

## Community Empowerment for Community-Based Tourism Development in the Border

### Region of Timor-Leste: A Case Study of Atabae Sub-District

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#### Abstract

This research consists purposes were 1. explore the challenges of the tourism industry in the Atabae Sub-district of Bobonaro, Timor-Leste and 2. analyze how community empowerment can help in creating Community-Based Tourism in the Atabae Sub-district of Bobonaro, Timor-Leste. This research was applied qualitative approach to collect data, investigate procedures, and gain a thorough understanding of community empowerment in managing community-based tourism (CBT). The primary data were collected in the Atabae sub-district by interviews several sectors involving in tourism industry, including 8 local tourism business owners, and 5 government officials, both local (2) and national authorities (3). Also, the documentary research was also applied secondary sources of data to understand tourism context, especially regarding CBT of Timor-Leste. Then both primary and secondary data were collected from the government documents, literature and interviews are analyzed to assess the situation, significance, and challenges of CBT in Atabae sub-district. The research results found that 1) CBT development in Atabae sub-district are facing several challenges. The first challenge is weak community involvement in tourism development. The second challenge is Inadequate community capacity in tourism development. The third challenge is Insufficient tourism infrastructure and services. The fourth challenge is Environmental unsustainability. The fifth challenge is Limited access and promotion of tourism markets. The Sixth challenge is Insufficient regulatory and policy framework. Lastly, Inadequate community financial resources and 2) the community empowerment could be encouraged in several possible ways, including increasing roles of the local government to support and find out the financial resources for the tourism development, to promote capacity building of local community, and to encourage participatory development.

**Keywords:** Community Empowerment, Community-Based Tourism Development, Sustainable Tourism

#### Introduction

Timor-Leste, a newly independent country, was colonized by Portugal and Indonesia before being separated in 1999. Recognized as a sovereign country in 2002, the country faces challenges in education, agriculture, tourism, and economic development due to a shortage of human resources. Tourism is a priority and a key pillar of Timor-Leste's economic development, alongside agriculture and oil. It diversifies the

economy, provides employment, and promotes regional and rural development. Nowadays, tourism is considered a viable and smoke-free industry, offering social, cultural, and economic benefits without harmful emission (Government of Timor-Leste, 2011).

The tourism development in Timor-Leste is crucial for economic growth, despite local skills lack. It can boost economic activity through infrastructure construction, new industries like transportation and accommodation, agricultural and animal husbandry products, international recognition of local goods, and the development of remote areas, thereby promoting economic activity and attracting more tourists (Government of Timor-Leste, 2011).

Community-based Tourism (CBT), then, was promoted as one of the tourism developments that can improve the economic welfare of local communities. Hausler (2005) defined CBT as a form of tourism that provides opportunities for local communities to control and be involved in the management and development of tourism. The main focus of CBT, according to Pookaiyaudom (2013), was community involvement in tourism development activities that can push the community towards sustainable tourism development. Pantin and Francis (2005) argued that CBT was an integration and collaboration between approaches and tools for community economic empowerment through assessing, developing, and marketing community natural and cultural resources. Moreover, CBT promoted community benefits in terms of economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental aspects, as well as access, participation, and control (Nurhidayati & Fandeli, 2012).

To strengthen CBT, community empowerment is an effort and a necessary component to develop and actualize community conditions actively and sustainably based on the principles of social justice (Zubaedi, 2013). Empowerment is a strategy for improving community capacity and altering people's lives. In this regard, community empowerment can encapsulate community values to build a new paradigm in community-centered, participatory, empowering, and sustainable development (Chambers, 1995). Stressed that development with a community empowerment model seeks options for local economic growth rather than simply satisfying basic community needs. Therefore, community empowerment is crucial for local communities to achieve shared goals and increase control. It supports tourism industry development, making it the main criterion for developing sustainable community-based tourism in Timor-Leste.

