



Communicative Governance and Tourism Development: Negotiating Power and Government Community Relations in Lake Toba, Indonesia

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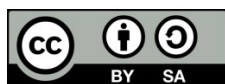
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ABSTRACT

Tourism development in Lake Toba, Indonesia, illustrates the tension between state-led development ambitions and the rights, knowledge, and expectations of local communities. As a national strategic tourism destination, Lake Toba has been positioned as an instrument of regional economic transformation, cultural promotion, environmental conservation, and international tourism expansion. However, the development process has also generated disputes concerning customary land, institutional authority, access to resources, benefit distribution, and the quality of communication between government agencies and local communities. This article examines how communicative governance shapes power relations and government-community relations in the Lake Toba tourism area. It employs a qualitative case study design based on document analysis and a review of relevant academic literature, policy documents, legal regulations, institutional publications, and reports concerning tourism development, customary land, community participation, and the management of the Lake Toba Tourism Authority. The analysis is informed by communicative governance, collaborative governance, participatory governance, and power theory. The findings indicate that communication in Lake Toba tourism governance has not yet functioned as an equal deliberative mechanism. Instead, it has frequently operated as an instrument of policy dissemination, project legitimization, and the management of social resistance. While government documents emphasise sustainability, conservation, community welfare, and partnership, community responses reveal persistent concerns regarding customary land recognition, procedural justice, transparency, and substantive participation. The article argues that the central challenge is not merely the absence of communication but the unequal distribution of communicative capacity and decision-making power. Effective tourism governance therefore requires a transition from consultative governance toward rights-based, deliberative, and co-decisional arrangements that recognise customary institutions and strengthen community control over tourism resources.

Keywords: *communicative governance; tourism development; Lake Toba; customary land; community participation; collaborative governance; power relations; Indonesia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism development has become an important instrument of regional transformation in Indonesia. Beyond its contribution to employment, investment, infrastructure, and local revenue, tourism is increasingly expected to support cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and the inclusion of local communities in economic development. These expectations are particularly evident in Lake Toba, North Sumatra, which has been designated as one of Indonesia's national priority tourism destinations. Government policy presents Lake Toba as a strategic area capable of attracting domestic and international visitors while stimulating the development of surrounding communities. The development of Lake Toba, however, is not simply a technical matter of constructing infrastructure, improving accessibility, and promoting destinations. It is also a political process involving the allocation of land, authority, public resources, economic opportunity, and symbolic recognition.

Decisions concerning tourism zones determine who may access land, who may benefit from investment, whose knowledge is recognised, and which institutional actors have the authority to define the future of the region. Consequently, tourism development must be understood as a governance process in which state agencies, local governments, private investors, customary communities, civil society organisations, and residents negotiate competing interests.

The Lake Toba case demonstrates the importance of communication in such negotiations. Government agencies have used policy documents, development plans, public statements, consultation forums, and institutional programmes to communicate the objectives of tourism development. These messages generally frame tourism as a pathway toward economic welfare, environmental conservation, and the revitalisation of local culture. At the same time, local communities have expressed concerns regarding the status of customary land, limited access to decision-making, unclear distribution of benefits, and insufficient information concerning tourism projects. Research on the Sigapiton community, for example, identifies significant communication gaps between

the Lake Toba Tourism Authority and residents affected by the development of the Toba Caldera Resort. The problem is therefore not merely whether communication exists, but what kind of communication is institutionalised. Communication may be understood narrowly as the transmission of information from government to citizens. In this model, government agencies formulate policy, while communities receive information and are expected to support implementation. Alternatively, communication may function as a deliberative process in which actors exchange reasons, contest assumptions, recognise differences, and participate in decisions that affect their lives. The distinction is significant because a formally participatory process can remain substantively hierarchical when communities lack the authority to influence final decisions.

This article examines the relationship between communicative governance and tourism development in Lake Toba. It asks three main questions:

- How is tourism development constructed and justified through government and policy discourse?
- How do communication practices shape power relations between government institutions and local communities?
- What institutional conditions are required to develop more inclusive government–community relations in Lake Toba?

