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A community perspective on local ecotourism development: lessons from Komodo National Park

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ABSTRACT

As developing countries are embracing new forms of tourism, particularly nature-based and community-based variants, the claim that an ecotourist-driven economy offers a sustainable future for local communities has come under critical scrutiny. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this debate by investigating a nature-based UNESCO heritage site that has developed into a prominent ecotourist destination in Indonesia: Komodo National Park (KNP). Based on qualitative research, including participant observation, this paper raises the question as to whether ecotourism has been an appropriate strategy to secure the sustainability of KNP's natural resources and accommodate the needs of local communities. The contribution of this paper is twofold: first, in offering a critical analysis of the transition to an ecotourist-driven economy from a local perspective, the paper reveals a series of failures to deliver on the sustainable development goals. In so doing, the paper contributes to the critical literature on ecotourism. Second, the paper draws attention to the diverse and multi-layered character of local communities and their embeddedness in a regional economy. In that, it recommends a broader scope of tourism policies beyond the level of the immediate protected area in order to include multiple stakeholders.

摘要

随着发展中国家拥抱新的旅游形式，特别是基于自然和基于社区的旅游形式，生态旅游驱动型经济为当地社区提供可持续未来的说法受到了严格审查。本文的目的是通过调查一个以自然为基础的联合国教科文组织遗产、现已发展成为印度尼西亚著名的生态旅游目的地的科莫多国家公园(Komodo National Park, KNP)，推进这场辩论。基于质性研究(包括参与观察)，本文提出了生态旅游是否是一种确保科莫多国家公园自然资源可持续发展、满足当地社区需求的合适策略的问题。本文的贡献有两个方面：首先，从当地视角对生态旅游驱动型经济的转型进行了批判性分析，揭示了在实现可持续发展目标方面的一系列失败。在此基础上，本文有助于批判性地分析生态旅游议题。其次，本文注意到地方社区的多样性和多层次特征及其在区域经济中的嵌入性。因此，本文建议在当前保护区的范围之外制定更广泛的旅游政策，以涵盖多个利益相关者。

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Introduction

Many developing countries have come to embrace new forms of tourism to advance community development (Zielinski et al., 2020). The advocates of ecotourism, in particular, argue that an ecotourist-driven economy offers a sustainable future for local communities while maintaining ecosystem integrity (Scheyvens, 1999). As the sustainability claim remains contentious (Gössling et al., 2009; Serenari et al., 2017), there is growing awareness that, in order to achieve sustainable outcomes, comprehensive measures are called for to engage local people in the planning and management of (eco-)tourist sites (Cheer & Lew, 2018; Zielinski et al., 2020).

Whilst an increasing number of studies promote a stakeholder-based approach in ecotourism that includes local people (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008), both supporters and critics commonly view local communities in a reductionist fashion. First, communities are represented as passive onlookers to tourism development that have to be given a voice by other stakeholders involved in the process (Cater, 2006; Garrod, 2003; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). Whilst such calls have the best of intentions to make ecotourist developments more inclusive, local people are denied agency. Second, local communities are typically represented as homogeneous entities where everybody is affected by tourism in the same way (Cater, 2006; Tolkach & King, 2015). Although scholars acknowledge that ecotourism development is received by communities in many different ways, studies largely fail to address the structural inequalities and power struggles that affect the extent to which local people benefit (Blackstock, 2005; Han et al., 2014). Third, advocates of a multi-stakeholder approach commonly define 'community' in a narrow fashion limiting its scope to those living on and in the immediate vicinity of an ecotourist site. Such a narrowly tailored approach ignores that ecotourist developments affect livelihoods well beyond the village (Tolkach & King, 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to address these issues by focusing on a nature-based UNESCO heritage site that has developed into a prominent ecotourist destination in Indonesia: Komodo National Park (KNP) in the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara, home to the famous Komodo Dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*). KNP was established in 1980 for the purpose of conserving these unique lizards (Hitchcock, 1993). In 2005, ecotourism has become the main pillar of making KNP self-financing. This new approach included the provision of alternative livelihoods to communities within and surrounding the Park (Borchers, 2009). Looking back on four decades of tourism development in KNP, this paper raises the question as to whether ecotourism has been an appropriate strategy to secure the sustainability of the Park's natural resources and accommodate the needs of local communities.

The above question will be investigated from the perspective of local people who came to model their livelihood strategies on ecotourism. The data underlying this paper were collected in 2015 by way of ethnographic fieldwork, at a time when the Indonesian government initiated a campaign to promote tourism growth in targeted areas. Consequently, ecotourism in the Park came under scrutiny and erratic government directives left local communities in limbo about their future. As this situation has not been resolved, the findings of this study remain valid and current to the present day. In order to obtain an understanding of how KNP's ecotourism strategy worked out for local communities within and surrounding the Park and to identify

its weaknesses that continue to affect livelihoods in the area, our research identified two sites (see [Figure 1](#)) where ecotourism creates diverging livelihood opportunities: (1) Komodo Village within KNP where local people have to abide by the rules set by the park management. Their livelihood strategies revolve around the production and sale of handicrafts and souvenirs. (2) Labuan Bajo, the 'gateway' to Komodo, an unregulated, sprawling tourist destination with a booming economy. Here, the prominent employment opportunities for local people include boat charters and travel agencies targeting visitors to the Park. In comparing tourism-based livelihoods at both sites, this paper offers insights into the opportunities and challenges for local people to benefit from ecotourist developments. So doing, the contribution of this paper is twofold: first, it engages with the critical literature on sustainable ecotourism development. Second, the paper makes an attempt at offering a more adequate conceptualization of 'community' by drawing attention to the diverse and multi-layered character of community and its embeddedness in a regional economy.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature on local participation, stakeholderism and empowerment in an ecotourist context as key concepts for the interpretation of the empirical findings. In the subsequent sections, the research will be situated in its geographic setting, followed by a brief description of the research methodology. Then, selected stories of local people in the Komodo tourism industry will be narrated and discussed against the backdrop of the key concepts. The concluding section will highlight the contribution to the ongoing debate on sustainable community development and will outline directions for future research. In addition, recommendations will be offered for planning and policy to benefit the tourism-dependent communities of the Komodo area.

