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GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES IN COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM: EVIDENCE FROM THE KALASH VALLEYS, PAKISTAN

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Abstract:

Although previous studies have addressed the problems related to CBET and stakeholder participation, there has not been much emphasis placed on governance processes and policy implementation in indigenous mountain communities of developing countries. Drawing upon previous works on CBET governance in the Kalash Valleys, this study investigates CBET governance from the perspective of stakeholder theory and tourism governance. Differing from previous works in which the focus is solely on the participation of stakeholders in tourism development, this study focuses on how institutional interaction and governance processes affect the sustainability of CBET in the long run. A qualitative single case study was carried out involving 24 semi-structured interviews with individuals from the local community, tourism entrepreneurs, government authorities, and NGOs. In terms of governmental participation in planning, it was found that there were inconsistency and reactivity of the process, which prevented any efforts towards future development. In parallel, the participation of NGOs was very helpful in capacity building and in making local community members more aware, but such participation was mostly short-term and depended on the funding of projects. Such findings demonstrate the need for more coordination, policies and collaboration to ensure the sustainability of CBET in indigenous mountain communities in the future.

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Keyword:

Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET), Governance Arrangements, Institutional Coordination, Pakistan, Stakeholder Theory, Sustainable Tourism.



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Introduction

The Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) strategy has recently gained much recognition as an important approach to achieving sustainable tourism development in rural areas of developing countries. It involves such fundamental elements as community involvement in tourism, conservation of natural environment, and socio-economic empowerment of local communities (Scheyvens, 2011; Kunjuraman, 2023). Alternative to traditional mass tourism forms, CBET has been actively promoted by various international organizations and development agencies as a means of poverty alleviation, cultural preservation, and inclusive economic growth.

However, despite obvious normative advantages of this concept, its practical implementation is rather complicated and inconsistent. Several researchers have found out that although CBET initiatives show positive intentions, their implementation often encounters problems connected with governance, which makes them unsustainable (Zapata et al., 2011; Wondirad et al., 2020; Jackson, 2025). Thus, governance emerges as one of the key factors for successful CBET implementation. Without proper governance framework, CBET projects tend to become inefficient, externalized, and even unsatisfactory.

Tourism governance represents a complex of structures, processes, and means, via which the process of tourism development is planned, regulated, and managed by various stakeholders such as governmental bodies, private sector organizations, NGOs, and local communities (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; current updates in Farsari, 2022; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2023). In CBET's case, governance plays an especially significant part since its implementation implies collective decision-making, sharing of responsibilities, and participative collaboration on the part of various stakeholders. Consequently, proper governance is essential for achieving proper balancing of power relations, accountability, and development of stable partnership relationships serving the interests of communities.

Nevertheless, in most cases, governance systems in tourism in most developing countries are still quite deficient, centralized, and poorly coordinated. Government bodies are usually in charge of the processes of planning, while communities and grassroot organizations are minimally engaged in making decisions (Nunkoo, 2016; recent updates in Irfan et al., 2024). Meanwhile, NGOs try to play a gap-filling role in the processes of governance by delivering training, financial, and technical assistance. However, their participation in the process is rather sporadic and project-based (Scheyvens, 2011; current assessments in 2023-2025 CBET

reviews). These governance dynamics highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of stakeholder roles and institutional arrangements in CBET development.

Stakeholder theory provides an important tool for analyzing governance processes in tourism. Stakeholder theory was first introduced by Freeman (1984) and places much emphasis on the identification and management of relationships between the stakeholders having interest in organizational or development activities. In tourism studies, stakeholder theory is broadly used for analysis of power dynamics, conflicts of interests and collaboration of government institutions, local communities, private companies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Byrd, 2007; recent applications in Cheng et al., 2019; Jaafar et al., 2020; Jung, 2022; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2023). Using the CBET framework, local communities can be considered as main stakeholders, whereas government and NGOs are facilitating actors.

Even though there have been several academic writings on the CBET model, there is a clear gap in literature when it comes to evaluating the effects of projects on the process, resource allocation process and implementation process of the policies. Though most of the academic studies concentrate more on the roles of the local stakeholders separately or the role played by the government in facilitating, the need for empirical examination of the process of institutional interaction, power relations and constraints of the networks remains conspicuous. This gap in literature is especially visible in the case of the disadvantaged indigenous mountain communities in South Asia, who are known for having many institutional divisions, overlapping regulations and centralized policy making process.

There are numerous examples that can be provided to demonstrate how challenging it is to ensure effective CBET governance. However, Pakistan is one of the countries that provides an excellent case study in this regard. First, being endowed with beautiful natural landscapes and rich cultural heritage, Pakistan has great potential to develop ecotourism in mountainous areas like Gilgit-Baltistan, Chitral, and the Kalash Valleys. It is important to note that the Kalash Valleys located in the Chitral District of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province are internationally known because of their rich indigenous culture, scenery, and cultural festivals.