The article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it connects communicative governance with the political economy of tourism development in a context where customary land and state-led development intersect. Second, it conceptualises communication as a dimension of power rather than as a neutral administrative activity. Third, it develops a governance-oriented interpretation of the Lake Toba case based on systematic document analysis and literature review. The article argues that communicative governance in Lake Toba remains predominantly managerial and project-oriented. Government institutions have communicated the benefits of tourism development, but the communicative process has not consistently created equal opportunities for communities to define problems, assess alternatives, reject harmful

proposals, or co-determine the distribution of benefits. The resulting gap between official narratives and community experience has contributed to distrust and contestation. A more legitimate model requires institutionalised deliberation, transparent information, recognition of customary rights, and the redistribution of decision-making authority.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Tourism governance and regional development

Tourism governance refers to the institutional arrangements, political processes, and relationships through which tourism is planned, regulated, implemented, and evaluated. It involves public authorities, private businesses, community organisations, residents, visitors, and other stakeholders. Unlike traditional government, which emphasises hierarchical authority, governance focuses on interaction, interdependence, negotiation, and the coordination of multiple actors. In destination development, governance is particularly important because tourism affects multiple dimensions simultaneously. It creates economic opportunities but may also generate land-use conflict, environmental pressure, cultural commodification, social inequality, and displacement. A destination cannot be governed effectively through a single-sector administrative approach because tourism intersects with spatial planning, environmental management, transportation, investment, land administration, cultural policy, and local economic development.

The concept of sustainable tourism governance therefore requires more than the balancing of economic, social, and environmental objectives. It also requires institutional mechanisms through which affected communities can influence decisions. Studies of Lake Toba tourism governance have emphasised the significance of participation, transparency, accountability, and partnerships among government, communities, and the private sector. These principles are consistent with the broader literature on good tourism governance, but their practical meaning depends on the distribution of power among participating actors.

Tourism governance can be classified according to the degree of community involvement. At the lowest level, communities are treated as beneficiaries or recipients of government programmes. At an intermediate level, they are consulted or invited to provide information. At a higher level, they participate in partnerships, co-management, and decision-making. The critical question is whether participation changes the content

of policy and the distribution of authority, or merely improves the acceptance of decisions already made by powerful actors.

Communicative governance

Communicative governance refers to governance arrangements in which public decisions are shaped through communication, dialogue, deliberation, and the exchange of arguments among interdependent actors. Its theoretical foundation can be linked to deliberative democracy and communicative rationality, particularly the idea that legitimate decisions should emerge from processes in which participants can speak, question, challenge, and justify positions under conditions of relative equality. Communication in governance performs at least four functions. First, it enables actors to exchange information concerning policy problems and possible solutions. Second, it permits different forms of knowledge—technical, administrative, experiential, and customary—to enter the policy process. Third, it creates opportunities for the recognition of interests and identities. Fourth, it can generate legitimacy by allowing affected actors to participate in the reasoning behind collective decisions.

However, communication is not automatically democratic. Government agencies and corporations often possess greater access to data, experts, legal resources, media, and institutional platforms. Communities may be invited to meetings but lack the technical language, documentation, or legal authority necessary to influence outcomes. Communicative governance must therefore be assessed not only by the existence of dialogue but also by the quality, inclusiveness, openness, and consequences of that dialogue.

Three dimensions are particularly relevant to the Lake Toba case:

- **Access:** Who is invited to participate, and who is excluded from the communication process?
- **Voice:** Can participants express disagreement, alternative knowledge, and historical claims without intimidation or marginalisation?
- **Influence:** Do community contributions affect policy design, project implementation, land arrangements, and benefit distribution?

When communication is limited to the transmission of official information, it functions as administrative communication. When it enables mutual learning and shared decision-making, it approaches deliberative communication. The Lake Toba case suggests that the difference between these two forms is central to understanding government–community relations.

Collaborative governance

Collaborative governance describes arrangements in which public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in collective decision-making that is oriented toward consensus, problem-solving, and public value. It is often used to explain partnerships between government, private actors, civil society, and local communities. The collaborative governance perspective highlights several conditions for successful collaboration. These include an inclusive forum, clear institutional rules, balanced participation, trust-building, shared understanding, facilitative leadership, and the capacity to generate joint outcomes. Collaboration is difficult when actors enter the process with unequal resources or when the government retains unilateral authority over key decisions.

