

## LEVERAGING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PARTICIPATORY PLATFORM FOR ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF SITU CISANTI

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### ABSTRACT

Governments in developing countries view ecotourism as a strategy to enhance local income and improve community livelihoods. However, the dominance of mass tourism systems often constrains the potential benefits of ecotourism for local communities. This study aims to examine the forms and dynamics of community participation in ecotourism development at Situ Cisanti, Tarumajaya Village, Kertasari Subdistrict, Bandung Regency, West Java, Indonesia. The research employs a qualitative case study approach informed by critical theory. Data collection include field observations, in-depth interviews with local community members, tourism stakeholders, and government officials, as well as document analysis. The findings identify four main forms of community participation: environmental protection, local entrepreneurship, cultural preservation, and ecotourism marketing. Social media functions as a participatory platform that facilitates information dissemination, stakeholder collaboration, and community empowerment through the Community Information Group (Kelompok Informasi Masyarakat/KIM). Nevertheless, participation remains largely tokenistic, as community members tend to follow externally driven agendas without possessing significant decision-making authority. This study highlights that social media has the potential to enhance local contributions to ecotourism development when integrated with inclusive government policies and community capacity-building initiatives.

**Keywords:** sustainable eco-tourism; community participation; social media; Situ Cisanti

## OPTIMALISASI MEDIA SOSIAL UNTUK MENDORONG PARTISIPASI MASYARAKAT LOKAL DALAM PENGEMBANGAN EKOWISATA

### ABSTRAK

Pemerintah di negara berkembang memandang ekowisata sebagai strategi untuk meningkatkan pendapatan dan kesejahteraan masyarakat lokal. Namun, dominasi sistem pariwisata massal sering kali membatasi manfaat ekowisata bagi komunitas setempat. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji bentuk dan dinamika partisipasi masyarakat dalam pengembangan ekowisata di Situ Cisanti, Desa Tarumajaya, Kecamatan Kertasari, Kabupaten Bandung, Jawa Barat, Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif dengan perspektif teori kritis. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi lapangan, wawancara mendalam dengan masyarakat lokal, pemangku kepentingan pariwisata, serta pejabat pemerintah, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi empat bentuk utama partisipasi masyarakat, yaitu perlindungan lingkungan, kewirausahaan lokal, pelestarian budaya, dan pemasaran ekowisata. Media sosial berperan sebagai platform partisipatif yang memfasilitasi penyebaran informasi, kolaborasi pemangku kepentingan, dan pemberdayaan masyarakat melalui Kelompok Informasi Masyarakat (KIM). Meskipun demikian, partisipasi yang terjadi masih bersifat tokenistik karena masyarakat cenderung mengikuti agenda yang dirancang oleh pihak eksternal tanpa memiliki kewenangan pengambilan keputusan yang signifikan. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa media sosial berpotensi meningkatkan kontribusi masyarakat lokal terhadap pengembangan ekowisata apabila didukung oleh kebijakan pemerintah yang inklusif dan program penguatan kapasitas masyarakat.

**Kata kunci:** ekowisata berkelanjutan, partisipasi masyarakat, media sosial, Situ Cisanti

### INTRODUCTION

Situ Cisanti, located in Tarumajaya Village, Kertasari Subdistrict, Bandung Regency, West Java, Indonesia, represents a critical case of ecotourism development in rural Indonesia. As the

source of the Citarum River and surrounded by tea plantations and mountain landscapes, this site has attracted increasing attention from tourists and policymakers since 2005. However, despite nearly two decades of ecotourism activities, the local community continues to face persistent poverty and limited

participation in tourism governance. This empirical reality raises fundamental questions about the relationship between ecotourism development, community participation, and the role of communication technologies in facilitating local engagement.

In this study, community participation is conceptualized as the active involvement of local residents in ecotourism planning, implementation, and benefit-sharing processes (Tosun, 2000). Following Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, we distinguish between tokenistic participation—where communities are consulted but lack decision-making power—and authentic participation, which involves genuine power-sharing and community control over development processes. This conceptualization aligns with our empirical observations in Tarumajaya Village, where participation manifests across multiple dimensions yet remains constrained by structural power asymmetries.

A participatory platform, in the context of this research, refers to communication infrastructure—specifically social media—that enables horizontal information exchange, collective voice amplification, and stakeholder collaboration in tourism governance (Hays et al., 2013; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Unlike traditional top-down communication channels, participatory platforms facilitate bidirectional dialogue, allowing local communities to not only receive information but also generate content, coordinate activities, and engage directly with external stakeholders. This definition is grounded in our data showing how the Community Information Group (CIG) utilizes Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to transform community members from passive beneficiaries into active communicators in ecotourism development.

The proliferation of ecotourism frequently entails various responsibilities for communities and regions, compelling them to examine their identities critically and craft distinctive characteristics into commodities that captivate tourists. Both developing and developed nations must prioritize the handling of socio-cultural issues and evaluate potential adverse consequences from ecotourism development (Figueroa & Rotarou, 2016). Local populations possess profound comprehension of essential ecotourism elements, encompassing verdant environments, rich biodiversity, unspoiled woodlands, and activities showcasing indigenous characteristics (Phelan et al., 2020). These communities have developed long-lasting partnerships with their natural surroundings, perceiving ecotourism as means to generate economic prospects and discover employment avenues (Hunt et al., 2015).

The complex interaction between ecotourism and local communities highlights a relationship in which natural beauty conservation connects closely to cultural diversity appreciation. Ecotourism functions as means through which communities exhibit their distinct cultural history (Chan et al., 2021) and participate in preserving their natural surroundings. This approach enhances economic possibilities while aligning with environmental preservation objectives and cultural heritage promotion. However, the appeal of ecotourism may occasionally obscure possible drawbacks (Bartosch, 2019). Sincere endeavors to utilize ecotourism may unintentionally disturb indigenous customs, necessitating nuanced equilibrium that safeguards cultural authenticity while harnessing sustainable tourism advantages.