Literature review and key concepts

Among tourism scholars consensus is gathering that sustainable tourism development is a sensible strategy to generate economic benefits and enhance livelihoods in local communities (Blackstock, 2005; Shen et al., 2008; Tao & Wall, 2009a, 2009b). Livelihoods are deemed sustainable if the total of resources available provides sufficient alternatives to cope with and recover from stress and shocks, and offer long-term opportunities to preserve a way of life (Chambers & Conway, 1992, p. 6). Despite profound criticism (see Sharpley, 2000, 2020), the concept nevertheless rose to great prominence and came to underlie the discourse on tourism as an instrument to create sustainable livelihoods. This discourse extends across new, overlapping, variants of tourism such as ecotourism, responsible and sustainable tourism, community-based tourism and inclusive tourism. In addressing a variety of social, economic and environmental issues, these new tourisms capture novel or alternative ways in which tourism development differs from conventional tourism (Gössling et al., 2009). The ongoing debate revolves around a number of dimensions, three of which are key to our study: local participation, recognition of stakeholderism in tourism development and community empowerment. Local participation is a way to enhance the ability of local people to participate effectively in decision-making processes (see Saufi et al., 2014; Scheyvens, 1999), recognition of stakeholderism advances the inclusion of local communities in tourism planning and policy-making (Tolkach & King, 2015), and empowerment implies that

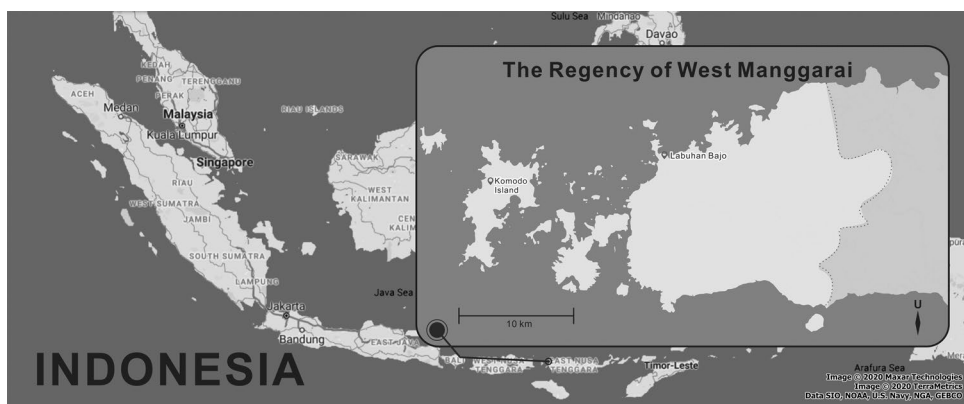


Figure 1. The regency of West Manggarai with Komodo and Labuan Bajo. Source: Modified from ©2021 GoogleImage 2021 Maxar Technologies Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO

local people control the decision-making regarding tourism developments in their community (Dolezal & Novelli, 2020). These dimensions will be elaborated in the subsections below.

Local participation

There is growing awareness that the intended long-term effects of the new variants of tourism depend on the participation of local communities (Carter et al., 2015; Shen et al., 2008; Zielinski et al., 2020). The latter is conceived in this study as ‘tourism activities operated by the local community with the retention of economic benefits locally, and the accrual of favorable social outcomes such as tourism-related education and training’ (Saufi et al., 2014, p. 803). Ecotourism - which as the centerpiece of KNP’s financing scheme and management strategy is of particular interest to our research - is often hailed as both a conservation and development tool that has the capacity to provide sustained economic benefits and livelihood enhancement to local communities while also maintaining ecosystem integrity through low-impact use of local resources (Borchers, 2009; Garrod, 2003; Scheyvens, 1999). To meet its dual objective to protect the environment and alleviate poverty, ecotourism strongly advocates the involvement of local people in the production of tourism (Scheyvens, 1999).

However, there is mounting evidence that revenues often fail to reach local communities and local participation in the planning and management of ecotourist sites is commonly absent (Carter et al., 2015). In many ecotourist projects, community participation is, in terms of Tosun (2006), mere tokenism and contributes only minimally to local development. There are many examples, particularly in the ‘classical conservationist’ approach (Cater, 2006), where local people are prohibited from accessing ecotourist sites, even dislocated to give way to ecotourist developments (Serenari et al., 2017), and where alternative livelihoods rarely offer sustainable outcomes (Carter et al., 2015). Commenting on the ‘local participation mantra’ in sustainable tourism, Cole (2006) points out that community participation is often constrained by

institutional factors such as centralized decision-making and a lack of knowledge among host communities about ways in which they could participate.