In tourism development, collaborative governance is relevant because destinations are shared spaces. Public authorities may control licensing and planning, businesses may control investment and marketing, while communities possess local knowledge, customary authority, cultural resources, and social legitimacy. Sustainable development requires the integration of these resources rather than the dominance of one actor. Nevertheless, collaboration can become rhetorical when the state defines the agenda, selects participants, controls information, and retains final decision-making power. A meeting involving community representatives does not necessarily constitute collaborative governance if participation is restricted to consultation. Collaborative governance must therefore be evaluated in relation to institutional consequences: whether agreements are binding, whether community institutions are recognised, and whether affected groups possess mechanisms to monitor and challenge decisions.

Power and discourse

Power is central to tourism governance because tourism projects reorganise access to space and resources. Power operates through legal authority, control of land, institutional mandates, financial resources, expert knowledge, development discourse, and the ability to define what counts as a public interest. A discourse is not simply a set

of words. It is a framework through which problems, solutions, actors, and responsibilities are defined. In the Lake Toba case, the discourse of sustainable tourism links tourism development with conservation, economic welfare, cultural promotion, and national competitiveness. Such a discourse can mobilise support, but it can also obscure conflicts concerning land ownership and unequal benefit distribution. Critical discourse analysis is useful because it examines the relationship between language and social power. Previous research on Lake Toba shows that government discourse has presented tourism development as a means of conserving nature and improving local welfare, while civil society actors have challenged this representation through the concept of “green grabbing”. This critique suggests that conservation and sustainability can be mobilised to legitimise new forms of state territorialisation and community exclusion. The analytical value of discourse is not limited to identifying government narratives. Community statements, customary claims, civil society reports, legal documents, and media coverage can also be interpreted as competing forms of political communication. These materials reveal how different actors seek to define legitimacy, rights, development, and justice.

Government community relations

Government–community relations refer to the institutional and political relationship between public authorities and communities affected by public policy. In tourism development, this relationship includes consultation, service delivery, regulation, conflict resolution, land administration, local empowerment, and economic partnership. A productive relationship requires more than harmonious interaction. Conflict may be unavoidable where projects affect land, livelihoods, or cultural identity. The relevant issue is whether conflict can be managed through fair procedures, transparent information, recognition of rights, and accessible mechanisms for negotiation and remedy. In Lake Toba, government–community relations are shaped by the coexistence of formal administrative structures and customary institutions. The Toba communities possess historically embedded forms of collective identity, land relations, kinship, and customary authority. When state tourism institutions operate without sufficiently recognising these arrangements, communication becomes vulnerable to

misunderstanding and distrust. The concept of communicative governance provides a bridge between participatory governance and power analysis. It acknowledges the need for dialogue while asking whether dialogue is organised under conditions that permit communities to exercise meaningful influence. This framework is used in the present study to analyse policy discourse, institutional communication, participation, contestation, and the negotiation of authority.

RESEARCH METHODE

This study uses a qualitative case study design. The case is the governance of tourism development in the Lake Toba region, with particular attention to relations among government institutions, tourism authorities, local governments, customary communities, civil society, and private-sector actors. A qualitative case study is appropriate because the research examines a complex governance process embedded in a specific historical, institutional, and socio-political context. The study does not aim to measure the statistical effects of communication or to generalise findings to all Indonesian tourism destinations. Instead, it seeks to explain how communicative practices are constructed, interpreted, and connected to power relations within a strategically important tourism region.

Data sources

The research relies on document analysis and a structured review of academic and policy literature. The materials include:

- National and regional tourism policies, regulations, development plans, and institutional documents.
- Documents relating to the Lake Toba Tourism Authority and tourism development programmes.
- Academic articles, theses, conference papers, and research reports on Lake Toba tourism governance.
- Legal and policy discussions concerning customary land, spatial planning, conservation, and tourism development.
- Reports and public statements produced by civil society organisations, community groups, and advocacy institutions.

- Relevant media and publicly available online materials concerning disputes, consultation, participation, and tourism projects.