Local populations' active engagement in ecotourism endeavors highlight transition from passive beneficiaries to active collaborators in shaping the tourism environment (Gutierrez, 2023). Communities actively participate in authoring narratives and influencing visitor encounters. Nevertheless, this change presents challenges, as stakeholders must adapt to fulfill evolving participation requirements within the dynamic ecotourism realm. This pattern characterizes significant transitions toward ecotourism advancement in various regions. Areas designated as ecotourism sites showcase natural landscapes and encompass thriving indigenous populations increasingly acknowledged as key players in fostering sustainable development. Their engagement contributes to visitor experience genuineness and guarantees fair economic benefit distribution.

In the context of sustainable ecotourism development in Indonesia, complexity cannot be overlooked. Different interpretations of ecotourism concept by various stakeholders, such as government, tourists, local communities, and tourism operators, posed challenge in developing and implementing effective strategies (Bello et al., 2017). While government viewed ecotourism as means to promote rural development and sustainability, some local communities and visitors had more superficial view, focusing primarily on economic benefits within tourism industry (Novelli et al., 2017). Certain government agencies and tourists grasped deeper meaning of ecotourism, recognizing its environmental conservation and community empowerment dimensions (Stone, 2015). Other stakeholders, including villagers, tour operators, some tourists, and other government agencies, had more shallow understanding, commonly referring to it as "nature-based tourism," adopting surface-level ecological approach (Kavita & Saarinen,

2016). This business-focused environmental view considered benefits alongside tourism industry goals yet displayed minimal dedication to acknowledging pivotal function of nearby communities (Talukder & Hoque, 2025). Moreover, this perspective emphasized weak sustainability, as ecotourism management prioritized environmental protection while maintaining decentralized leisure spaces (Duffy et al., 2003). With Tarumajaya's ecotourism activities coinciding with traditional mass tourism, mass tourism had detrimental effect on region, impeding growth and well-being of local population (Musavengane & Leonard, 2022).

However, concepts about tourism advancement, including ecotourism, remain insufficiently investigated, particularly in geographically isolated and socially disadvantaged areas. Most scholarly investigations concentrate on popular tourist locations, neglecting distinctive obstacles and prospects isolated villages encounter. Community interests are typically examined within frameworks of enhancing economic gains without comprehensive assessment of wider consequences (Ardoin et al., 2015). This research gap is particularly evident in understanding how digital communication technologies, specifically social media, influence community participation patterns in remote ecotourism destinations. While existing literature acknowledges social media's promotional role in tourism, limited empirical evidence demonstrates how these platforms facilitate or constrain local community agency in ecotourism governance, especially in contexts characterized by socioeconomic heterogeneity and limited digital literacy. Recent research on Situ Cisanti by Anwar et al. (2024) documented local community participation through conservation activities (reforestation and environmental cleanup) and economic engagement (food stalls, coffee shops, souvenirs, and homestays), demonstrating that ecotourism can empower conservation awareness, economic welfare, and women's participation. However, their study focused on offline participation forms during 2021 and did not extensively explore how digital communication platforms mediate community engagement. This present study extends Anwar et al. (2024) findings by specifically examining social media's role as participatory platform in ecotourism governance, analyzing how these technologies enable or constrain community voice and decision-making processes.

This scenario highlights complexity in establishing sustainable ecotourism within Indonesia's diverse landscape. According to Wearing and Neil (2009), government perceives ecotourism as driv-

ing force for rural development, potentially fostering sustainable future whereby natural resources, local populations, visitors, and stakeholders derive reciprocal benefits. Successful execution depends on government institutions and non-governmental organizations cultivating support and encouraging active local community involvement in ecotourism and conservation endeavors. In ecotourism destinations where isolated communities reside, activities including farming, ranching, hunting, fishing, and resource extraction remain integral to daily routines, highlighting interdependence between livelihoods and environment.

In light of this context, this investigation examines and elucidates varied involvement of indigenous groups in ecotourism advancement, emphasizing Situ Cisanti. The study objectives are: first, to discern unique attributes of local community residing in Tarumajaya Village and investigate historical underpinnings contributing to Situ Cisanti's establishment as ecotourism site; second, to identify and analyze forms of community participation in ecotourism development; and third, to assess how social media functions as participatory platform influencing community engagement patterns, examining both enabling factors and constraints in facilitating local agency within ecotourism governance structures.

Recent years witnessed noticeable rise in ecotourism significance within West Java Province's tourism industry. Local authorities, particularly in Bandung Raya area, prioritize developing ecotourism and nature-based tourism due to significant economic potential. Promoting ecotourism in West Java focuses on conserving and preserving abundant natural resources, encompassing national parks, mountains, beaches, geoparks, lakes, and wildlife reserves. However, absence of cohesive efforts has impeded community-based ecotourism advancement, limiting utilization of culturally diverse resources and lowering overall ecotourism experience quality for visitors.

Local community in Tarumajaya Village is heterogeneous, especially regarding income levels and education. Many residents lived below poverty line and had limited educational backgrounds. Different socioeconomic backgrounds could lead to different political views and attitudes towards ecotourism development (Priatmoko et al., 2021). This heterogeneity shapes differential capacities and motivations for ecotourism participation, creating complex dynamics that require nuanced understanding of how various community segments engage with tourism development processes.

## METHOD

This research employed a qualitative methodology, seeking authentic understanding rather than statistical quantification of a phenomena. The research used a case study approach involving in-depth study of particular social environment aspects, including human elements. Case studies were conducted on individuals, groups, human settings, and social institutions. This approach proved effective in uncovering underlying motives behind empirically emergent social facts. Thus, the approach drew on environmental and communication studies and organizational sociology. The case study approach presented research findings based on facts discovered during research process, using qualitative data (Silverman, 2013).

Data collection occurred between March and August 2023 in Tarumajaya Village, focusing on Situ Cisanti ecotourism site. The study involved three categories of informants: (1) local community members, including small business owners, farmers, cultural practitioners, and youth activists (n=15); (2) tourism stakeholders, comprising Community Information Group (CIG) administrators, homestay operators, and tour guides (n=8); and (3) government officials from Bandung Regency Tourism Office, village administration, and Perhutani forestry corporation (n=5). Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in ecotourism activities and knowledge of community participation dynamics.