Recognition of local stakeholdership

As claims of 'local participation' came under critical scrutiny, tourism scholars have raised issues with presenting local communities as passive onlookers who have to be given a voice in the planning and implementation of tourism development (Tolkach & King, 2015). In many ecotourist projects local communities are defined as the recipients of benefits and denied an active role as decision-maker, entrepreneur, business owner, manager and leader (Dahles et al., 2020). Ecotourist sites are often initiated and operated by external agencies, foreign investors or international NGOs that - whilst they may have the best of intentions to generate economic benefits for local communities - deny them agency (Carter et al., 2015). Local impact, however, is not achieved through economic benefits alone. More importantly, sustainable outcomes require business initiatives which help build management and leadership skills, and strengthen local institutions (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). Budding local initiatives are part of a social economy which is characterized by small-scale enterprises with strong ties to other local industries and collaborative networks (Tolkach & King, 2015). These include formal social ties which may facilitate access to resources and the actual ability of people to mobilize a variety of 'livelihood capital'- a concept coined by Shen et al. (2008). When local communities become stakeholders in ecotourist developments, they also become stakeholders in the preservation of natural and cultural heritage (Nugroho & Numata, 2020). Multiple-stakeholder collaboration that includes local communities as equal partners not only increases economic benefits, but also provides a more robust foundation for the conservation dimension of ecotourism (Cochrane, 2013). As a case in point, community-based ecotourism may reconcile environmental conservation and local livelihood needs (Serenari et al., 2017).

Local empowerment

The inclusion in local stakeholder collaborations, however, is often prone to the misconception that a local community is a bounded whole, limited in its scope to those living on and in the immediate vicinity of a tourist site (Tolkach & King, 2015). This understanding of local community fails to question the scale and scope of this concept and ignores that tourism development implies mobilities, interdependencies and collaboration far beyond the immediate local setting. Hence, people occupying a common geographic location are rarely identifiable as a single community. Yet, it is believed that ecotourism, or any other form of community-based tourism, is based on consensus and community involvement in designing and implementing tourism activities (Simons & De Groot, 2015). However, communities tend to be incomplete, divided and changeable, as Tolkach and King (2015) point out. It has been observed that often only select groups benefit from tourism development, creating dramatic differences in wealth and power within and among communities (Blackstock, 2005; Han et al., 2014) and power and empowerment have been identified as 'critical success

factors for community-based tourism projects' (Simons & De Groot, 2015, p. 74). In their study of social empowerment through community-based tourism in rural Bali, Dolezal and Novelli (2020, p. 4) argue that empowerment means 'active participation, ownership, control, and power over tourism decision-making, resources, and lives.'

In summary, this literature review distinguishes three dimensions of the sustainable tourism development discourse that are critical for ecotourism to meet its dual mission: (1) local participation in planning and management, (2) recognition of local communities as equal partners in multi-stakeholder collaborations, and (3) local empowerment implying control over tourism decision-making. The ways in which the experience of local people in the Komodo tourism industry resonates with these dimensions will be explored in the empirical section below. But first we will discuss the surge of tourism in the Komodo area as the background against which their experience has to be understood.

Tourism development in komodo

KNP is located in the regency of West Manggarai in the province of East Nusa Tenggara and includes the three larger islands Komodo, Padar and Rinca, and 26 smaller ones, with a total area of 1,733 km² (see [Figure 1](#)). The Park rose to worldwide fame when it was declared a UNESCO World heritage site in 1991 and selected as one of the New Seven Wonders of Nature in 2007 (Erb, 2015). Listed among the government-prioritized areas, dubbed as the 'ten new Bali's', to be developed as a tourist destination (Westoby et al., 2021), this rather remote and poverty-stricken part of Indonesia experienced a remarkable development of infrastructure. Most rapid development has been witnessed outside the protected area in Labuan Bajo which emerged as the central business district and the hub of the burgeoning tourism industry (Walpole & Goodwin, 2000). Since the research underlying this study has been completed in 2015, the development of both residential and tourism infrastructure, such as shopping malls, health precincts, hotels, restaurants and entertainment venues, have skyrocketed along the coastal area of Labuan Bajo.

Komodo Village on Komodo island is located inside the protected area comprising four hamlets with a total population of 1.714 people at the time of research (Kodir et al., 2019, p. 1408), a number that has slightly increased over the recent years (to 1,791 in 2019, see Kecamatan Komodo Dalam Angka, 2020, p. 19). The traditional livelihoods in this coastal area were based on the exploitation of a variety of marine resources, hunting and gathering, and some agriculture (Borchers, 2009; Kodir et al., 2019). In the 1980s, *bagan* fishing came to dominate local livelihoods. *Bagan* fishing employs large nets and kerosene lanterns to attract squid, the main the catch. The 1990s into the mid-2000s were the golden decade of *bagan* fishing which, at the time, offered high incomes and generated a measure of prosperity in this coastal region (Kodir et al., 2019). However, when visitor numbers to KNP started to soar from the mid-1990s (see [Table 1](#)), the lives in the coastal communities underwent drastic change. In Labuan Bajo, a migrant town that has been permanently settled only since the 1950s accommodating a rather diverse population (Cole, 2017), tourism growth has been pushed at any cost, reflecting Indonesia's neoliberal policies. People from all over Indonesia and beyond flocked to the area in response to local

Table 1. KNP-bound tourist arrivals.