Documents were selected based on four criteria: relevance to Lake Toba tourism development, discussion of government–community relations, reference to participation or communication, and contribution to understanding power and institutional arrangements. The review incorporated both supportive and critical sources in order to avoid reproducing a single institutional narrative.

Data analysis

The analysis proceeded through four stages. First, documents were organised according to actor, institutional level, policy issue, and form of communication. Second, the texts were coded thematically using categories derived from the theoretical framework. These categories included sustainability, conservation, economic welfare, participation, partnership, customary rights, transparency, conflict, land, legitimacy, and accountability. Third, official narratives were compared with community and civil society accounts. Fourth, the findings were interpreted through the concepts of communicative governance, collaborative governance, and power. The analysis adopted a critical interpretive approach. It examined not only what documents stated but also what they assumed, prioritised, omitted, and legitimised. Particular attention was given to the following questions:

- How is the tourism problem defined?
- Which actors are represented as legitimate decision-makers?
- How are communities represented?
- What benefits and risks are emphasised?
- What forms of participation are proposed?
- What rights, histories, and conflicts remain marginal in official narratives?
- How are disagreement and resistance interpreted?

Triangulation was conducted by comparing policy documents with academic research, legal discussions, and community-oriented accounts. This procedure enhanced analytical credibility by identifying convergence and disagreement across sources.

Scope and ethics

Because the study is based on publicly available documents and literature, it does not involve direct interviews with human participants. Nevertheless, ethical attention is necessary when interpreting claims involving customary communities, land conflict, and state authority. The study avoids treating official documents as neutral representations and does not assume that either governmental or community narratives are internally uniform. The analysis also recognises that the term “community” may conceal differences of class, gender, age, clan, occupation, and political position. Therefore, references to local communities are interpreted as politically heterogeneous rather than as a single unified actor.

2. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Tourism as a national development project

The first finding concerns the dominant construction of Lake Toba tourism as a national development project. Official narratives generally associate the destination with economic growth, foreign exchange, employment, infrastructure development, cultural promotion, and environmental improvement. This framing gives tourism a high degree of political legitimacy because it connects a regional project with national development priorities.

The national framing also shapes the role assigned to local communities. Communities are frequently represented as beneficiaries, cultural custodians, entrepreneurs, service providers, and partners in development. These roles are positive in appearance, but they may limit the political identity of communities. Residents are recognised as economic participants while their claims as customary rights-holders and co-governors receive less institutional emphasis. The development narrative therefore contains a tension. On one hand, local participation is considered necessary for successful tourism. On the other hand, the strategic character of the project encourages centralised planning, accelerated implementation, and the prioritisation of investment and infrastructure. When these imperatives conflict with community claims, participation may be subordinated to project delivery.

The official language of sustainability further strengthens this dynamic. Sustainability is presented as a shared objective, but its meaning may differ among actors. For government institutions, sustainability may refer to environmental management, destination competitiveness, and long-term investment. For communities, it may include the continuity of customary land, farming livelihoods, social relations, cultural authority, and intergenerational access to resources. Without deliberation over these different meanings, sustainability can become a general slogan rather than a negotiated standard.

Communication as policy dissemination

The second finding is that communication has often functioned as policy dissemination rather than shared decision-making. Government institutions communicate development plans, investment opportunities, expected benefits, and project designs to local actors. This communication is important, but it is largely one-directional when the agenda, language, timeline, and policy parameters have already been determined. The communication gap identified in relation to the Lake Toba Authority and the Sigapiton community reflects this problem. Existing research reports that communication concerning the Toba Caldera Resort was perceived as lacking informativeness, relevance to community interests, consistency in communicating benefits, and transparency regarding positive and negative impacts. These deficiencies weaken trust because residents cannot assess the project based on complete and credible information. Policy communication is also affected by asymmetry in institutional capacity. Government agencies possess legal documents, spatial plans, technical studies, maps, consultants, and administrative procedures. Communities may rely on oral histories, customary narratives, collective memory, and local experience. When official communication recognises only written administrative evidence as legitimate, community knowledge is structurally disadvantaged. This does not mean that communities lack communication capacity. Community groups and civil society organisations have generated counter-narratives, mobilised public attention, used legal channels, and challenged official representations. However, these forms of communication often emerge in response to decisions rather than as an integral part of planning. Communication thus becomes reactive and conflictual instead of preventive and deliberative.