In-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview guides, allowing informants freedom to elaborate responses while maintaining focus on research themes. Interview topics covered community characteristics, participation forms, social media utilization, and perceived impacts of ecotourism development. Each interview lasted 45-90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the informants' consent. Observation was conducted through field visits to Situ Cisanti, community gatherings, and CIG activities, documenting interactions, physical environment, and tourism operations. Document analysis examined village monographs, tourism promotional materials, social media content from CIG platforms, and government policy documents related to ecotourism development.

Data processing and analysis followed thematic analysis procedures informed by critical theory framework. Critical theory, particularly drawing on power relations analysis and participatory development critique (Gutierrez, 2023; Tosun, 2000), guided our interpretation of community participa-

tion patterns and social media's role in ecotourism governance. The analysis proceeded through four interconnected stages: First, data preparation and familiarization. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and observation notes were systematically organized chronologically and thematically. Researchers engaged in repeated reading of transcripts to achieve deep familiarity with data content and identify preliminary patterns.

Second, initial coding (inductive approach). Using open coding techniques, we identified recurring themes and patterns across data sources without imposing predetermined categories. This inductive process allowed empirical themes to emerge organically from participants' experiences and perspectives. For example, codes such as "cleanup activities," "warung operations," "Instagram posting," and "government-led planning" emerged directly from interview and observation data. This stage generated 87 initial codes representing diverse aspects of community participation and social media utilization.

Third, focused coding and categorization (deductive-inductive integration). Related codes were grouped into broader categories representing forms of participation. Here, we integrated deductive elements by examining how empirical categories aligned with or diverged from existing participation typologies in literature (e.g., Arnstein's participation ladder, community-based tourism frameworks). This iterative process resulted in four main participation categories: environmental protection, economic engagement, cultural preservation, and ecotourism marketing. We analyzed both semantic content (explicit meanings in participants' statements) and latent meanings (underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and structural constraints implicit in narratives).

Fourth, theoretical coding and interpretation (critical theory lens). Empirical categories were connected to critical theory framework, examining power relations, participation authenticity, and structural constraints. We specifically analyzed: (a) who holds decision-making authority in ecotourism planning; (b) how benefits are distributed among stakeholders; (c) whether community participation represents genuine empowerment or tokenistic consultation; and (d) how social media platforms mediate power relations between communities and external actors. This critical lens revealed that despite active participation in implementation activities, communities lacked substantive influence over strategic decisions, reflecting tokenistic rather than authentic participation.

Throughout the analysis, we employed several strategies to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Data triangulation compared findings across interviews, observations, and documents to verify consistency and identify discrepancies. Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings with selected informants (n=5) to verify interpretations and incorporate their feedback. Reflexivity was maintained through analytical memos documenting researchers' interpretive decisions, theoretical assumptions, and potential biases influencing analysis.

The analysis employed descriptive approach detailing data characteristics rather than statistical methods, consistent with qualitative research principles. Analytical decisions prioritized thick description of participation forms and social media roles while maintaining critical perspective on power dynamics shaping community engagement in ecotourism governance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tarumajaya Village is located in Kertasari sub-district, Bandung regency, West Java, Indonesia. The village is known for the source of the Citarum River, a focal point of the Citarum Harum initiative, and has extensive tea and coffee plantations (Desa Tarumajaya, 2020). The majority of the population of Tarumajaya Village are indigenous people, mainly belonging to the Sundanese ethnic group. Tarumajaya residents make their living primarily from agriculture and farm labor. Although primarily an agricultural community, according to the Tarumajaya Village chief's report, residents engage in various other activities such as livestock rearing, private sector employment, entrepreneurship, trading, retirees, motorcycle taxi drivers, factory workers, and miscellaneous work (Desa Tarumajaya, 2020). Most of these side jobs are related to trade. The stores scattered around the village are usually small stores located near the inhabitants' houses. The main problem of these small stores is the lack of business capital, coupled with the low income of the residents, which affects the stores' income due to the increased dependence on credit. One solution available to residents is to participate in ecotourism in Situ Cisanti. However, residents' limited education and skills have prevented them from benefiting significantly from ecotourism activities. Consequently, poverty remains a constant challenge.

Situ Cisanti is a natural spring-fed lake at the foot of Mount Wayang, administratively located in Tarumajaya Village, Kertasari sub-district, Ban-

dung regency, West Java. Situ Cisanti is surrounded by three mountains: Mount Wayang as a source of water, Mount Rakutak, Mount Malabar, Bukit Bedil, and Mount Kendang, which serves as a natural boundary between Bandung Regency and Garut Regency. There are also several tea plantations in the area of PTPN VIII Pangalengan. In the distance, behind Mount Kendang, you can see Mount Papandayan and Mount Jampang, which fall under the administrative jurisdiction of the Garut Regency. Within the 10-hectare total area of Situ Cisanti are seven natural springs, including Pangsiraman Spring, Cikoleberes, Cikawedukan, Cikahuripan, Cisadane, Cihaniwung and Cisanti. Situ Cisanti itself is an ecotourism destination in Tarumajaya Village, located in a tea plantation area within the Perhutani Forest Management Zone (Desa Tarumajaya, 2020).

### *Characteristics of the Local Community in the Village of Tarumajaya*

The community residing in Tarumajaya Village exhibited diverse traits enhancing social fabric. Based on interviews with village officials and demographic data from village monographs, disparities existed across multiple variables, encompassing gender, age, income, and educational attainment. As stated by the village secretary: "Our community is very diverse. We have young people with high school education working in cities, but also many elderly with only elementary education still farming" (Interview, April 2023). These disparities led to heterogeneous community uniting individuals and groups with various life experiences and opinions.

Socioeconomic differences among villagers played critical role in shaping attitudes toward ecotourism development (Priatmoko et al., 2021). Observations at local markets and interviews with 15 community members revealed that limitations in education and economic constraints emerged as critical factors determining ecotourism engagement. A small business owner explained: "Those who have capital can open shops or homestays, but for us who only have small land, we can only work as laborers or guides" (Interview, May 2023). Those with abundant resources ventured into entrepreneurial activities such as trading or handicrafts, while less fortunate resorted to traditional activities such as farming or herding. Field observations confirmed that significant population percentage resided in impoverished, isolated regions devoid of essential social facilities.

