecting cultural heritage, and ensuring environmental sustainability must remain at the core of tourism policies. By addressing systemic challenges through participatory and inclusive approaches, Labuan Bajo can emerge as an exemplary destination that not only preserves its unique natural and cultural assets but also delivers equitable benefits to all stakeholders. Through such efforts, the region can achieve long-term sustainability, serving as a benchmark for other tourism destinations worldwide.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the comprehensive analysis of Labuan Bajo's tourism development, several conclusions can be drawn. First, while the destination's immense natural beauty and cultural richness have positioned it as a global tourism hotspot, rapid growth has brought challenges, including environmental degradation, economic inequality, and inadequate infrastructure. These issues underscore the importance of integrating sustainable practices to preserve the fragile ecosystem and cultural heritage that underpin Labuan Bajo's appeal. Adopting waste management systems, protecting coral reefs, and enhancing transportation connectivity are essential to address these pressing concerns.

Second, the application of a democratic approach is vital in ensuring inclusive and equitable tourism development in Labuan Bajo. By involving local communities in decision-making and fostering partnerships among government agencies, NGOs, and private stakeholders, the region can create a more participatory framework. Programs like entrepreneurship training and sustainable tourism campaigns exemplify the potential to empower local populations while addressing economic disparities. Such efforts also ensure that tourism growth benefits all parties involved and promotes long-term socio-economic stability.

Lastly, maintaining Labuan Bajo's status as a premier tourism destination requires a balance between economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. Through integrated planning, transparent governance, and inclusive participation, Labuan Bajo can serve as a model for eco-friendly tourism development. The collaboration of all stakeholders is crucial to safeguarding the region's natural and cultural assets for future generations. This approach not only enhances the destination's global reputation but also aligns with the broader objectives of sustainable and equitable tourism practices.

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