Customary land and the politics of recognition

The third finding concerns customary land as the central arena of power negotiation. Tourism development requires the reorganisation of space through zoning, infrastructure, concessions, resorts, roads, conservation areas, and investment facilities. In Lake Toba, these spatial interventions intersect with customary claims and historically embedded land relations. The Sigapiton case illustrates the difficulty. Research on the dispute reports that the government asserted that customary land had been transferred to the state in the past, while the community requested documentary evidence of the transfer that could not be adequately demonstrated [?]. The same source reports that negotiations eventually included a government promise concerning the return of approximately 400 hectares, subject to clear legal status and boundaries. The issue is not only ownership in a narrow legal sense. It concerns recognition: recognition of historical narratives, customary authority, collective identity, and the right of a community to participate in determining the future of its territory. Where land is treated solely as a state asset or tourism input, the community may experience development as dispossession even when the project is presented as beneficial.

The institutional arrangement for the tourism authority has also been associated with overlapping claims. One legal analysis reports that the authority's management area of at least 500 hectares intersected with communal forest and customary land associated with several indigenous groups and clans. Such overlaps create administrative ambiguity and intensify conflict because different institutions claim authority over the same physical space. Communicative governance requires these conflicts to be addressed through more than socialisation. It requires public clarification of land histories, open access to maps and legal documents, independent verification, recognition of customary evidence, and negotiation over the authority to approve or reject development. Without these measures, communication cannot resolve the underlying conflict because the parties are not merely disagreeing about information; they are contesting rights and power.

Community participation and unequal influence

The fourth finding is that community participation exists but remains uneven in depth and influence. Communities may participate through meetings, consultations, cultural activities, local enterprises, homestays, environmental programmes, or tourism promotion. These forms of involvement can generate economic benefits and social visibility. Nevertheless, participation often takes place after major strategic decisions have

been made. Communities may be invited to help implement tourism programmes without having equal influence over the designation of land, the design of infrastructure, the selection of investors, or the distribution of revenues. This represents a gap between participation as involvement and participation as power. A study of local perspectives on participation in Lake Toba describes community involvement in terms associated with partnership, suggesting that local actors are not entirely excluded from tourism activity. However, the existence of partnership does not necessarily establish equal governance. A community may participate in service provision while remaining excluded from the ownership, regulation, and strategic direction of tourism development. Participation is also affected by representation. Government institutions may consult village heads, customary leaders, business groups, or selected community representatives. Yet the interests of women, farmers, informal workers, young people, and households without strong political connections may be less visible. A communicative governance approach must therefore ask who speaks for the community and how internal differences are managed.

Competing sustainability narratives

The fifth finding concerns the competition between official and community-based understandings of sustainability. Government narratives frame development as compatible with environmental conservation and local welfare. The tourism project is presented as a mechanism through which natural resources can be protected, destinations improved, and communities integrated into the formal economy. Critical research, however, shows that conservation and sustainability discourses can coexist with territorialisation and exclusion. The Lake Toba case has been interpreted as a struggle over natural resources in which the state uses policy instruments, development incentives, and institutional arrangements to regulate who controls access to land and resources. Civil society actors have challenged the official narrative by describing the process as a form of green grabbing or community exclusion under the justification of ecotourism. These competing narratives reveal that sustainability is politically constructed. If sustainability focuses only on ecological conditions and tourist infrastructure, it may fail to account for social justice. A lake can be environmentally managed while communities lose access to

land, livelihoods, or customary institutions. Conversely, community claims to land must also be assessed in relation to environmental responsibility and the broader ecological condition of Lake Toba. The appropriate response is not to reject sustainability but to democratise its definition. Environmental conservation, economic development, cultural continuity, and customary rights should be negotiated in a public institutional arena. Sustainable tourism should be measured not only by visitor numbers, investment, or environmental indicators but also by procedural fairness, rights recognition, and the equitable distribution of benefits.

