

# A MODEL OF COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM MANAGEMENT (A CASE STUDY IN NINO KONIS SANTANA NATIONAL PARK, TIMOR-LESTE)

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## Abstract

*This research aims to analyze the implementation of a collaborative governance model in the management of indigenous community-based ecotourism within the Nino Konis Santana National Park (NKSNP), Timor-Leste. As a relatively new nation, Timor-Leste has designated tourism as a priority sector for economic development, with NKSNP serving as a primary destination due to its unique biodiversity and cultural richness. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of stakeholder interaction. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, participant observation in community meetings, and a documentary study of relevant policies. The findings indicate that the collaboration process among the government, the Fataluku indigenous community, NGOs, and the private sector is ongoing but remains informal, reactive, and suboptimal. Several key challenges were identified, including significant imbalances in power and resources, the absence of a formal collaborative forum with legal legitimacy, limited community management capacity, and overlapping regulations between the tourism and conservation sectors. Despite these challenges, there is significant potential rooted in the local wisdom of Tara Bandu, which is upheld by the indigenous community as a philosophical and practical foundation for conservation. This study concludes that the collaborative governance model in NKSNP is still in its initial (formative) stage and requires a more inclusive institutional design, strong facilitative leadership, and a transparent benefit-sharing mechanism to transform into a sustainable and equitable ecotourism management system that benefits the local community.*

*Keyword: Collaborative Governance, Ecotourism, Nino Konis Santana National Park, Community-Based Tourism*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nino Konis Santana National Park (NKSNP), located at the eastern tip of Timor-Leste, is the country's first and largest conservation area, covering 123,600 hectares of terrestrial and marine ecosystems. The area holds immense ecological and cultural value, serving as a habitat for over 200 bird species, possessing coral reefs that are part of the world's Coral Triangle, and featuring prehistoric cave sites and sacred locations for the Fataluku indigenous people (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 2016). Through its Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030, the Government of Timor-Leste has identified tourism, particularly ecotourism, as a key driver for the non-oil economy to reduce dependency on the oil and gas sector. The sector showed a positive growth trend before the global pandemic, indicating strong international interest. Data from the Ministry of Tourism, Commerce, and Industry (MTCI) reveals a year-on-year increase in international tourist arrivals, directly contributing to the tourism sector's share of the non-oil GDP.

**Table 1. Statistics of International Tourist Arrivals in Timor-Leste and  
Estimated Visits to NKSNP**

Year	Number of International Tourist Arrivals (Timor-Leste)	Estimated Visits to NKSNP
2017	66,000	2,500
2018	74,800	3,100
2019	78,500	3,500
2022	55,000 (post-pandemic recovery)	2,200

Source: Data processed from MTCI Statistical Report (2023) & Researcher's Projections

This data highlights the urgency for effective management to maximize NKSNP's potential as a world-class ecotourism destination. However, efforts to realize this potential face complex management challenges involving numerous actors with diverse interests, values, and levels of power, thus necessitating a collaborative and inclusive governance approach.

A review of previous research indicates that collaborative governance is key to the successful management of protected areas and tourism destinations. A study by Plummer and FitzGibbon (2004) in Canada emphasized that structured multi-stakeholder partnerships can enhance management effectiveness, reduce land-use conflicts, and increase the legitimacy of decisions. Conversely, a global study on Community-Based Tourism (CBT) by Goodwin and Santilli (2009) revealed a contrasting reality where many CBT initiatives fail due to a lack of sustained external support, weak internal community capacity in management and marketing, and an inability to connect with the broader tourism market. More contextual research by da Costa & Lopes (2020) in Timor-Leste asserted that the formal recognition and integration of traditional knowledge and laws like *Tara Bandu* into conservation policy significantly contribute to the success of natural resource protection efforts. Meanwhile, Pereira (2019) highlighted the unique challenges of tourism development in a post-conflict nation like Timor-Leste, where government institutions are still consolidating, trust among actors is low, and infrastructure is severely limited. Lastly, the theoretical framework of Ansell and Gash (2008), applied across various contexts, shows that the success of collaboration heavily depends on initial conditions, such as the incentives for all parties to participate and a history of cooperation or conflict, which can either facilitate or hinder the trust-building process.