Over the last decade, the area has been attracting a growing number of both domestic and international visitors and thus creating grounds for developing CBET initiatives. However, despite the evident increase in tourism interest, CBET development in the region is rather informal and under-institutionalized. The tourism activities are mainly supported by local businesses, homestays and communities but there are not much planning and policy making from the side of governmental agencies. Although there are many NGOs working on development projects in the region, their efforts are not well coordinated. Against this backdrop, the current study will endeavor to investigate the governance and institutional aspects of CBET development in the Kalash Valleys of Pakistan. It will try to understand the roles of government institutions, NGOs, and other stakeholders in the governance of CBET, as well as identify some policy gaps and governance issues which are responsible for creating obstacles in its sustainable implementation. This study will make an important contribution to the body of literature regarding sustainable tourism governance using a stakeholder governance approach. This paper is an extension of the previous work carried out by the same authors (Khan et al., 2025) to study the common problems, opportunities, and stakeholders related to the development of CBET in the Kalash Valleys. The past study has already provided a comprehensive perspective. This study, however, concentrates specifically on the issue of governance and institutional factors. It highlights the role of government organizations and

NGOs in CBET governance, the existing coordination processes, and highlights the major policy shortcomings.

Pakistan being one of the countries with abundant natural and cultural resources provides a relevant environment to study such issues. Kalash valleys located in Chitral District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province are renowned throughout the world for their unique indigenous culture, festivals, and landscape.

This study will be framed by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the roles of government and institutional actors in the governance of community-based ecotourism in the Kalash Valleys?
- (2) In what ways are NGOs assisting in community participation and capacity building for CBET development?
- (3) What policy gaps and governance issues exist that prevent effective implementation of CBET in the region?

Through answering these questions, the current study intends to make theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it will contribute through combining stakeholder theory with tourism governance literature in the case of CBET. Practically, it will provide relevant lessons for policymakers, development professionals, and tourism planners.

Tourism is one of the fastest growing development sectors in addition to other development strategic agendas such as energy, food, infrastructure

(TNR, 12, single spacing, justify)

Literature Review

Community-Based Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) has emerged as an important model of sustainable tourism, particularly in rural and marginalized regions of developing countries. CBET is generally understood as a form of tourism in which local communities play a central role in planning, managing, and benefiting from tourism activities, while ensuring environmental conservation and cultural preservation (Scheyvens, 2011; Kunjuraman, 2023). Unlike mass tourism, which is often externally controlled and profit-driven, CBET emphasizes local empowerment, participatory decision-making, and equitable distribution of benefits.

Conceptually, CBET is very similar to the ideas behind sustainable development that aim to achieve a balanced relationship between economic development, social equity, and environmental sustainability (UNWTO, 2018; latest SDG connections in Jackson, 2025). In terms of development, CBET is often presented as an instrument for poverty reduction, livelihood diversification, and resilience of local communities, especially those living in rural, isolated and ecologically vulnerable regions (Zapata et al., 2011; Birendra & Kusi, 2025). According to several empirical studies conducted in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, CBET may lead to positive socio-economic impacts like income creation, employment, and social capital formation (see recent reviews, e.g., CBET bibliometries from 2023 to 2025).

Despite the above-mentioned potential benefits, there are also several critical views on CBET that point out that this approach is not always successful. CBET initiatives tend to fail because of unreasonable expectations, lack of skills, inadequate institutional capacity, and governance problems (Blackstock, 2005; Wondirad et al., 2020; Jackson, 2025). There are many structural obstacles for CBET such as the existence of centralized governance system, lack of funding, and insufficient political commitment that make it difficult for local communities to participate in tourism development. The conceptual foundation of CBET is closely aligned with the principles of sustainable development, which seek to balance economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection (UNWTO, 2018; recent SDG linkages in Jackson, 2025). From a development perspective, CBET is frequently promoted as a tool for poverty alleviation, livelihood diversification, and community resilience, particularly in remote and environmentally sensitive areas (Zapata et al., 2011; Birendra & Kusi, 2025). Empirical studies across Asia, Africa, and Latin America suggest that CBET can generate positive socio-economic outcomes, including income generation, employment opportunities, and improved social capital (updated in recent reviews, e.g., 2023–2025 CBET bibliometric analyses).