Year	International Visitors	Domestic Visitors	Total
2001	1,476	12,612	14,088
2002	1,249	12,863	14,112
2003	1,282	10,305	11,587
2004	13,396	1,651	15,047
2005	16,904	1,742	18,646
2006	16,559	1,114	17,673
2007	19,307	762	20,069
2008	20,814	948	21,762
2009	34,954	1,580	36,534
2010	41,707	2,965	44,672
2011	41,833	6,177	48,010
2012	41,972	8,010	49,982
2013	54,147	9,654	63,801
2014	67,089	13,537	80,626
2015	76,195	19,215	95,410
2016	78,617	29,094	107,711
2017	76,612	48,457	125,069
2018	121,411	55,423	176,834
2019	144,068	77,635	221,703
2020	13,089	38,529	51,618

Source: Komodo National Park, 2020.

governments inviting tourism investment. These new migrants, capital-rich and experienced in the tourism industry, came to buy up land to be developed for high-end tourism in Labuan Bajo (Borchers, 2009; Erb, 2015), following the trend in eastern Indonesia where most tourism revenue is generated by tour and cruise ship operators located in Lombok, Bali, Java, and overseas (Borchers, 2009). Whilst 80 per cent of Labuan Bajo's population is living below the Indonesian poverty line (Cole, 2017), this influx of new migrants is creating extreme social and economic contrasts (Erb, 2013).

When KNP was founded in 1980, originally to preserve Komodo's environment for scientific purposes (Hitchcock, 1993), Komodo Island was divided into zones, with only a limited area designated for human settlement. The park management introduced restrictions on the exploitation of natural resources and banned all agricultural and hunting and gathering activities (Borchers, 2009; Kodir et al., 2019). From the beginning, zoning arrangements - though common in national parks (Nugroho & Numata, 2020) - have been the bone of contention between the local community and the KNP Office located in Labuan Bajo (Kodir et al., 2019). From 2005 to 2010, KNP was run as a Komodo collaborative management initiative. The key partners were the Komodo National Park Authority, local government, and Putri Naga Komodo, a joint venture between an American environmental organization (The Nature Conservancy) and an Indonesian private tour operator (Borchers, 2009; Cochrane, 2013).

Ecotourism was identified as the main pillar of a scheme to make the Park self-financing and better integrate local communities in the process of protected area management. Provisions for alternative livelihood strategies were made and some villagers have received training in tour guiding, diving, woodcarving and handicraft production (Borchers, 2009; Kodir et al., 2019). Initially, this arrangement seemed to work well (Cochrane, 2013). In 2010, however, the collaboration broke down for lack of trust between the key stakeholders, the absence of good governance and conflicts over access to the rich fishing grounds. As only few villagers were

trained and employed as wildlife rangers and natural guides, their vast local knowledge remained untapped and local participation in ecotourism, other than souvenir production and selling, remained limited (Benu et al., 2020, p. 259).

In 2013 about 60 per cent of income in Komodo Village came from tourism (Cochrane, 2013, p. 135) and, at the time of research, the vast majority of local households depended on returns from the souvenir trade. Despite the surge of tourism, Komodo Island still lacks basic infrastructure, there is widespread poverty and lack of education, while issues with access to fresh water and waste management remain unresolved (Cole, 2006, 2017). At the same time, land grabbing and speculation by business investors from outside the region are rife (Benu et al., 2020, p. 258). As local communities feel abandoned and left with few options, the situation is exacerbated by the pertinent fear of having to resettle to neighboring islands outside the Park. The most recent announcement to temporarily close Komodo Island to tourists was made by the provincial government of East Nusa Tenggara in 2019, only to be withdrawn a few months later (Lyons, 2019; Munthe & Diela, 2019). What at first appeared a repeated attempt at enforcing conservationist measures for the purpose of protecting the Komodo lizards, soon turned out to be an exercise in rebranding Komodo as an up-market destination with quotas and excessive entrance fees (Fullerton, 2019).

Methodology

This study makes an attempt at appreciating local perspectives on ecotourist developments and their underlying social realities. In this vein, the research is based on a constructivist approach which understands reality as fashioned by participants in a particular social setting and prone to continuous change (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Research being an interactive and interpretative process, the analysis of findings needs to acknowledge the situational and contextual character of the data collected, which includes the positionality of the researchers involved (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). While focusing on local participation, this study is participatory in itself in that it offers an *emic* account of social realities that are conveyed in terms meaningful to local actors (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). To create such a situationally grounded and contextualized account, the research features ethnographic fieldwork. Fieldwork aims to arrive at an in-depth understanding of the ways in which the people under study establish their world and give meaning to their lives and, therefore, implies a long-term involvement with the people under study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

This study is based on a cross-cultural collaboration between the lead researcher, an Indonesian tourism scholar, and the co-author, an Australian anthropologist, both with substantial experience in tourism research in diverse geographical settings in Indonesia. Fieldwork was conducted by the lead researcher during an intermittent period of nine months in 2015, first in Labuan Bajo, then in Komodo Village. It was a time when the Indonesian government initiated a campaign to promote tourism in the coastal area of the regency of West Manggarai. The research strategy comprised of a pilot project prior to the actual fieldwork in order to initiate contact with key actors in the local tourism industry and to obtain the required research permits. During fieldwork, triangulation of both data sources and methods of data collection was applied in order to establish a dataset that makes judgments of credibility and

transferability possible (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The data collection revolved around participant observation, including conversing, interviewing, observing, listening and sharing in order to co-produce an understanding of the local experience of tourism development and its context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Participants were recruited based on recommendations made by initial contacts, the so-called 'snowball effect' (Bryman, 2016, p. 415). This resulted in a pool of 36 local participants (15 in Komodo Village and 21 in Labuan Bajo) who engaged in repeated conversational interviews conducted in Indonesian language. The interviews included onsite observations which were made in an unobtrusive way by following participants (with their explicit consent) during daily activities. Both interviews and observations were based on a list of topics prepared prior to each meeting. All participants in this sample are men. While male bias may have played a role in the sampling undertaken by the lead researcher, the gendered character of the field also contributed to the composition of the sample. After all, the owners of the local tourism businesses studied - i.e. souvenir producers, tourboat operators and travel agents - are commonly the male heads of household.