According to village demographic records (Desa Tarumajaya, 2020), Tarumajaya's population is characterized by a significant proportion of young individuals, particularly between ages 15 and 30, comprising approximately 35% of the total population. Interviews with community leaders revealed that the governance structure was predominantly governed by persons within the age range of 31 to 55 years and older. The village head noted: 'Most of our RT and RW leaders are in their 40s and 50s because younger people work outside the village' (Interview, April 2023). The educational landscape highlighted shortcomings, as document analysis showed that 60% of the population had only elementary education, 25% completed junior high school, and merely 15% achieved senior high school or higher education. Interview data indicated that a significant portion of residents belonged to the lower-income category, with family incomes typically below the regional minimum wage. A farmer stated: "Our income from farming is barely enough for daily needs, let alone to invest in tourism business" (Interview, May 2023). Active engagement in sustainable development initiatives, such as ecotourism and agriculture, was impeded by financial constraints, limited expertise, and skill deficiencies.

This heterogeneity has profound implications for understanding participation patterns in ecotourism development. Following Priatmoko et al. (2021), socioeconomic differences create differentiated capacities for tourism engagement, with wealthier, more educated community members able to capture entrepreneurial opportunities (shops, homestays, cafés) while marginalized segments remain confined to low-wage labor (guides, cleanup workers). This stratification reflects broader patterns in community-based tourism where benefits accrue disproportionately to those with pre-existing economic and social capital (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019).

Based on interviews with 15 community members and observations conducted over four months, Situ Cisanti village's socioeconomic landscape remained largely unchanged regarding ecotourism since 2005. A long-time resident explained: "Tourism has been here for almost 20 years, but our lives haven't changed much. The benefits mostly go to outsiders who manage the entrance and parking" (Interview, June 2023). Poverty issue continued to endure, with village data indicating that 40% of rural population lacked land ownership and adequate housing. Although ecotourism appeared viable, interviews with community members revealed limited ability to significantly improve so-

cioeconomic conditions. Consequences resulted in dissatisfaction among people trapped in enduring poverty cycle.

Furthermore, interviews with tourism stakeholders and government officials revealed that the village engaged in ecotourism for nearly 17 years. A Perhutani official stated: "We manage this area together with TNI for security and conservation purposes. Community involvement is still limited to small businesses around the site" (Interview, May 2023). Management was predominantly under governmental entities' purview, namely TNI and Perhutani, without active local villagers' participation. While certain village members expressed support for ecotourism due to anticipated advantages, a homestay operator noted: "We hoped tourism would bring more income, but management decisions are made by the government without asking us" (Interview, June 2023). Actual execution frequently resulted in noteworthy adverse effects on indigenous population, intensifying intricate socioeconomic circumstances.

This governance structure exemplifies what Toun (2000) identifies as top-down participation, where external agencies (government, military, state forestry corporation) retain decision-making authority while communities are relegated to implementation roles. Despite nearly two decades of ecotourism activity, structural poverty persists, suggesting that current participation models fail to generate transformative socioeconomic benefits for local populations.

### *Community Participation in the Development of Ecotourism in Tarumajaya Village*

Local people's participation in ecotourism development in Situ Cisanti manifested in four specific ways: participation in environmental protection, participation in economy, participation in culture and history, and participation in marketing ecotourism through social media. This multi-dimensional participation pattern aligns with contemporary understanding of community-based ecotourism requiring diverse engagement forms (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). However, as our critical analysis reveals, the breadth of participation activities does not automatically translate to depth of community empowerment or equitable benefit distribution.

#### *Environmental Protection Participation*

Indigenous population of Tarumajaya Village played active role in environmental conservation

through two distinct approaches. Based on observations conducted during six field visits and interviews with eight environmental volunteers, community members made valuable contributions by tidying premises of Situ Cisanti and eliminating litter. A CIG member explained (Interview, May 2023): "Every month we organize cleanup activities involving youth groups and local residents. We collect plastic waste and educate visitors about keeping the environment clean." Observations on April 15, 2023, documented 25 community members participating in cleanup activity, collecting approximately 50 kilograms of waste. Additionally, community engaged in reforestation efforts by planting trees near Situ Cisanti. A farmer stated: "We planted 200 pine and mahogany trees last year around the lake area to prevent erosion and maintain water sources" (Interview, June 2023). These endeavors and active involvement of Tarumajaya Village inhabitants in conserving Situ Cisanti's natural ecosystem substantiated continued significance placed on environmental concerns and collective recognition of long-term viability.

While environmental participation demonstrates community commitment to conservation, interviews revealed that these activities are typically organized by external agencies (CIG, government) rather than community-initiated. This reflects what Stone & Nyaupane (2017) describe as managed participation, where communities contribute labor to predetermined conservation agendas without shaping environmental management strategies. Genuine ecological stewardship would require community involvement in defining conservation priorities and resource management policies.

### *Economic Participation*

Residents of Tarumajaya Village engaged in economic activity through five distinct forms: operating small retail establishments, establishing Sapoci Café, operating souvenir stores, providing homestay accommodations, and pursuing diverse entrepreneurial endeavors. Field observations identified 12 small retail establishments (*warungs*) near Situ Cisanti entrance selling snacks, beverages, and basic necessities. A *warung* owner stated: "I opened this small shop three years ago. On weekends when many tourists come, I can earn Rp 300,000-500,000 per day, but on weekdays it's very quiet." (Interview, May 2023). Document analysis revealed Sapoci Café, established in 2019 by local youth group, served local coffee and tea to tourists. The café manager explained (Interview, June

2023): "We employ five local residents and source coffee beans from nearby farmers. Monthly revenue ranges from Rp 10-15 million during peak season."