However, the literature also highlights that CBET is not inherently successful and often faces significant implementation challenges. Many CBET projects fail due to unrealistic expectations, limited community capacity, weak institutional support, and governance deficiencies (Blackstock, 2005; Wondirad et al., 2020; Jackson, 2025). Structural constraints such as centralized governance systems, lack of financial resources, and limited political commitment often undermine community participation in tourism development. These critiques suggest that CBET should not be viewed merely as a technical intervention, but rather as a complex socio-political process shaped by power relations, institutional arrangements, and governance structures.

Tourism Governance and Institutional Frameworks

Tourism governance refers to the structures, processes, and interactions through which tourism is planned, regulated, and managed by multiple stakeholders at different levels (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Farsari, 2022; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2023). Governance goes beyond government control and emphasizes the role of networks, partnerships, and collaborative arrangements involving public, private, and civil society actors. In the context of sustainable tourism, governance is considered a key mechanism for addressing coordination failures, managing conflicts, and ensuring accountability among stakeholders.

Effective governance requires not only formal regulatory frameworks but also informal norms, trust, and social capital that facilitate cooperation and collective action. From this perspective, governance is particularly relevant for CBET, which depends on shared decision-making and collective management of tourism resources. Despite its importance, governance in developing countries is often characterized by weak institutional capacity, fragmented responsibilities, and limited stakeholder coordination (Nunkoo, 2016; Irfan et al., 2024). Government agencies tend to dominate tourism planning processes, while local communities are marginally involved in strategic decision-making. This top-down approach frequently results in policies that are poorly aligned with local needs and realities, leading to low levels of community ownership and sustainability.

In the case of CBET, governance problems are compounded due to the presence of several stakeholders whose interests are varied and who wield unequal power. The local communities might not be knowledgeable or politically powerful, but outside influences like tour operators, NGOs, and government organizations have resources and financial control. Thus, the CBET project becomes outside-driven rather than remaining as it should be.

Stakeholder Theory and Tourism Development

Stakeholder theory provides a useful framework for studying governance practices in tourism. Formulated by Freeman (1984), stakeholder theory holds that any organization or development project must take into account the interest and influence of all parties that are affected by or have an impact on their operations. The application of stakeholder theory in tourism studies to analyze power dynamics, conflict, cooperation, and participatory governance has been widespread (Byrd, 2007; some recent examples in Cheng et al., 2019; Jaafar et al., 2020; Jung, 2022; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2023).

Tourism stakeholders can be classified as primary and secondary and include government officials, local communities, tourism enterprises, NGOs, and tourists. Different parties have varying amounts of power, legitimacy, and urgency and thus play different roles in the process of making decisions concerning tourism. Using the CBET framework, local communities usually appear as key stakeholders, whereas governments and NGOs as facilitators or enablers. Nonetheless, the available literature indicates that there is inequity in the participation of stakeholders in tourism governance. Even though policies encourage participatory processes, these processes tend to be manipulated by certain influential stakeholders such as government bodies and private business organizations. The participation of stakeholders tends to become more of an exercise that lacks any substantial meaning, as there are few chances for the communities to exercise influence through participation.

This implies that it is important to study not only who the stakeholders are but also how they relate to each other in the system of governance. Stakeholder theory can therefore be helpful in analyzing the governance process of CBETs.

Role of Government in CBET Governance

Governments are important for tourism development as they create policies, regulations, infrastructures, and funding for that purpose. Governments in CBET environments should be seen as enablers to create an environment where communities can actively participate in tourism activities, capacity can be built, and environmental protection can be ensured.

The problem is that governments' involvement in CBET is usually associated with contradictions and deficiencies. Governments use CBET as rhetoric, while practical measures are fragmentary and inconsistent. Many tourism policies in developing nations focus more on mass tourism and attract private investment to those nations, while ignoring CBET. Moreover, inefficiency of bureaucracy, lack of coordination between various agencies, and poor monitoring can lead to difficulties in implementing CBET. Governmental projects often have problems with proper consultation of local communities in CBET and are focused on top-down approach. In that case, CBET can become a label for the policy instead of being a real activity.

Role of NGOs and Civil Society

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society actors play an increasingly important role in CBET development, particularly in contexts where government capacity is limited. NGOs often act as intermediaries by providing technical assistance, training, funding, and advocacy for community-based initiatives. Empirical studies indicate that NGOs contribute significantly to community empowerment and capacity building through knowledge transfer and social capital formation. However, literature also raises critical concerns regarding the sustainability and legitimacy of NGO-led CBET projects. Interventions are often short-term, project-based, and dependent on external funding, which limits long-term impact. Moreover, NGOs may unintentionally reproduce power imbalances by imposing external agendas that do not fully align with community needs. These findings suggest that while NGOs play a valuable role in filling governance gaps, their effectiveness depends on institutional integration, long-term commitment, and genuine community participation.