The interviews, conducted in *bahasa Indonesia*, were tape recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed and translated into English. The transcripts were manually analyzed to generate major themes, which were subsequently coded and systematized in matrices, and then matched with observation-based field notes and relevant documents (such as policy papers and statistical data) for cross-comparison. The final step in the analysis consisted of data interpretation by comparing and contrasting the initial findings with the outcome of the literature review. Ethical guidelines were implemented prudently throughout the research process. Participants' informed consent was obtained and data sources have been anonymized in accordance with the protocol of research ethics.

Local tourism-based livelihoods: three cases

This section focuses on the experience of local people in the Komodo and Labuan Bajo tourism industry, particularly regarding issues of participation, their role in collaborative arrangements and decision-making power in livelihood changes. From the database underlying this article, three local businessmen were selected, each representing an exemplary case of how ecotourism in the KNP and its vicinity has affected livelihoods. The main selection criteria were: (1) covering the research area of Komodo and Labuan Bajo, (2) representing the most significant categories of local tourism businesses, and (3) showcasing local stories about ways in which participants navigate the opportunities and challenges posed by tourism developments. The contextually embedded stories of the three businessmen selected provide a lens through which to look at the livelihood transformations generated by ecotourist developments in the wider KNP area.

Komodo island souvenir producers

It was only in the mid-2000s that souvenir production became the primary source for Komodo livelihoods. It was a time when *bagan* fishing came under pressure as squid, the major catch, became scarce and returns decreased significantly. As the

crisis in the fishing industry unfolded, visitor numbers to the KNP were soaring (see Table 1). Pak Saeh, who was among many other Komodo fishermen who gave up fishing and sold their boats, started to develop his wood carving skills under the guidance of his father-in-law, Haji Nuhung, the first sculptor in the village to obtain the honorable title of *haji*, indicating that he completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. Haji Nuhung passed down his carving skills to his children and their spouses and, today, the extended Nuhung family holds a prominent position in Komodo. Villagers who did not possess the required skills for sculpting nevertheless found ways to join the industry: as vendors. Their foremost merchandise being the Komodo dragon sculptures and shell-carved souvenirs, these vendors added other items to their stock, such as t-shirts, wooden masks and jewelry made of pearls obtained from other islands.

Pak Saeh carves his sculptures from logs he collects in the island's forest, preferably from Portia trees (*thespesia populnea*). As these trees are protected under KNP regulations, Pak Saeh often uses logs washed ashore or the Portia trees he grows in his backyard. He works the logs with traditional tools under his stilted house, which serves as a studio. As soon as the carving process is completed, family members get involved with the finishing process, including carving the dragon's scales, then sanding and coloring them with hair dye and shoe polish. Recruiting the unpaid labor of relatives is a common feature of Komodo's souvenir businesses (see Table 2).

Beyond and above the contributions in cash and kind from family members, Komodo's souvenir businesses employ various supplementary strategies to secure

Table 2. Komodo: livelihood contribution of household members.

Participant	Livelihood	Participating household members	Roles	
			Indirect income generator	Direct income generator
#SB01	shell carving	wife		selling fish snacks
#SB02	woodcarving (WC)	wife	assisting in the sculpture finishing process	selling food & drinks
#SB03	WC	children		running the family's souvenir business
#SB04 Pak Saeh	WC	wife children	sculpture finishing process	contributing cash from paid work
#SB05	WC	wife	sculpture finishing process	
#SB06	souvenir vendor (SV)	wife	souvenir modification process	supplying rice
#SB07	SV	wife	-managing family finances (F-MGT) -selling souvenirs	
#SB08	SV	wife	F-MGT	
#SB09	SV	wife	F-MGT	
#SB10	SV	wife	F-MGT	
#SB11	SV	wife	F-MGT	
#SB12	SV	wife	F-MGT	
#SB13	SV	wife	-F-MGT -assisting in the art shop	
#SB14	SV	wife	F-MGT	
#SB15	SV	wife	F-MGT	

their livelihood. Some families run side-businesses, peddle their produce at tourist hotspots, or hold salaried jobs off the island to complement the household income. Table 3 lists the most common strategies found among the participants in this research.

Pak Saeh enjoys privileged access to major stakeholders, including government officials, KNP management, art shops and vendors in Labuan Bajo. He has been sponsored to join training courses in other tourist destinations, such as Bali. In so doing, he has built a far-flung network and a large market for his work that extends far beyond Komodo Island. Yet, despite his fame and good connections, he struggles to generate a regular income. Pak Saeh, like all souvenir businessmen in this area, depends on cruise tourism which is subject to seasonality. For most of the year, Komodo souvenir producers and vendors go without a regular income and households experience extreme income fluctuation. This situation leads these people into a circle of debt.

Labuan Bajo tourboat operators

Similar to Komodo Island, people in the coastal area of Labuan Bajo depended on *bagan* fishing until the crisis made their traditional livelihood unsustainable. When increasing numbers of tourists arrived to see the Komodo dragons, local people got engaged in tourism. In contrast to Komodo people, however, Labuan Bajo fishermen did not abandon their boats, but converted their shipping vessels into tourboats to run charters to the nearby islands, including Komodo.

Irfan is one of the many locals who abandoned *bagan* fishing. Upon establishing his own tourboat charter, his business received a boost when KNP needed a boat with skipper to take staff to the guard posts on nearby islands. The monthly trips for KNP earn him a fixed income which is sufficient to support his family. In addition, he seizes every opportunity to offer his charter services to tourists. He commonly receives his bookings from friendly local travel agencies. Irfan's experience resonates with the other tourboat operators who all depend on their ability to mobilize a variety

Table 3. Komodo: supplementary livelihood strategies.