Observations documented eight souvenir stores selling handicrafts, local agricultural products, and Situ Cisanti-branded merchandise. Additionally, interviews with homestay operators revealed six homestay facilities operated by local families, accommodating 2-4 guests each, charging Rp 150,000-250,000 per night. A homestay owner stated: "Homestay income helps supplement our farming income, especially during school holidays when many families visit" (Interview, May 2023). Other entrepreneurial endeavors included motorcycle taxi services, tour guide services, and photography services, providing additional income sources for community members.

Economic participation represents the most tangible form of community engagement, generating direct income for participating households. However, critical examination reveals significant limitations. First, economic benefits remain concentrated among community members with initial capital to invest in businesses, excluding the poorest segments. Second, income generation is highly seasonal and unstable, as evidenced by *warung* owners' testimonies about weekday-weekend disparities. Third, communities lack control over critical revenue streams—entrance fees and parking charges are managed by Perhutani and government, with unclear benefit-sharing mechanisms. This pattern reflects what Stronza et al. (2019) identify as "leakage" in ecotourism economies, where substantial revenues flow to external actors rather than local communities. Authentic economic participation would require community ownership or co-management of core tourism infrastructure and transparent revenue-sharing agreements.

### *Cultural and Historical Participation*

Within cultural realm, residents of Tarumajaya Village engaged in activities concerning traditional heritage of indigenous population. Interviews with three cultural practitioners and observations of two cultural performances revealed that Tarumajaya hamlet is renowned for preserving Sundanese arts and traditions passed down through centuries. A traditional arts teacher explained: "We regularly perform Wayang Golek and traditional Sundanese music for tourists, especially during weekends and holidays. This helps preserve our culture while earning income" (Interview, June 2023). Observations on May 20, 2023, documented Wayang

Golek performance attended by approximately 80 tourists, with performers earning Rp 2 million for three-hour show. Furthermore, historical factors were evident in community involvement. Interviews with village elders revealed efforts to preserve historical narratives about Citarum River source and sacred springs. A village elder stated: "We tell visitors about the history and spiritual significance of these springs for our ancestors. This knowledge must be passed to younger generations" (Interview, April 2023). Community participation integrated ecotourism and cultural elements, with involvement apparent in preserving and administering historical components at Situ Cisanti, including maintaining traditional structures and sacred sites.

Cultural participation demonstrates positive synergy between tourism and heritage preservation, aligning with ecotourism principles of cultural conservation (Chan et al., 2021). However, interviews also revealed concerns about cultural commodification. A cultural practitioner noted: "Sometimes tourists want us to shorten performances or change traditional elements to be more 'entertaining.' We worry about losing authenticity" (Interview, June 2023). This tension reflects broader debates about whether tourism-driven cultural preservation genuinely empowers communities or transforms living traditions into staged performances for external consumption (Sonjai et al., 2018). Authentic cultural participation would require community authority to define how cultural heritage is represented and commercialized, resisting external pressures to modify traditions for tourist preferences.

#### *Ecotourism Marketing Participation*

Community participation in ecotourism marketing primarily occurred through social media platforms, discussed comprehensively in subsequent section. Interviews with CIG administrators and analysis of social media content revealed active community engagement in promoting Situ Cisanti through Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube platforms. This form of participation represented significant shift in community agency, enabling direct communication with potential tourists and broader stakeholder networks.

Marketing participation through social media represents the most innovative and potentially transformative form of community engagement observed in this study. Unlike other participation forms constrained by physical infrastructure and capital requirements, social media offers low-cost, accessible platform for community voice amplifi-

cation. However, as detailed in the following section, the empowering potential of social media remains mediated by digital literacy disparities, government control over CIG infrastructure, and broader power asymmetries in ecotourism governance.

#### *Forms of Community Participation in Ecotourism Development*

Investigations showed that villagers in Tarumajaya were invested in ecotourism ventures across multiple dimensions. However, ecotourism involvement by local community did not automatically lead to definite advantages or returns, unlike others contributing to industry development (Stronza et al., 2019). According to Tosun (2000), participation level exhibited by Tarumajaya villagers amounts to tokenism, as they primarily adhered to blueprints and initiatives formulated by policymakers and ecotourism planners without having influence over underlying dynamics. This tokenistic participation reflects broader patterns in developing countries where communities are consulted but lack genuine decision-making power (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018).

Analysis revealed that community involvement in Situ Cisanti Ecotourism was diverse, spanning four distinct forms. Interviews with 15 community members confirmed awareness of need to use available resources, especially Situ Cisanti area. A community leader stated: "We know this is our opportunity. We must work together to make tourism benefit everyone" (Interview, June 2023). All participation reflected active and reactive roles of residents. Participants expressed confidence that situation would have positive impact, especially on economy. A small business owner explained: "Tourism gives us hope for better income. We do what we can to market our products and services" (Interview, May 2023). Therefore, they did what they could to market and offer what would improve economic well-being. However, interview data also revealed concerns about sustainability. A farmer questioned: "We work hard, but will this continue if we don't get better results? We need more support from government" (Interview, June 2023). Whether they would continue efforts, especially if not getting best results, depended on sustained support and tangible benefits.

The tokenistic nature of participation has significant policy implications. Without genuine empowerment and decision-making authority, communities remain vulnerable to external exploitation and cannot fully benefit from ecotourism develop-

ment (Novelli et al., 2017). This necessitates policy reforms that institutionalize community participation beyond consultation toward co-management and shared governance structures (Stone & Nyau-pane, 2017).

### ***The Role of Social Media in Promoting Civic Participation***

#### *Infrastructure Challenges and Social Media as Solution*

Media at local level often faced challenges to presence and sustainability. Based on interviews with village communication officials and document analysis of media infrastructure reports, many local media were initiatives of rural communities or government agencies, hampered by limited resources and inadequate maintenance. A village communication officer stated: "We don't have budget for professional media equipment or trained personnel. This makes it difficult to compete with commercial media" (Interview, April 2023). This situation became serious problem because of media's critical role in communicating information and engaging communities in region's ecotourism development and natural resource protection.