Policy Gaps and Governance Challenges in Developing Countries

The establishment of effective policy framework is essential in CBET development through setting standards, assigning institutional responsibilities and allocating resources. Nevertheless, it is repeatedly stressed in academic literature that there is no coherent CBET policy in many developing nations. Such gaps could be identified by such factors as lack of CBET recognition as a legal entity, uncertain land tenure system, poor environmental regulations and lack of financial assistance. Such gaps hinder development of tourism and prevent community involvement.

CBET policies are especially poorly developed in South Asia. Tourism governance systems in South Asia are highly centralized with no supportive institutions for community-based efforts. Therefore, many CBET projects are informal and lack regulatory protection and consistent policies. This problem of governance and policy in CBET requires further empirical research.

Research Gap

Although contemporary studies on CBET offer profound knowledge about livelihood impacts and the baseline of community involvement in CBET projects, an overwhelming majority of literature tends to examine such programs purely in terms of socioeconomic interventions without due consideration to their multidimensional and multilevel political dimension. Hence, the major empirical lacuna in the field concerns the institutional mechanisms, intersectoral institutional design, and policy failures that determine the structural existence of such projects. Also, empirical studies that reveal how institutional fragmentation, power asymmetries, and gaps between policy and practice occur in the highly sensitive socioecological contexts of mountainous South Asia, especially in the context of marginalized indigenous communities in the region, are scarce. The current study aims at filling the empirical gap in question by performing an institutional analysis of CBET governance in the unique structural context of Kalash valleys of Pakistan. The paper goes beyond descriptive descriptions of stakeholders and analyses their interactions through the unified prism of stakeholder and tourism governance theories.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This case study has made a critical analysis of the institutional and organizational aspects of ecotourism development in community-based form in the Kalash Valleys of Pakistan. Through the exploration of the narrative experiences of 24 different stakeholders, it has been shown that the sustainability of the local forms of tourism depends on various structural setups at multiple levels. It has been found that even though institutions have formal authority, they are highly reactive and administratively centralized in their activities. On the other hand, NGOs play a vital part in capacity building and skill transfer, but their influence is repeatedly compromised by the temporary nature of the funding. This leaves serious fragmentation among the institutions and a lack of any legal setup open to exploitation and paralysis of community initiatives.

Theoretical Contributions

In terms of theory, the current research contributes to modern literature through the integration of stakeholder and tourism governance theories into one framework in the context of a marginal and indigenous mountain setting (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2023; Jackson, 2025). Rather than being content with a mere description of the functions of stakeholders, this paper provides evidence of the fact that legitimacy at the local level is impossible without power structures. It proposes a theoretical approach that illustrates how the combination of top-down administration by the state and civil society initiatives that lack coordination leads to ambiguous conditions in marginal locations. Thus, sustainable community ecotourism cannot be considered just a grassroots movement – it needs networks.

Practical and Policy Implications

In terms of practical approaches, there are various important interventions that should be considered to ensure sustainability for the destination:

The Development of Statutory Framework: The provincial and national level policy makers should prepare a specific legally binding act on community ecotourism. Such an act should formally define community-based enterprises and develop environmental carrying capacity protocol. Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure the protection of land tenure of indigenous communities and the establishment of a fair benefit sharing mechanism to prevent any exploitation by outsiders.

The Institutionalization of Collaboration Platforms: The regional administrators should set up an institutionalized tourism council.

Decentralized State Capacity Building: Public institutions should change their approach to operations from developing basic public infrastructure to engaging in community partnerships. This entails decentralization of funds for tourism development and establishment of localized public training centers to develop marketing, finance, and management skills in indigenous managers.

NGO-State Integration Mechanisms: Non-Governmental Organizations should stop using isolated and project-specific workshops. Future funding interventions need to have an institutional mechanism to ensure integration of such capacity-building programs within state

development programs such that the capacity building sessions become part of the institutional training curriculum.

Financial and Regulatory Incentives: The state needs to provide specific financial incentives in the form of micro-finance grants and tourism loans for marginalized indigenous women and youth for their homestay and artisan businesses.

Limitations and Future Research Pathways

However, while this paper presents important findings on a socially disadvantaged region, the main drawback of this paper lies in the single case study nature of the paper that fails to generalize statistically for different geographic locales. For further research, it would be necessary to conduct comparative multiple case studies in the different mountainous locales of South Asia to identify any institutional trends. Moreover, the use of mixed methods or longitudinal analysis would be of immense importance.

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- Ethics Statement:** This study involving human participants was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All qualitative procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board/Ethics Committee of the authors' home institution, and verbal or written informed consent was meticulously obtained from all 24 interview participants prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, strict confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed using pseudonyms, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.
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