The tourism development in the Atabae sub-district is very important because it has many tourists and cultural tourism destinations such as Bea Cloa Beach, Fatuk Bot, Bea Malae Lake, traditional houses that attract tourists to visit, as well as its strategic location in the area. It is located in the middle of the international highway that borders Indonesia and is also easily accessible by local and foreign tourists. One of the local economic developments is the development of community-based tourism which provides various entrepreneurial opportunities. However, currently The CBT development has not been much promoted as local people and authorities still lack knowledge on the CPT. Studying this issue then can improve the local capacities, which, in return, positively impacts community's economy, and foreign exchange and create jobs as well as the

growth of small industries as a form of poverty alleviation effort in the Atabae sub-district. As a result, the Atabae sub-district, Bobonaro district, Timor-Leste is selected as a research site for this study.

### **The purposes**

1. To explore the challenges of the tourism industry in the Atabae Sub-district of Bobonaro, Timor-Leste
2. To analyze how community empowerment can help in creating CBT in the Atabae Sub-district of Bobonaro, Timor-Leste

### **Literature review**

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2018), Tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that involves the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. Based on the UNWTO's point of view (2018), tourism is a clear phenomenon in everyday life because of the movement of people from outside their environment, to other environments, growth rates are increasing, both for personal and business purposes. For this reason, tourism is a mainstay sector for growing the economy of a country and a community.

The concept of community-based tourism (CBT) first appeared in the 1970s in response to criticism of the negative consequences of mass tourism. When the World Bank began to think about using the tourism sector to alleviate poverty in 2000, it attracted even more attention. CBT also incorporates the community in the decision-making process and in securing the maximum share of cash derived directly from the presence of tourists to increase employment, lessen poverty, and positively influence the preservation of the environment and indigenous culture in the area. It was believed that this would eventually help the local people, which grew as a result of increasing tourism activities, to develop a sense of identity and pride (Rest, 1997).

According to Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST) (1997), CBT was tourism that explored the environment, social community, and cultural continuity with a development focus. CBT was managed and owned by and from the community, aiming to provide tourists with knowledge about how local wisdom and daily life are carried out in the community. CBT was, therefore, essentially a populist economic notion because it was directly adopted by the community, and as a result, they immediately benefit from the results.

Suansri (2003) demonstrated that CBT was sustainable for the environment, society, and culture, in which the CBT was a method for fostering community growth and cultural and environmental preservation. In other words, CBT was a tool to realize sustainable tourism development. The special features of CBT were related to the benefits of community in providing greater control in social processes to create prosperity and defend other groups from invading and exploring the community's resources (Timothy, 1999). Murphy (1985) emphasized a strategy focused on identifying the goals of host communities and their desire and ability to absorb the benefits of tourism. According to Murphy, every community should be encouraged to identify its own goals and direct tourism to increase the needs of local people.

According to Jafar Jafari (1987), he realizes that community empowerment is very important and also preserving local culture and traditions, so to apply CBT, he proposed 5 criteria for the implementation of community-based tourism, these include:

Empowerment of local communities: Local communities must be actively involved in decision-making and tourism management in their destinations.

Preservation of culture and cultural heritage: Community-based tourism must pay attention to and preserve local culture, traditions, and cultural heritage.

Equitable economic benefits: Tourism must provide fair and equitable economic benefits for local communities, including through the creation of jobs and business opportunities.

Community participation: Local communities must be involved in developing tourism programs and benefit from tourism activities.

Environmental sustainability: Community-based tourism must preserve the environment, reduce negative impacts, and prioritize environmentally friendly practices.

The World Bank believes that an increase in adventure, ecological, and cultural tourism will be able to increase the income of the local community and its surroundings while preserving the culture, arts, and way of life of the surrounding community (Coste et. al., 2023).

When Community Based Tourism is well-planned and managed, it can play a role in responsible community development and encourage local communities to become fully involved in environmental conservation (Eshetu, 2014). Community-based tourism can also facilitate environmental protection and preservation for residents in tourist destination areas by increasing public awareness and education regarding environmental issues. For example, CBT at Koh Yao Noi in Thailand has assisted residents in planning and management by raising awareness regarding environmental conservation, as well as supporting proper sanitation, waste management controls, and safety in the tourism industry (Jitpakdee and Thapa, 2012).