Rural communities found cost-efficient yet effective solutions to overcome these barriers. Interviews with 10 community members revealed that social media increasingly became preferred solution. A young CIG member explained: "Social media is free and everyone has smartphones now. We can reach thousands of people without spending money on printing or broadcasting" (Interview, May 2023). Social media transformed how communities interact and share information, serving as platform for communication and message sharing with significant potential as promotional tool. Analysis of social media metrics showed that CIG Instagram account (@kimcerdastarumaja) reached 15,000 followers, with average post engagement rate of 8%, significantly higher than typical tourism accounts. Rural communities used social media platforms to increase awareness of ecotourism sites, reach wider audience, and promote community engagement in various tourism activities at minimal cost.

From a communication perspective, social media functions as a participatory platform enabling horizontal communication among community members and vertical communication with external stakeholders (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). This dual communication function transforms traditional top-down tourism promotion into more

democratic and inclusive process (Hays et al., 2013). The low-cost, accessible nature of social media platforms addresses critical barriers faced by resource-constrained rural communities, democratizing access to communication infrastructure previously monopolized by government agencies and commercial media.

#### *Community Information Group (CIG): Institutionalizing Social Media Participation*

Establishing Community Information Group (CIG) in Tarumajaya Village, managed by Bandung Regency Communication and Information Agency, exemplified community involvement in tourism promotion through social media. The CIG played an important role by acting as a digital bridge between the village administration's development goals and the community's grassroots initiatives. It functioned not only as a promotional agent but also as a data hub that translated complex government ecotourism policies into accessible social media content for local residents. The CIG coordinator stated: "Our main goal is to inform community and the outside world about opportunities and benefits of Tarumajaya Village, especially Situ Cisanti ecotourism. We do this through regular social media posts, videos, and live streaming" (Interview, May 2023). Content analysis of CIG social media from January to June 2023 revealed 156 posts on Instagram, 89 Facebook updates, and 24 YouTube videos, covering topics including natural scenery, cultural events, cleanup activities, and visitor testimonials.

Smart CIG Tarumajaya fulfilled a multi-faceted mission beyond collecting tourism information. Interviews with eight CIG members revealed how it served as a dynamic platform to promote community participation in various activities and ventures. A CIG member explained: "We don't just post photos. We organize events, coordinate with government, train community members in digital skills, and actively support tourism initiatives" (Interview, June 2023). Observations documented CIG organizing three major events during research period: environmental cleanup (April 2023, 25 participants), cultural festival (May 2023, 200 attendees), and digital marketing workshop (June 2023, 30 participants). Participation went beyond mental awareness to practical actions such as aggressively disseminating information, organizing events, and actively supporting tourism initiatives. Analysis of social media engagement data showed that the synergy between social media and Smart CIG Tarumajaya resulted in increased knowledge of untapped

ecotourism potential, with website traffic to Tarumajaya tourism information increasing by 45% between 2022 and 2023. This concerted action enabled community to take active role in preserving natural heritage, exemplifying how wise use of social media and community-driven initiatives can significantly contribute to promoting sustainable ecotourism at grassroots level.

### *CIG Activities and Content Strategy*

Smart CIG Tarumajaya demonstrated enthusiastic dedication to promoting tourism in Tarumajaya Village, focusing on Situ Cisanti. Content analysis of social media posts from January to August 2023 identified a repertoire of well-designed programs and initiatives carefully documented and disseminated through social media platforms. A CIG administrator explained: "We document everything we do and share it immediately on Instagram and Facebook. This creates real-time connection with our audience" (Interview, May 2023). These initiatives included cleanup efforts (monthly activities documented in 12 posts), hosting dignitaries (8 official visits documented), and organizing campaigns to promote tourism (6 major campaigns). Observations confirmed that combining forces restored allure of Tarumajaya Village, eliciting positive response from visitors. Analysis of visitor comments on social media showed 78% positive sentiment, with visitors frequently mentioning cleanliness, natural beauty, and community friendliness. A tourist commented on Instagram (May 2023): "Beautiful place with caring local community. Will definitely come back and recommend to friends."

### *Government Support and Digital Infrastructure Investment*

Tarumajaya Village administration diversified online platforms by investing in infrastructure to boost internet connectivity. Document analysis of village budget allocation showed Rp 50 million invested in 2022-2023 for digital infrastructure. The village head stated: "We know internet access is crucial for tourism promotion. We installed Wi-Fi hotspots at strategic locations and provided equipment for CIG" (Interview, April 2023). They crafted village profile films and promotional clips for Situ Cisanti and supplied cutting-edge technology like cameras and tripods for Smart CIG supervisors. Analysis of YouTube channel revealed three professional videos produced in 2023, accumulating 45,000 total views. These endeavors focused

on elevating profile of Situ Cisanti and Tarumajaya Village.

The team educated younger villagers on creating digital content for tourism promotion using smartphones. Interviews with workshop participants revealed that 30 youth received training in June 2023. A workshop participant stated: "The training taught us how to take good photos, edit videos, write engaging captions, and use hashtags effectively. Now I help manage CIG social media" (Interview, June 2023). They were instructed on producing successful YouTube channels, detailing techniques involved. As part of celebrations, cell phone photo competition was organized, with prize-winning images presented to West Java provincial government as tokens. Document analysis showed competition attracted 87 participants, with winning photos displayed at provincial tourism exhibition in July 2023.

Government investment in digital infrastructure and capacity-building represents crucial enabling factor for social media-based participation. However, this support also raises questions about autonomy and control. CIG operates under Bandung Regency Communication and Information Agency, suggesting government oversight of community communication activities. This institutional arrangement may constrain community agency, as content and messaging potentially require government approval. Authentic participatory platforms would require community ownership and editorial independence, allowing communities to communicate freely without government censorship or control.

### *Impact and Effectiveness of Social Media Participation*

Various stakeholders praised activities with positive reviews. Interviews with 12 tourists revealed they found information on Tarumajaya social media pages informative. A tourist stated: "I discovered Situ Cisanti through Instagram. The photos were beautiful and information about access and facilities was very helpful in planning my visit." (Interview, May 2023). Government officials found social media particularly useful when accessing most recent updates before visiting site. A Bandung Regency Tourism Office official explained: "We always check CIG social media before official visits to see its current conditions and plan our activities accordingly. It's very efficient." (Interview, June 2023). Furthermore, analysis of social media influencer posts showed that accounts like @wisatabdg (180,000 followers) and @kim-

cerdastarumaja significantly raised awareness about Situ Cisanti among tourists. Influencer posts about Situ Cisanti generated average 5,000 likes and 200 comments, with many followers expressing interest in visiting.