The synthesis of these studies confirms the importance of collaboration, community empowerment, and the recognition of local wisdom in ecotourism management. However, a significant research gap exists: a lack of in-depth empirical analysis of how collaborative governance dynamics specifically unfold with all their processes, frictions, and small successes in the context of indigenous community-based ecotourism in Timor-Leste, particularly in NKSNP. Most existing studies tend to focus on general conservation aspects or national-level tourism policies, without unpacking the complexity of actor interactions at the ground level. Therefore, this research is urgently needed to fill that gap by critically analyzing the processes, challenges, and opportunities for collaboration in NKSNP using a relevant theoretical framework. The findings are expected not only to contribute to academic literature but also to provide actionable strategic recommendations for building a more effective, equitable, and sustainable governance model, ultimately protecting invaluable ecological and cultural assets while improving the well-being of the Fataluku indigenous community as the primary guardians of the area.

Collaborative governance is defined as an arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective, formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative decision-making process (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

This approach emerged in response to the failures of traditional top-down and adversarial governance models in addressing complex and interconnected public problems (*wicked problems*). Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh (2012) expanded on this concept by outlining an integrative framework that includes principles of engagement, shared motivation, and the capacity for joint action as key drivers. In the context of natural resource management, such as national parks, this approach is increasingly vital due to the complexity of issues that cannot be solved by a single actor. Its goal is to achieve more legitimate decisions by involving those affected, generate more innovative solutions by blending various types of knowledge (scientific, local, practical), and ensure more effective policy implementation through a shared sense of ownership.

Ansell and Gash (2008) developed a comprehensive model that has been widely used to analyze the success or failure of collaborative governance processes. The model consists of several key, interconnected, and dynamic variables:

- a. **Starting Conditions:** These factors significantly influence whether collaboration will begin and how it will evolve. They include power and resource imbalances among stakeholders (e.g., the government has legal authority, but the community has social legitimacy), perceived incentives to participate (e.g., a crisis threat or an opportunity to gain resources), and a history of past conflict or cooperation that can create initial levels of trust or suspicion.
- b. **Institutional Design:** This refers to the explicit and implicit ground rules that govern the collaboration process. Key elements include the inclusivity of participation (who is invited and who is not), process transparency, clarity of roles and responsibilities for each party, and the availability of conflict resolution mechanisms. A well-designed process can help mitigate power imbalances and ensure fairness.
- c. **Leadership:** In collaborative governance, facilitative not directive leadership is crucial. An effective leader acts as a mediator, helps build trust, maintains momentum, and empowers other participants to contribute. This leadership can come from a government agency, an NGO, or even a respected community figure.
- d. **Collaborative Process:** This is the heart of the model, where interaction occurs. This process ideally involves constructive face-to-face dialogue, gradual trust-building, the development of commitment to the process, the creation of a shared understanding of the problem and its solutions, and the achievement of intermediate outcomes like small agreements that build momentum for larger goals.

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is a form of tourism that gives local communities substantial control and ownership in its planning, development, and management, and ensures that the majority of economic and social benefits are received by them (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). The core principles of CBT are sustainability (economic, social, and environmental), community empowerment, and cultural preservation. Empowerment in this context means not only receiving economic benefits but also increasing capacity, self-confidence, and involvement in decision-making processes that affect their lives. In the context of ecotourism in an indigenous area like NKSNP, CBT is the most ethically and practically relevant approach because it positions the community as the primary subject, not merely an object of tourism or cheap labor. The success of CBT heavily depends on the community's internal capacity to organize, facilitative external support (from

government and NGOs), and its ability to integrate with broader tourism planning to avoid market isolation.

## 2. METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. This approach was chosen as it is best suited to the research objective: to understand in-depth and holistically the complex, dynamic, and context-bound phenomenon of collaborative governance in the specific situation of NKSNP. A case study allows the researcher to explore the "how" and "why" of collaboration processes (or their absence) from the perspectives of the actors directly involved. The research location is focused on the main villages within and around the NKSNP area, in the Lautém Municipality, Timor-Leste, which is the center of ecotourism activities.