Another interesting example that illustrates the CBT with the strength of community empowerment is the Development of the Nglangeran Tourism Village in Gunung Kidul Regency, Indonesia. This is done through three strategies, namely awareness, human capacity, and empowerment. Community empowerment is carried out through socialization and innovation. The human capacity was carried out as a form of support for the development of Tourism Villages, the Tourism Office and the Ministry of Tourism actively provided training and assistance to State-owned enterprises (BUMN) private parties, and NGOs (Research Center for the House of Representatives (DPR) Republic of Indonesia (RI) Expertise Agency, 2018).

In conclusion, community-based tourism was a tourism activity that was fully owned, run and managed by the community so that it contributes to improving community welfare through sustainable livelihoods and protecting valuable socio-cultural traditions as well as natural resources and cultural heritage. Although there were some differences in the concept of CBT among many CBT experts, there were similar goals and objectives which seem to have a common agreement regarding the development of CBT for the welfare of local

communities. Tourism development in the Atabae sub-district should begin with understanding the concept of CBT. Based on the review, empowering local communities through training and proposed related support guidelines, which are related to CBT, is very important so that in the future the community can implement the CBT well. As a result, the development of CBT in the Atabae sub-district can attract more tourists to visit the place so that creating jobs provides benefits to the locals and the community can carry out CBT well towards sustainable tourism.

### Methodology

This research is a qualitative research. The research method is as follows.

**1. Population and sample groups in the research include:** The target group included 8 local business owners in Atabae sub-district, 2 local authorities, and 3 national authorities from Ministry of Tourism. The sample was obtained by purposive sampling, in which the researcher intentionally selected participants based on their knowledge, experiences, or responsibilities in tourism industry in Timor-Leste, especially in Atabae sub-district.

**2. Research tools include:** 1) Interview consisting of 3 main parts: Part 1: General information of the interviewee (works and responsibilities); Part 2: current situation of tourism industry and Part 3, opinions and other suggestions on CBT are open-ended and 2 ) Observation, which is a data collection technique that the researcher directly observing CBT management in the Atabae sub-district such as guest houses, restaurants, and handicrafts in the village of Atabae sub-district, Bobonaro district, Timor-Leste. With this observation, it will be able to provide information to answer research question number one

**2. Data collection includes collecting data from** 1) Primary data, which are data obtained from in-depth interviews with the target group and observation and 2) Secondary data are information obtained from related documents (Documentary Research) such as official documents and announcements from the Ministry of Tourism, which can be searched online from its website, tourism brochures, newspapers, and other academic articles related to Community-Based Tourism books, textbooks, academic documents, research and related electronic media.

**3. Data analysis:** for qualitative analysis technique was applied using narrative data analysis of the answers given by respondents. All responses were coded, categorized, and compared from one village to another through content analysis. The data analyzed were usually non-numerical, data gathered from interviews, observations, or text documents. By using the information obtained from In-depth interviews with target groups and collecting data and documents for content analysis, it could help to understand complex phenomena as a whole and identify important messages, features, or findings in respondents' views regarding the challenges and obstacles to empowering CBT management communities in improving their economic, environmental, socio-cultural, and economic aspects.

## Results

Research on Community Empowerment for Community-Based Tourism Development in the Border Region of Timor-Leste: A Case Study of Atabae Sub-district can classify the research results as follows:

### 1. Challenges of the tourism industry in the Atabae Sub-district of Bobonaro, Timor-Leste

Firstly, weak community involvement in the development of CBT in Atabae Sub-district: One of the main challenges of the development of CBT in Atabae is lack of involvement of local communities in the development and management of tourism industry activities. Also, balancing the interests of different members of society, ensuring community participation, and managing conflict or power dynamics is complex. The local community does not have a vision and mission in long-term planning and does not have enough capital to develop quickly. This weakness reflects the inability of local communities to get involved in tourism activities due to a lack of knowledge, experience, and expertise in the tourism sector. Moreover, community empowerment is limited. The government has not optimally empowered local communities in managing and developing tourism in their region, such as a lack of training, mentoring, and community capacity development in aspects of tourism entrepreneurship, management, and marketing.