Participant:	Assistance from relatives	Seeking new markets	Supplier for other Komodo vendors	Supplier for vendors elsewhere	Living off savings	Reducing production costs	Running	Peddling items at tourist hotspots
#SB01	X		X					
#SB02	X		X					
#SB03	X							
#SB04 Saeh	X	X	X	X		X		
#SB05	X		X					
#SB06	X				X			
#SB07	X	X	X	X	X		X	
#SB08	X	X	X	X			X	
#SB09	X		X				X	
#SB10	X		X					
#SB11	X				X			X
#SB12	X		X		X			
#SB13	X	X	X	X			X	
#SB14	X		X		X			
#SB15	X						X	X

of social ties to secure their livelihoods, including intermittent jobs for organizations and favors received from forthcoming travel agents and tour guides (see [Table 4](#) below).

Due to his work for KNP, Irfan does not suffer from the low tourist season as much as other Labuan Bajo tourboat operators do, the more so as his wife contributes to the household's disposable income. Similar to Komodo's souvenir businesses, the contribution of family members to household income is crucial as few tourboat operators manage without additional assistance (see [Table 5](#) below). In Irfan's case, this financial buffer allowed him, in collaboration with other tourboat operators, to include tour packages in their service offerings. Whilst this innovation reduced their dependency on tour agencies and increased their income, challenges abound. Thrust in a role that reaches far beyond navigating a boat, Irfan experienced that his English proficiency is yet insufficient to perform as a caterer, tour guide and entertainer for international tourists.

The Labuan Bajo tour operators

In the early 2000s, Fandy's family moved to Labuan Bajo from Ruteng, a small town in the highlands of Western Flores. As his relatives prospered in the local tourism industry, young Fandy was sent to Bali to be educated at university. His studies and occasional jobs at his uncle's hotel back home in Labuan Bajo equipped him not only with excellent English communication skills, but also with first-hand experience in

Table 4. Labuan Bajo: supplementary livelihood strategies.

	Relying on favours	Seeking New Markets	Living off savings in low season	Assistance from relatives	Casual jobs	Direct marketing to tourists
Tourboat Operators:						
#TBO01	X	X	X	X	X	X
#TBO02 Irfan	X	X		X	X	
#TBO03	X	X	X	X		X
#TBO04	X			X		
#TBO05	X	X		X	X	
#TBO06	X		X	X		
#TBO07	X			X		
#TBO08	X	X		X		X
#TBO09	X			X		X
#TBO10	X		X			X
#TBO11	X	X			X	
Travel Agents:						
		Running side-businesses/ farming				
#TA01			X	X	X	X
#TA02		X		X	X	
#TA03			X	X	X	X
#TA04				X	X	
#TA05		X		X		
#TA06 Fandy		X		X		
#TA07			X	X	X	
#TA08				X		
#TA09		X		X		
#TA10		X		X		

the tourism trade. Upon graduation, he started a tour operation business as his uncle allowed him to use office space at no cost in one of his properties on a prime location close to Tilong harbor, the starting point of cruises to Komodo Island. Due to the wide-ranging support received from his family, Fandy's business is thriving and he is able to employ one fulltime staff. This resonates with the other travel agents in the sample, none of whom manages without the significant contribution made by family members in cash and kind (see Table 5).

Table 5. Labuan Bajo: livelihood contribution of family members.

Partici-pant	Livelihood	Participating household members	Roles	
			Indirect income generator	Direct income generator
Tourboat Operators				
#TBO01	tourboat charter (TBC)	wife and children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> gathering food to sell 	
#TBO02 Irfan	TBC	father in law wife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> F-MGT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> subsistence fishing early education teacher
#TBO03	TBC	wife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> F-MGT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> selling cakes making snacks to sell
#TBO04	TBC	brother		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> working as KNP staff
#TBO05	TBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> daughterwife 	F-MGT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a teacher making bags from plastic garbage to sell
#TBO06	TBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sons 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tourboat operations
#TBO07	TBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wife 	F-MGT	
#TBO08	TBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mother 	F-MGT	
#TBO09	TBC			
#TBO10	TBC			
#TBO11	TBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wife 	F-MGT	
Travel Agents				
#TA01	tour guiding (TG) & travel agency (TA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wife 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> F-MGT 	
#TA02	TG & farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wife 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> F-MGT taking care of family farm 	
#TA03	TG & hotel management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wife 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> F-MGT 	
#TA04	tour guide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> providing various resources 	
#TA05	TA, tour boat & car rental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wife 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> F-MGT 	
#TA06 Fandy	travel & real estate agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> parents & uncle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> providing various resources and business support 	
#TA07	TG & staff at TA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wife 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> F-MGT 	
#TA08	TA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> brother 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> providing free housing 	
#TA09	TA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wife 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> family farm 	
#TA10	TA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wife 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> family farm 	

Fandy has many connections in the local tourism industry. He is good mates with local tour guides who taught him how to arrange tour packages; and his friendships with local tourboat operators are instrumental in ensuring privileged access to boat rentals when demand is soaring during high season. Hotel staff recommends his travel agency to tourists who then book their sightseeing tours through his office.

Like many of his local counterparts (see [Table 4](#)), Fandy is putting strategies in place to weather the impact of the low season such as diversification of his sources of income into sectors other than tourism. He holds a stake in his father's property business and builds investment property. Whilst Fandy is doing well as a businessman, he has growing concerns about the increasing competition in the travel industry posed by the arrival of newcomers to Labuan Bajo, a concern he shares with many of his local counterparts.