Rural area tourism promotion gained pertinence as technology and information proliferated; Smart CIG Tarumajaya embodied this shift. Analysis of visitor survey data (n=50) conducted in June 2023 revealed that 68% of visitors learned about Situ Cisanti through social media, 20% through word-of-mouth, and 12% through other sources. Social media's reach considerably helped Situ Cisanti gain popularity among travelers, representing concrete instance of social media's capacity to promote tourism and introduce destinations to broader audience.

As technology impacts rural regions, Smart CIG Tarumajaya's tourism promotion represents crucial innovation. Statistics pointed towards social media as primary factor luring travelers to Situ Cisanti, serving as primary reference point for contemporary society in various life aspects. Survey data showed that 85% of visitors used social media to gather information before visiting, and 72% shared their experiences on social media platforms after visiting.

#### *Synthesizing Social Media's Role: Empowerment or Controlled Participation?*

Given these factors, social media importance becomes increasingly clear. Social media allows broader and more diverse information dissemination about ecotourism and helps educate public about deeper and more sustainable benefits (Gabriel-Campos et al., 2021). In addition, social media provides opportunities for communities to actively participate in ecotourism development. Local communities use social media to communicate experiences, promote cultural and natural values, and interact with potential tourists (Leung et al., 2013). Participation of local communities in Ecotourism development in Tarumajaya Village exemplifies how social media enables multiple participation forms. Communities use social media to engage in environmental protection, local economic projects, and cultural and historical ventures. Social media is also an important tool for commercializing ecotourism, allowing better promotion and direct connection between local communities and tourists (Chatterjee & Dsilva, 2021).

Based on the empirical evidence of CIG's activities and digital infrastructure investment mentioned above, the importance of media becomes in-

creasingly clear. Media is critical to promoting community engagement in ecotourism development by informing and educating the public about ecotourism value, biodiversity, and environmental protection (Basyuni et al., 2018). Media helps the public recognize various positive impacts of ecotourism on the environment and local economies by providing pertinent information (Siswanto & Moeljadi, 2015). Recent studies demonstrate that digital media literacy enhances community capacity to participate effectively in tourism governance (Femenia-Serra & Neuhofer, 2018). Second, media is effective tool for marketing ecotourism areas (Tetiawat et al., 2019). Media highlights natural beauty, culture, and unique experiences through pictures, films, articles, and reviews, encouraging others to visit and support these places (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

In addition to that, media serves as forum to bring together different stakeholders in ecotourism industry, such as the government, local businesses, non-governmental organizations, and local communities (Sentanu et al., 2021). Through reporting, meetings, and interviews, media promotes discourse and collaboration needed for long-term ecotourism growth (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Furthermore, media empowers local communities by giving them voice in ecotourism planning and growth (Thornburg, 2017). Media helps community communicate interests and concerns to other stakeholders through interviews, reports, and discussion forums (Hays et al., 2013). Finally, media helps improve public knowledge of environmental issues related to ecotourism, such as climate change, habitat protection, and species conservation (Rezaeinejad & Khaniwadekar, 2021). Public can be more motivated to support environmental protection activities related to ecotourism if awareness increases (Shekhar & Kothari, 2025).

In other words, media educates, inspires, and connects community with Ecotourism (Sonjai et al., 2018). This contributes to conservation of local nature and culture and brings economic benefits to local community. Therefore, media role in supporting ecotourism development is critical to achieving sustainable tourism goals, closely linked to government support (Bello et al., 2017).

#### *Policy Implications: Integrating Social Media with Governance Reforms*

Government should seriously consider leading ecotourism development projects such as homestay programs, businesses, culture, and history in villages. This is because rural devel-