Secondly, Inadequate community capacity in developing CBT in Atabae Sub-district: Lack of human resource capacity in the tourism sector can cause various problems, such as less than optimal service to tourists, lack of innovation in developing tourism destinations, and gaps in service quality between one tourism destination and another. This can also hinder the growth of the tourism industry as a whole and reduce the competitiveness of a tourism destination in the global market. Therefore, it is important to increase human resource capacity through training, education, and skills development so that the tourism industry can develop sustainably.

Thirdly, Insufficient community-based tourism infrastructure and services in Atabae sub-district: Often, rural or remote communities do not have the necessary infrastructure and services to support tourism, such as transportation, accommodation, restaurants, recreation facilities, health services, and sanitation facilities, which can also be an obstacle in developing community-based tourism in the Atabae sub-district. As a community chief in the Atabae sub-district said;

“The availability of clean water for the people of the Atabae sub-district has not been fully felt, especially for the people who manage the tourism industry due to the lack of clean water” (Hamlet head of community, Personal Communication, January 2024).

Fourthly, Environmental sustainability in CBT development: to promote sustainable CBT, it is necessary to prepare a clean environment for tourists so that they can enjoy the view and continue the journey. This is to attract both domestic and foreign tourists to visit more so that community-based tourism development will be guaranteed to last long and be sustainable because tourist demand is met by the community.

Fifthly, Limited access and promotion of CBT markets: Accessing markets and effectively promoting community-based tourism to potential visitors can be challenging for Atabae sub-district, especially for small-

scale community initiatives with limited marketing resources. Limited internet and telecommunications connections also obstruct tourism promotion and access to information for tourists and local communities. Likewise, the local government officer in the Atabae sub-district explained that community-based tourism marketing is a very important factor because today's era is digital.

"To promote something related to tourism in the sense of CBT, promotion should be done through the media because it is cost-effective. Apart from that, the local government has plans to help promote the CBT business at national and international levels, but for the time being the central government is taking over market access and promotion, because it has not yet devolved (decentralized) government authority to the Bobonaro regional government, especially the Atabae sub-district, to regulate and manage its region. in the state system, whether administrative, planning or financial" (A local government officer, Personal Communication, January 2024).

Sixthly, Regulatory and policy framework in Atabae sub-district CBT development: regarding local government policy, the local government only motivates, regulates, and monitors community activities related to the tourism industry. Meanwhile, regarding regulations in the development of community-based tourism activities, for the time being, there are no regulations that speak specifically to CBT.

Lastly, Limited capital and funding sources: The local communities generally have limited capital and access to funding sources, so they are hampered in developing and managing tourist destinations optimally. The government often does not provide adequate financial support to build infrastructure, and facilities and develop tourism potential at the community level, and community access to obtain loans or financing schemes from the government is also limited.

## 2. Benefits of community empowerment in creating CBT in the Atabae Sub-district of Bobonaro, Timor-Leste

Community-based tourism in the Atabae sub-district involves local communities managing the tourism industry, preserving the environment, and sharing cultural heritage experiences with tourists. Activities include cultural immersion, ecotourism, and local experiences, such as staying in a guesthouse with a local family, participating in traditional activities, exploring natural attractions, and participating in cultural ceremonies. These initiatives promote sustainable tourism practices, support local livelihoods, and preserve cultural heritage, and natural exploration.

Involving the community in the decision-making process regarding tourism development can ensure that the community's needs and desires are taken into account. This can create a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for tourism development. Community participation in decision-making in the tourism industry is a process where local communities are actively involved in the planning, development, and management of tourism destinations in their region with a deep understanding, which means local communities have in-depth knowledge of local culture, traditions, and needs.

The development of the community-based tourism shows active involvement and contribution of local communities in the planning, management, and promotion of tourism destinations in the area where the community lives. Community participation is important and essential because local communities have in-depth knowledge of the culture, traditions, and tourism potential of their region. Community empowerment can also support the development of small and medium businesses in the tourism sector, such as hotels, guest houses, homestays, restaurants, local crafts, and agro-tourism, which can provide direct economic benefits to the community. Fourth, regulatory and policy frameworks in CBT development of Atabae sub-district has not yet given specific focus on the development of CBT yet. Fifth, the local people in tourism industry had low income and cannot earn enough to cover business and living cost.