Institutional fragmentation

The sixth finding is that fragmented institutional authority complicates communication and accountability. Lake Toba tourism involves national ministries, tourism authorities, provincial government, district governments, village administrations, customary institutions, environmental agencies, land administration bodies, investors, and civil society organisations. Each may possess different mandates, plans, data, and interpretations of development. Institutional fragmentation creates at least three problems. First, communities may not know which institution is responsible for a decision or complaint. Second, agencies may communicate inconsistent information concerning land, benefits, project timelines, and responsibilities. Third, the absence of a single accountable forum allows institutions to shift responsibility when conflict emerges. Research on sustainable tourism policy in Lake Toba identifies the importance of coordination, partnership, community participation, transparency, and accountability. Other studies report that institutional coordination, public accountability, and community participation remain only partially integrated into tourism policy. These findings suggest that governance quality depends not only on the intentions of individual agencies but also on the architecture of interinstitutional relations. A communicative governance framework would require an integrated forum with clear authority, public procedures, accessible documentation, and mechanisms for monitoring commitments. Without these arrangements, dialogue may produce statements of cooperation but no enforceable institutional change.

Resistance as political communication

The seventh finding is that community resistance should be interpreted as a form of political communication. Protests, objections, legal claims, public statements, petitions, and civil society campaigns are not merely obstacles to development. They communicate

dissatisfaction with the content and process of governance. Resistance becomes more likely when formal communication channels are perceived as ineffective. If consultation does not provide relevant information, if objections do not affect decisions, or if promises are not implemented, communities may move to other arenas. These include courts, media, advocacy networks, social media, and direct action. From a communicative governance perspective, resistance reveals a failure of recognition and responsiveness. It indicates that the established governance process has not adequately incorporated the experience and claims of affected groups. Treating resistance as misinformation or anti-development sentiment can deepen conflict because it denies the political meaning of the objection. At the same time, community resistance should not be romanticised as internally unified or automatically representative of all residents. The analytical point is that contestation provides evidence of institutional dissatisfaction and a demand for more meaningful participation. It should be incorporated into policy learning rather than treated solely as a problem of public relations.

Discussion

From consultation to co-decision

The findings demonstrate that Lake Toba tourism governance cannot be improved merely by increasing the number of meetings or communication materials. The deeper issue is the institutional position of communities within the decision-making process. If communities are consulted after decisions have been made, communication will remain largely symbolic. The shift from consultation to co-decision requires a change in institutional design. Communities should be involved at the agenda-setting stage, when the problems, priorities, spatial alternatives, and development models are first defined. They should have access to independent technical advice and the opportunity to propose alternatives. Their consent or reasoned objection should have identifiable consequences for project approval and implementation. This does not imply that every community demand must automatically determine public policy. Deliberative governance requires negotiation among competing interests, including ecological protection, public access, investment, and regional development. However, negotiation can be legitimate only when

affected communities participate under fair procedural conditions and when authorities provide reasons for accepting or rejecting proposals.

The Lake Toba case suggests that participation must be connected to authority. A community forum without influence may generate expectations that later produce greater distrust. Conversely, a forum with defined powers—such as review, recommendation, monitoring, mediation, and consent over customary territories—can strengthen accountability.

Communication and the redistribution of power

Communication is frequently treated as a soft element of governance, while land, budgets, legal mandates, and infrastructure are considered hard forms of power. The Lake Toba case demonstrates that communication is connected to both. The actor that controls the definition of problems, the production of data, the timing of consultation, and the official explanation of policy possesses significant agenda-setting power. Accordingly, communicative governance should not be understood as a neutral process of consensus-building. It must address the unequal resources with which actors enter the dialogue. Communities require access to maps, environmental assessments, legal documents, investment plans, and financial information. They also need institutional support to translate customary knowledge and local priorities into formats recognised by public administration. The redistribution of communicative capacity may include funding for independent community advisers, public legal assistance, translation into locally accessible language, open data platforms, participatory mapping, and training in planning and negotiation. These instruments are not merely technical support. They enable communities to participate as informed political actors rather than as passive recipients of policy information.