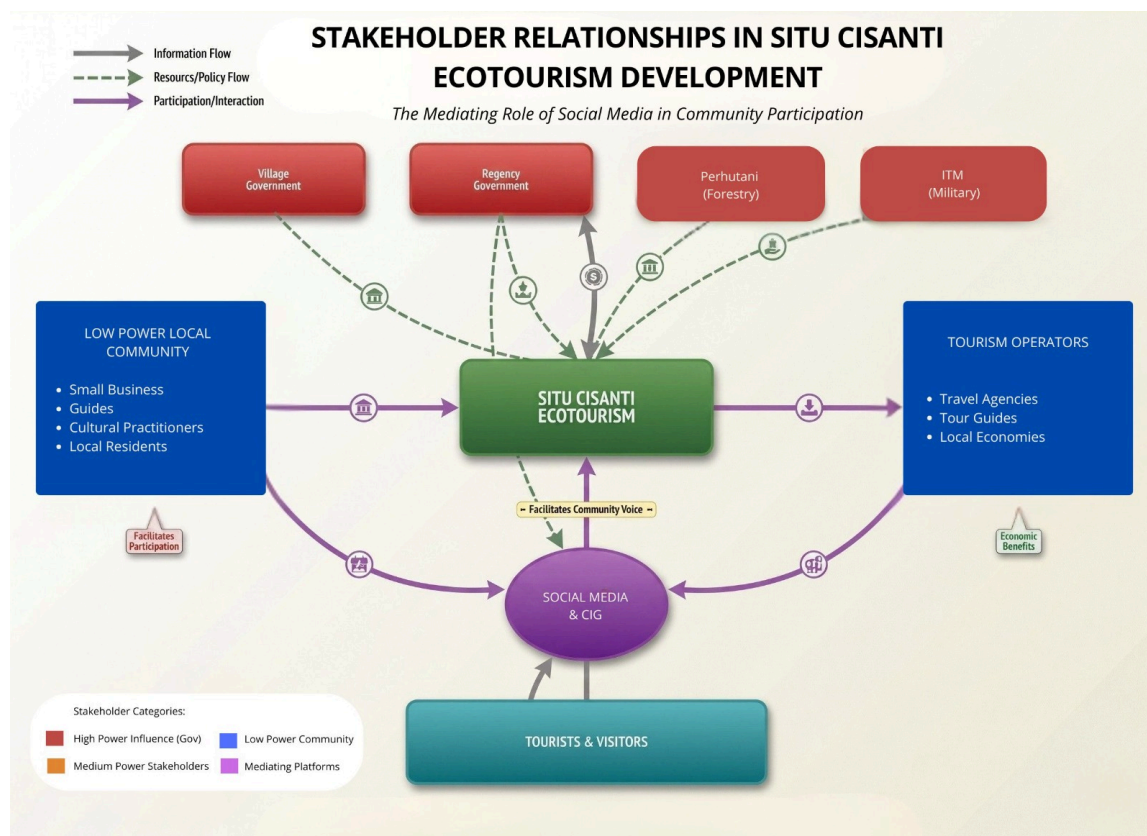


Figure 1. Stakeholder Relationships in Situ Cisanti Ecotourism Development

opment and poverty alleviation are democratic government functions (Orji & Awortu, 2015). In ecotourism, government agencies' role as "developers" is critical because they have authority and resources to implement development plans compared to private companies and non-governmental organizations (Gupta et al., 2019).

The government could use media to educate public about ecotourism benefits, biodiversity, and environmental protection. To support ecotourism development, the government could collaborate with media to optimize media role in increasing community participation, raising awareness, and promoting sustainable Ecotourism (Yasir et al., 2021). Through this collaboration, the government could be more effective in managing ecotourism development projects and ensuring that the local community is truly involved (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). The Situ Cisanti case demonstrates that social media functions as an enabling infrastructure for community participation, yet its effectiveness depends on complementary factors including digital literacy, government support, economic resources, and institutional frameworks that genuinely empower com-

munities beyond tokenistic involvement (Stronza et al., 2019).

## CONCLUSION

This study examined community participation in ecotourism development at Situ Cisanti, Tarumajaya Village, West Java, Indonesia, with particular focus on social media's role in facilitating local engagement. The research achieved its objectives by identifying community characteristics, analyzing participation forms, and assessing social media's influence on community involvement patterns.

The local community in Tarumajaya Village demonstrated significant heterogeneity regarding income, education, age, and livelihood strategies. This socioeconomic diversity shaped differential capacities and motivations for ecotourism participation. Despite nearly two decades of ecotourism activities since 2005, many residents remained below the poverty line with limited educational backgrounds, constraining their ability to fully capitalize on tourism opportunities. The study's primary contribution lies in identifying four distinct yet interconnected forms of community participa-

tion: environmental protection (cleanup activities and reforestation), economic engagement (small businesses, cafés, souvenir shops, homestays, and diverse entrepreneurial ventures), cultural and historical preservation (traditional arts performances and heritage site maintenance), and ecotourism marketing (social media-based promotion). These participation forms demonstrate community agency and resourcefulness in leveraging available assets despite structural constraints.

Regarding social media's role, the research demonstrates that these platforms function not merely as promotional tools but as a participatory infrastructure enabling community engagement in ecotourism governance. Through Community Information Group (CIG), social media facilitated information dissemination, stakeholder collaboration, community voice amplification, and sustainability culture cultivation. Empirical evidence showed that 68% of visitors learned about Situ Cisanti through social media, and CIG activities reached 15,000 followers with 8% engagement rate, significantly exceeding typical tourism accounts. Beyond visitor attraction, social media enabled communities to document activities, coordinate events, develop digital skills, and communicate directly with government officials and tourists. This represents qualitative shift from passive beneficiaries to active communicators in tourism development process.

However, critical analysis reveals that participation level observed in Tarumajaya constitutes tokenism, where communities follow externally designed plans without substantial decision-making power. This finding carries significant implications for policy and practice. Tokenistic participation perpetuates power asymmetries, limits equitable benefit distribution, and undermines long-term sustainability of community-based ecotourism. Policy implications include: First, institutional reforms must move beyond consultation toward co-management arrangements granting communities genuine authority in ecotourism planning and resource allocation decisions. Second, capacity-building initiatives should enhance not only technical skills but also organizational capacity and political literacy enabling communities to negotiate effectively with more powerful stakeholders. Third, benefit-sharing mechanisms require formalization through transparent agreements ensuring communities receive fair returns from ecotourism revenues. Fourth,

government agencies must recognize communities as partners rather than passive recipients, restructuring governance frameworks to institutionalize participatory decision-making processes.

Practical recommendations for enhancing community participation include: (1) Establishing community-managed ecotourism cooperatives with legal authority to negotiate with the government and private sectors; (2) Implementing participatory planning workshops where communities define development priorities and strategies; (3) Creating dedicated funding mechanisms for community-initiated ecotourism projects; (4) Developing digital literacy programs specifically designed for marginalized community segments including women and elderly; (5) Facilitating peer-learning networks connecting Tarumajaya community with successful community-based ecotourism initiatives elsewhere; and (6) Institutionalizing regular multi-stakeholder forums ensuring community voices influence policy decisions.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of how digital communication technologies intersect with community participation in ecotourism contexts characterized by socioeconomic heterogeneity and limited resources. While social media offers unprecedented opportunities for community voice and visibility, its empowering potential remains constrained by broader structural factors including power relations, resource distribution, and governance frameworks. Social media can enhance local contributions to ecotourism growth, but only when integrated with supportive policies, capacity-building initiatives, and institutional reforms that genuinely empower communities beyond tokenistic involvement. The Situ Cisanti case demonstrates that technological solutions alone cannot overcome deeply embedded power asymmetries; meaningful participation requires simultaneous transformation of governance structures, economic arrangements, and social relations shaping ecotourism development processes.

For sustainable ecotourism development in Indonesia, promoting a shared understanding of ecotourism, encouraging genuine community participation beyond tokenism, and harnessing media power with government support constitute critical steps to achieve both environmental conservation and socioeconomic development goals. Future research should examine longitudinal impacts of social media-facilitated partic-

ipation and explore mechanisms for transitioning from tokenistic to authentic community empowerment in ecotourism governance.

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