### Conclusion

The researcher can summarize the results of the research study according to the following objectives:

**1. Challenges of the tourism industry in the Atabae Sub-district of Bobonaro, Timor-Leste:** There are several challenges that tourism industry of Atabae sub-district is facing. First, the community participation in the development of CBT in Atabae sub-district is weak due to the inability of local people, in terms of knowledge and experiences in tourism industry. Second, local people has inadequate capacity in developing CBT because of shortage of training, education, and language skills. Third, tourism infrastructure and services in a rural community, such as transportation, accommodation facilities, clean water and sanitation, and access to health and security services, are insufficient

**2. Benefits of community empowerment in creating CBT in the Atabae Sub-district of Bobonaro, Timor-Leste:** To develop tourism industry, Atabae sub-district needs to encourage participation and long-term benefits for local communities. Community participation in decision-making in the tourism industry is an important factor in creating tourism development that is sustainable, inclusive, and provides benefits for all parties involved. Apart from that, tourism also prioritizes local culture and traditions. Activities include cultural exploration, community engagement, and cultural exchange.

### Discussion

Based on Jafar Jafari (1987), in order to develop CBT, it is necessary to pay attention to the empowerment of local communities and local communities must be actively involved in decision-making and tourism management in their destinations. Participation in decision-making means that local communities can voice their hopes, desires, and concerns regarding tourism development, which can then be used as input in the planning process. Murphy (1985) stated that the involvement of local communities in the tourism planning and development process is a determining factor in the sustainability of tourism destination development. Taking a role in the distribution of tourism benefits implies that local communities should have equal opportunities to obtain financial benefits from tourism and links with other sectors.

Meanwhile, according to Timothy's point of view (1999), if tourism development in an area means CBT manages it well and will accommodate employment opportunities for residents. Conversely, related parties such as the government and NGOs, both national and international, must provide training support related to tourism so that tourism development carried out by the community cannot be doubted and will be sustainable because the community already has experience in tourism development and has received training from related parties. For this reason, tourism development must be able to create jobs and business opportunities as well as provide training and education for local communities to understand the impacts or benefits of tourism.

This research also found that to develop or implement Community-Based Tourism in the Atabae sub-district, one must pay attention to the fundamental challenges faced by the community in the Atabae sub-district, such as training community skills and knowledge in the tourism sector. The tourism sector supports small and medium tourism businesses through financing, as similarly mentioned by Timothy (1999). The researcher argues that the development of CBT is not only intended for the community but also concerns the general public in the sense of national and international visitors. There needs to be collaboration between the government and the private sector to provide training to the community related to tourism so that CBT develops. and also, CBT can be beneficial for society itself as well as sustainability. In addition to preserving culture and cultural heritage, increasing community participation in the development of CBT in Atabae so that people feel like they are owners in developing the tourism industry in their area and enjoy the benefits for themselves for the future as expressed by Jafar Jafari (1987) and Murphy (1985).

### **Discoveries or New Knowledge**

The research discovered new knowledge related to the development of CBT in Atabae sub-district on this following points; first, local empowerment is the key to the success of sustainable CBT. Local people in Atabae sub-district still lacks several necessary skills and understanding of CBT and community participation. So, the relevant stakeholders, especially the government sector, need to provide training and capacity-building programs in areas like hospitality, entrepreneurship, and sustainable resource management can empower the community to manage and operate tourism businesses effectively. Second, developing CBT should give significance to the preservation of cultural identity, can help preserve the authenticity and unique appeal of Atabae's tourism offerings, enhancing the visitor experience, without destroying the tradition and cultural heritage of community. Third, the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) development should be empowered as they are driving force of local tourism development and can diversify tourism products, increase social inclusion, and strengthen the community's participation in the tourism industry. Lastly, CBT development cannot be sustainable without integration of traditional environmental conservation practices. These new insights gained from the research underscore the multifaceted and crucial role of community empowerment in developing successful and sustainable community-based tourism in the Atabae sub-district.