Discussion

The transition to an ecotourist-based economy in Komodo and Labuan Bajo has fallen short of delivering on its sustainable development goals as it failed to meet its dual mission of protecting the environment and alleviating poverty. This, in summary, is the short answer to the question as to whether ecotourism has been an appropriate strategy to secure the sustainability of the KNP's natural and human resources. Although the transition was embraced by local people, the resources that became available did not provide sufficient alternatives to recover from the downturn of the fishing industry and opportunities to preserve their livelihoods in the long term, conditions that Chambers and Conway (1992) define as critical for sustainable development. In defiance of the literature promoting tourism as a strategy for sustainable development, this study reiterates Sharpley's (2000, 2020) verdict that sustainable tourism development is 'unfeasible' and this widely endorsed discourse needs drastic revision. Underlying the un-sustainability of the ecotourism-based economy in the coastal region of Komodo and Labuan Bajo is a series of failures which will be discussed below: (1) the failure to capitalize on local participation, (2) the failure to recognize local community as a stakeholder and (3) the failure to empower local people within and beyond the protected area of the KNP.

Capitalizing on local participation

This study has shown that local participation, advocated widely as the way forward in implementing the dual mission of ecotourism (Borchers, 2009; Carter et al., 2015; Scheyvens, 1999; Shen et al., 2008) is not a priority of the KNP authorities. But it is not for lack of participation that the voice of local people is absent in decisions made on their behalf. Local people are powerful agents of tourist development in their roles of producers, service providers, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. Their critical contributions go unnoticed or are frustrated by the authorities – as recent studies on Komodo (Benu et al., 2020; Cole, 2017) and other ecotourist destinations (Carter et al., 2015; Dahles et al., 2020; Saufi et al., 2014; Serenari et al., 2017)

demonstrate. In the tourism industry of Komodo and Labuan Bajo, local people have played and still play active roles as craftspeople, vendors, tour guides, and business owners. In fact, they significantly contributed to the creation of Komodo as an ecotourist destination and, in so doing, exhibited agency, resourcefulness and entrepreneurship. The Nuhung family, in particular, displayed the craftsmanship and entrepreneurial zest that created business opportunities for many villagers, thereby setting an example of a successful transition to a tourism-based livelihood. In Labuan Bajo, *bagan* fishermen repurposed their vessels and utilized their navigation skills and knowledge of the marine environment when establishing their charter business. Tourism development has attracted people from across the Indonesian archipelago to Labuan Bajo and many, such as Fandy's family, rose to prosperity.

In all cases, whether it is a humble woodcarving workshop on Komodo Island, a converted fishing vessel serving as tourboat or an independent travel agency in an up-market urban neighborhood, local business is embedded in a household economy. Family members commonly provide unpaid labor and additional income to bridge seasonal lows and to boost the household income in general. Family-based networks are strategically employed to obtain financial support for business start-ups and market access, to learn new skills and capitalize on reputations, and to recruit assistance for major projects. To move beyond mere tokenism (Tosun, 2006), the discourse surrounding local participation needs to distinguish between participation in the management of ecotourist sites and participation in unplanned, informal economic initiatives, enterprise development and business operations that emerge in tandem with the planned and formal activities.

Recognizing local stakeholdership

Ecotourism is prone to a false contrast between humans and nature. In an attempt to introduce a more sustainable way of managing natural resources, the KNP authorities embraced a variant of ecotourism that favors nature conservation over human development, commonly described as the 'classical conservationist' approach (Garrod, 2003). Since the establishment of KNP, the presence of humans has been viewed as a risk to biodiversity and, consequently, Komodo people live under the constant threat of dislocation (see Borchers, 2009). Local entrepreneurs encounter many obstacles in developing their business. Enforced by strict zoning measures, the natural resources accessible to Komodo villagers have progressively been reduced, affecting for example the availability of timber for woodcarving as Pak Saeh explained. Similarly, the recent increase of access fees to KNP is feared to affect visitor numbers not only to Komodo Island, but to the coastal area of Labuan Bajo at large.

However, this study shows that the embedded nature of the local economy – which is based on family-operated small businesses and collaborative networks – implies that local people, beyond playing the role of beneficiaries or participants, are most of all stakeholders themselves, both in nature conservation and tourism (see Cochrane, 2013). On Komodo Island, through recognition of his artwork, Pak Saeh, for example, has turned into an ambassador of Komodo's ecotourism and nature conservation. Concurring with Benu et al. (2020), Nugroho and Numata (2020) and Tolkach and

King (2015), who argue that with adequate education and support, nature conservation and economic needs can make firm allies in an ecotourist destination, our findings suggest that the inclusion of local people as partners in policy and decision-making not only enhances local livelihoods but also provides the foundation for nature conservation in an ecotourist destination.

Empowering local people

The local community that depends on and contributes to Komodo's ecotourism extends far beyond the narrow confines of Komodo Island. It is through tourism development that the livelihoods of Komodo villagers and people in Labuan Bajo have become closely intertwined. Successful Komodo sculptors, such as Pak Saeh, maintain close ties with multiple stakeholders located in Labuan Bajo and beyond. Their participation in the tourism industry has opened the village to the outside world. Conversely, tour-boat operators and travel agents in Labuan Bajo have a regular presence on Komodo Island as it is in their interest to maintain smooth relations with local souvenir sellers, tour guides and KNP staff. Komodo tourism has created a community of local stakeholders that encompasses partnerships and interdependencies beyond the immediate local setting - as Tolkach and King (2015) observe for local communities in general.