Power redistribution also requires transparency concerning the limits of government authority. Agencies should clarify which decisions are negotiable, which are legally constrained, and which require the consent or approval of other actors. Ambiguous communication allows institutions to promise benefits without clearly specifying obligations, timelines, or remedies.

Recognition of customary institutions

The relationship between tourism governance and customary institutions is central to the legitimacy of development in Lake Toba. Customary communities are not simply local populations residing near a destination. They may possess collective relationships to

land, forests, water, cultural sites, and ancestral histories that are not fully represented in administrative categories. Recognition should operate at three levels. First, customary communities must be recognised as rights-bearing actors in land and tourism decisions. Second, customary institutions should be treated as governance partners rather than cultural symbols used mainly for destination branding. Third, customary knowledge should contribute to environmental management, cultural interpretation, land-use planning, and conflict resolution. Recognition does not mean that customary institutions are beyond accountability or that all customary claims are automatically uncontested. Customary territories may overlap, community leadership may be disputed, and internal inequalities may exist. These issues require transparent procedures and inclusive representation. Nevertheless, excluding customary institutions from the primary decision-making structure is incompatible with inclusive governance. A rights-based approach would require the state and tourism authorities to clarify land status before project development, conduct participatory mapping, establish procedures for handling historical claims, and provide accessible remedies. Negotiations concerning land should be documented, independently monitored, and linked to legally enforceable agreements.

Reframing sustainability

Sustainability in Lake Toba should be reframed as a socio-ecological and political concept. It must include environmental protection, economic viability, cultural continuity, social justice, and institutional legitimacy. A tourism project cannot be considered sustainable if it produces environmental improvements while weakening community rights or creating unresolved land conflict. This reframing has implications for policy evaluation. Conventional indicators such as visitor numbers, investment values, accommodation capacity, and employment should be complemented by indicators of:

- Community participation in agenda-setting and decision-making.
- Recognition and resolution of customary land claims.
- Transparency of project information and agreements.
- Distribution of tourism income among local groups.
- Protection of farming, fishing, and other local livelihoods.

- Inclusion of women, youth, vulnerable households, and marginal groups.
- Environmental performance and community involvement in conservation.
- Responsiveness to complaints and implementation of negotiated commitments.

Sustainability should also be assessed over time. Short-term economic gains may generate long-term conflict if they undermine local trust, customary authority, or ecological resilience. A communicative approach encourages periodic review in which government, communities, businesses, and civil society can evaluate whether tourism development continues to meet collectively agreed objectives.

Institutionalising dialogue

The findings support the establishment of a permanent multi-actor governance forum for the Lake Toba tourism area. Such a forum should not be merely ceremonial or advisory. It should have a clearly defined mandate, public membership criteria, transparent procedures, and authority to monitor development commitments. The forum could include representatives of national and regional government, tourism authorities, district and village administrations, customary institutions, local businesses, community organisations, environmental groups, women's organisations, youth, researchers, and independent facilitators. Its functions could include:

- Reviewing tourism plans and spatial proposals.
- Conducting participatory assessments of social and environmental impacts.
- Monitoring land agreements, compensation, and benefit-sharing.
- Coordinating interinstitutional communication.
- Receiving and resolving complaints.
- Publishing progress reports and meeting records.
- Facilitating mediation before disputes escalate.
- Evaluating tourism programmes according to social, ecological, and economic criteria.

For the forum to be effective, it should be supported by an independent secretariat and stable funding. Decisions, disagreements, and follow-up responsibilities should be