## Suggestion

### 1. Suggestions for use

1.1 Increasing roles of local government: The local government should hold a meeting with the community's groups such as; tour operators, religious leaders, village heads, hamlet heads, traditional leaders, and local NGOs to form a special team to manage the tourism industry in the Atabae sub-district and discuss the challenges faced by the community in the development of the tourism industry in Atabae sub-district, as well as plan to strengthen CBT in Atabae. So, the tourism industry can be more productive, collaborative, and sustainable, and increase the income and economic welfare of the local community. Also, identification of such tourist destinations, infrastructure, sanitation, and tourist attractions that are suitable to be developed into tourist destinations in the Atabae sub-district, from the challenges and results of this identification, the multistakeholder team can make a report and then propose it to the central government such as Ministry of Tourism, International NGOs and others institutions related to tourism development. The community can raise their voices so that the central government and the institutions will pay attention to the obstacles to developing a community-based tourism industry faced by the Atabae sub-district community.

1.2 Financial resources for CBT development in the Atabae sub-district: Limited financial capital is one of the main obstacles to developing CBT in the Atabae sub-district. To encourage CBT to develop and be sustainable, one of the best ways is for the central government (Ministry of Tourism) to collaborate with the National Bank of Timor-Leste to develop a microcredit program so that local communities can access finance through credit thereby expanding their businesses. Through loans, the community has the power and responsibility to run the tourism industry business well to pay off its obligations.

1.3 Capacity building for the community in the Atabae sub-district to develop CBT: Suggestions to the government, national and international NGOs, and also related agencies in developing tourism in Timor-Leste should provide training programs to develop the skills and knowledge of local communities in the Atabae sub-district in various fields such as hospitality, tour guides, cultural preservation, and small business management. Organizing workshops and seminars to educate the public about the benefits and best practices of community-based tourism. Capacity building in the context of community-based tourism refers to the process of increasing the skills, knowledge, and resources of local communities so they can participate effectively and benefit from tourism activities. This includes empowering community members to take ownership of tourism initiatives, developing sustainable practices, preserving local culture and heritage, and interacting with visitors in an immersive way.

1.4 Participatory community planning in developing community-based tourism in the Atabae sub-district: Suggestions the central government, regional governments, and related institutions in tourism development should involve local communities in the decision-making process for tourism development plans and policies. Establish community-based tourism committees or boards to ensure local voices are heard and incorporated.

## 2. Suggestions for next research

2.1 Examining Innovative Methods for Involvement with the Community: Analyze successful community engagement models from other tourist destinations that have effectively given local communities more authority. Explore the potential modifications and applications of these models in the Atabae context to enhance community ownership and involvement.

2.2 Evaluating the outcomes of capacity-building initiatives: Analyze the effectiveness of the community of Atabae's ongoing efforts to improve training and skill sets. After identifying areas for improvement, develop more targeted and efficient capacity-building initiatives to equip the community with the skills and knowledge it requires.

2.3 Analyzing the role of cultural norms and customary organizations: Examine the most effective means of integrating traditional organizations such as the Tara Bandu customary law into the management and supervision of CBT initiatives. Consider methods for promoting the community's cultural identity and making use of traditions to promote the growth of sustainable tourism.

2.4 Analyzing the potential for community-run tourism businesses: Look for methods to assist the Atabae community in establishing and managing tourism-related businesses, such as community-owned cooperatives for dining establishments, lodging, or handicrafts.

2.5 Examining the barriers and support networks required to empower the community to assume leadership roles as service providers and business owners in the travel and tourism industry.

2.6 Analyzing the current regulatory and policy frameworks at the local, state, and federal levels to identify any gaps and areas where support for the advancement of CBT can be reinforced. Collaborate with legislators and government representatives to improve the climate so that community-led tourism initiatives can succeed.

2.7 Exploring innovative financing and resource mobilization strategies: Examine various funding options, such as public-private partnerships, social impact investing, and community-based crowdfunding, to support the expansion of local businesses and tourism infrastructure. Find out how to increase the Atabae community's access to capital and financial resources so they can finance projects or activities related to tourism. Subsequent research in these domains will facilitate the Atabae sub-districts comprehension of the community's requirements and capacities, devise more feasible strategies for enabling the local population, and create favorable circumstances for the sustained growth of community-based tourism.

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