Yet, this study shows that tourism development has empowered the happy few, such as the Nuhung family who can build on the prolific role of their *pater familias* Haji Nuhung, or Irfan who was lucky to get on the KNP payroll, or Fandy with his university degree and well-to-do family to back him. The majority of local people have not received any institutional support. Their level of education remains low, their language proficiency insufficient to effectively communicate with tourists and their financial management skills inadequate keeping them trapped in a vicious circle of debt. Only a small number of local businesspeople generate enough income to cope with the seasonality and unpredictability of the tourism industry. The transition to a tourism-based livelihood has reinforced the significance of the household economy and informal economic activities. Local people, because of enduring poverty, fail to employ strategies for livelihood diversification. The most striking outcome of the transition to a tourism-based economy is the loss of skills related to fishing which constitutes a significant impediment to access the marine resources in their coastal environment. With their traditional economic assets gone, local people also lose their capability to flexibly respond to challenges of the new tourism-focused economy.

If empowerment is a critical success factor in community-based tourism as many scholars argue (Dolezal & Novelli, 2020; Simons & De Groot, 2015; Tolkach & King, 2015), then tourism development has failed the people in Komodo and Labuan Bajo. Instead, the transition to a tourism-based economy has significantly narrowed their flexibility in coping with livelihood challenges as local people in Komodo in particular lack basic education to access relevant information and ponder livelihood alternatives (see Benu et al., 2020). As has been observed in many tourism destinations worldwide (Blackstock, 2005; Han et al., 2014), tourism development creates new inequalities and power differences that affect the extent to which local people are able to participate in and benefit from the new opportunities provided and build their resilience to face unexpected and rapid change.

Conclusions

Theoretical implications

Building on the critical literature on sustainable tourism development, this study has shown that the transition to an ecotourism-based economy in the coastal area of Komodo and Labuan Bajo has pushed the replacement of one single livelihood strategy by another, as has also been observed by tourism scholars in similar situations (Shen et al., 2008; Tao & Wall, 2009a, 2009b). In this vein, the Komodo case is yet another example where tourism development fails to engage local communities to their full potential. Looking at local participation from a community perspective, however, this study, in addition to the current literature, argues that participation is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Local people, far from being passive onlookers, participate in tourism in manifold ways. In particular, the role of the household economy in supporting and growing local tourism businesses has been highlighted. While the important contribution of women and extended family networks often go unnoticed, their potential for advancing ecotourism locally deserves more attention both in future research and policy making.

This study reiterates the need to include local people in decision-making regarding their livelihoods. In order to achieve local empowerment, it is argued, the concept of community is in need of revision. Communities are diverse and multi-layered, resourceful and entrepreneurial, and embedded in a regional economy characterized by interdependencies and asymmetrical power-relations. The current study confirms the findings of recent research conducted in Komodo and other places in Indonesia (see Benu et al., 2020; Dolezal & Novelli, 2020; Nugroho & Numata, 2020; Saufi et al., 2014; Westoby et al., 2021) that institutions have failed to build an inclusive approach to local (eco-)tourism development. Being at the mercy of a distant government and an externally-owned tourism industry, Komodo's ecotourism project is outright unsustainable. As displacement is a persistent threat for the Komodo community to the present day, local people are discouraged to work towards environmental protection. Extending the current literature, this study argues that it requires sustainable community development at large to motivate local people to act as responsible stakeholders.

Lessons learned from the Komodo case have wider implications for tourism scholarship. This study reiterates the appeal made by many tourism scholars to dismiss the concept of sustainable tourism and focus on sustainable development instead. The *a-priori* primacy of tourism has to give way to an alternative approach with at its centre a diverse ecosystem that includes humans and where tourism may or may not be an appropriate strategy to diversify livelihood options.

Implications for policy and planning

The findings of this study advance a number of implications for tourism agencies and private sector actors in the Komodo and Labuan Bajo region:

First, instead of leaving local people in suspense about their future on Komodo Island, the 'alternative livelihoods' program that KNP briefly but unsuccessfully offered to educate Komodo villagers as direct stakeholders in the conservation project should

be reinstated and broadened to include hospitality training to prepare locals for employment as rangers, natural guides and hosts of ecotourist facilities in the Park. This strategy would provide employment, advance environmental protection, and diversify the local tourism economy beyond souvenir selling.

Second, this program should be extended to people in Labuan Bajo. For the conservation project to be successful, principles of ecotourism have to permeate the Komodo package tours as offered in Labuan Bajo and people across the region need to be educated to become guardians of Komodo's natural resources.

Third, measures designed to advance local participation need to include and adequately source both participation in the management of ecotourist sites and in local economic initiatives and enterprise development in order to fully capitalize on the local household economy.

Limitation of this study and future directions

A limitation of this study is that the underlying data were collected in 2015. There is evidence – in the literature and from ongoing engagement of the authors with the study area – that the trends outlined in this study have intensified in recent years. Until 2019, tourist arrivals to Komodo have further increased (see [Table 1](#)) and so has the influx of newcomers to the coastal area of Labuan Bajo. As local businesses suffer increased competition, the situation is worsened by erratic government directives. The threat of dislocation is pertinent for Komodo people as the provincial authorities envision the rebranding of Komodo's ecotourism entailing quotas and excessive entrance fees to the KNP. The global pandemic, however, brought these developments to a grinding halt. Visitor numbers plummeted (see [Table 1](#)) and it leads no doubt that the tourism-dependent communities in the coastal area of Komodo and Labuan Bajo have been severely affected. Urgent research is needed to map local survival strategies and investigate to what extent the household economy has transformed to mitigate the harsh effects implied by the downturn in tourist arrivals.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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