publicly documented. Communities should also be able to trigger review procedures when projects affect customary land, livelihoods, or cultural sites.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined communicative governance and government–community relations in the development of tourism in Lake Toba, Indonesia. Based on qualitative analysis of policy documents and relevant literature, it finds that tourism development is constructed through powerful narratives of national growth, sustainability, conservation, community welfare, and partnership. These narratives provide legitimacy for state-led development but do not always reflect the concerns of local communities regarding customary land, access to information, livelihood security, and decision-making authority. The central problem is not the absence of communication. Rather, communication remains unevenly distributed and is frequently organised as policy dissemination instead of deliberative engagement. Communities may be invited to participate in implementation, cultural promotion, or local enterprise development while remaining marginal to decisions concerning land, spatial planning, investment, and project design. The resulting gap between official narratives and community experience generates distrust and contributes to resistance. The Lake Toba case also demonstrates that communication is inseparable from power. The ability to define sustainability, produce authoritative documents, control spatial information, and determine the timing of consultation influences who can shape tourism policy. Customary land disputes therefore cannot be resolved through public relations or socialisation alone. They require recognition, transparent evidence, fair procedures, negotiated authority, and enforceable remedies. Communicative governance in Lake Toba should consequently be transformed from a consultative model into a rights-based and co-decisional model. This transformation requires institutionalised dialogue, participatory mapping, independent community support, public accountability, inclusive representation, and a broader understanding of sustainability. Tourism development will become more legitimate and resilient when communities are treated not merely as beneficiaries or cultural attractions but as political actors and co-governors of the destination.

Implications

Policy implications

The findings generate several policy implications for national and regional authorities:

- Tourism planning should begin with participatory agenda-setting rather than consultation after project decisions have been substantially determined.
- Customary land claims should be clarified through participatory mapping, transparent documentation, independent verification, and accessible legal remedies.
- Tourism authorities should publish project plans, environmental assessments, land arrangements, investment agreements, benefit-sharing mechanisms, and implementation schedules in accessible formats.
- Government agencies should establish a permanent multi-stakeholder forum with defined authority over review, monitoring, mediation, and accountability.
- Community participation should be evaluated according to influence over decisions, not merely attendance at meetings or involvement in tourism activities.
- Tourism benefits should be distributed through transparent mechanisms that support local livelihoods, community enterprises, cultural continuity, and environmental stewardship.
- Projects affecting customary territories should require meaningful agreement with legitimate community institutions and should be subject to independent social and environmental review.

Theoretical implications

The study contributes to communicative governance theory by demonstrating that communication must be analysed as a site of power. A governance process may appear participatory while remaining hierarchical if actors possess unequal access to information, legal resources, institutional platforms, and decision-making authority. The article also connects communicative governance with collaborative governance. Collaboration is not established solely through the presence of multiple stakeholders. It requires institutional conditions that enable mutual influence, shared problem definition, and accountable implementation. In contexts involving land and customary rights, collaboration must be complemented by recognition and justice. Finally, the study extends the analysis of tourism sustainability by placing procedural and distributive dimensions alongside environmental

and economic concerns. Sustainable tourism should include the legitimacy of decision-making, recognition of rights, and the equitable distribution of costs and benefits.

Practical implications

For practitioners, communicative governance can be strengthened through concrete measures:

- Prepare communication materials in clear and locally understandable language.
- Provide communities with independent legal and technical assistance.
- Use participatory mapping to combine administrative, ecological, and customary knowledge.
- Record and publish consultation results, including disagreement and unresolved issues.
- Create complaint mechanisms that are independent, time-bound, and publicly monitored.
- Involve local researchers and universities as neutral knowledge partners.
- Develop community-based indicators for evaluating tourism impacts.
- Conduct periodic social audits of tourism projects and benefit-sharing arrangements.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relies on publicly available documents and existing literature rather than primary interviews or ethnographic observation. Consequently, it cannot fully capture the everyday experiences, internal differences, and changing strategies of all communities involved in Lake Toba tourism governance. Second, the available literature is uneven. Some sources focus on policy implementation, while others emphasise conflict, land rights, or environmental discourse. This may produce a stronger representation of visible disputes than of less public forms of cooperation and negotiation. Third, the study treats Lake Toba as a connected governance case while recognising that the region includes different districts, villages, customary groups, economic sectors, and institutional histories. Findings should therefore not be interpreted

as evidence that all communities experience tourism development in the same way. Fourth, document analysis cannot independently verify all institutional claims, land histories, or reported commitments. Future research should combine document analysis with interviews, participant observation, participatory mapping, and longitudinal analysis of negotiated agreements. Comparative research involving other national priority tourism destinations could also clarify whether the communicative governance challenges identified here are specific to Lake Toba or reflect wider patterns in Indonesian tourism governance.

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