Data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 key informants selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The selection criteria for informants were their direct involvement in NKSNP management issues, including representatives from the Ministry of Tourism, Commerce, and Industry (MTCI), the National Directorate of Forestry, Protected Areas, and Watersheds (DNFPC-MAP), traditional leaders (*lian na'in*), village chiefs (*xefe suku*), members of youth ecotourism management groups, staff from local (Haburas Foundation) and international (Conservation International) NGOs, and tourism accommodation managers (homestays and guesthouses). Participant observation was also conducted over three months to observe interactions among stakeholders during unstructured village meetings and workshops. Secondary data was collected from a comprehensive document review, including government planning reports, NGO project documents, tourism and conservation-related legislation, and tourist arrival statistics.

Data analysis was conducted thematically following the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three concurrent stages: (1) Data Condensation, where interview transcripts and field notes were summarized and coded; (2) Data Display, where the coded data was presented in matrices and narratives to identify patterns and relationships between themes; and (3) Conclusion Drawing/Verification, where the meaning of the identified patterns was interpreted and linked back to the Ansell and Gash theoretical framework to build a robust explanation.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Stakeholder Mapping: An Arena of Interests and Power Imbalances

In-depth field analysis identified four main stakeholder groups. Their interactions form a complex arena where interests, resources, and levels of influence vary greatly.

**Table 2. Stakeholder Analysis in NKSNP Ecotourism Management**

Stakeholder	Primary Interests	Key Resources/Power	Key Challenges/Weaknesses
Government (MTCI, MAP)	Increasing non-oil GDP, achieving national development plan targets, biodiversity conservation.	Legal authority, access to the national budget, diplomatic networks.	Weak inter-sectoral coordination, limited human resource capacity, slow bureaucracy.
Fataluku Indigenous Community	Livelihood sustainability, protection of sacred sites, recognition of customary rights.	Social legitimacy, traditional ecological knowledge ( <i>Tara Bandu</i> ), labor force.	Weak bargaining position, limited managerial & financial capacity, dependency.
NGOs (Local &	Conservation, community	Access to international funds,	Donor dependency, questionable

International)	empowerment, policy advocacy.	technical expertise, advocacy networks.	project sustainability, potential for program overlap.
Private Sector	Economic profit, business development.	Market knowledge, operational networks.	Small-scale operations, difficult access to capital, poorly organized.

**a. Government**

The government's role in this collaborative arena is marked by a dual mandate and significant institutional fragmentation. On one hand, the Ministry of Tourism, Commerce, and Industry (MTCI) acts as an agent of economic development with clear targets to increase state revenue. This is manifested in aggressive promotional campaigns like "Explore the Unexplored," which feature the natural beauty of NKSNP at international tourism fairs. On the other hand, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAP), through its forestry directorate, holds a conservation mandate that is often restrictive. This dualism creates a policy "cold war" at the implementation level. For example, while the MTCI pushes for the development of supporting infrastructure like roads and small-scale resorts, MAP is often hindered by a lack of data on environmental carrying capacity and lengthy bureaucratic procedures for issuing permits, creating a status quo that is detrimental to all parties.

This fragmentation is exacerbated by an imbalanced allocation of resources. National budget data shows that funding for tourism promotion is significantly larger than the operational budget for management, monitoring, and community engagement within NKSNP. A MAP staff member in the field lamented, "We have a good management plan on paper, but we only have two staff members and one motorcycle to patrol an area of thousands of hectares. How can we be effective?" This situation makes the government, which should be the anchor of collaboration, a source of uncertainty. The lack of a consistent state presence at the ground level makes the community and other actors feel that the government is only interested in potential revenue, without demonstrating a corresponding commitment to solving real problems on the ground.

**b. Fataluku Indigenous Community**

The Fataluku indigenous community is both the heart and the most vulnerable node in the NKSNP management ecosystem. They are not a monolithic entity but are composed of various clans (ratu) with different interests and levels of involvement. Their dependence on natural resources is extremely high; a local socio-economic survey (2022) showed that over 70% of households still rely on subsistence agriculture (corn, cassava), traditional fishing, and the use of non-timber forest products. In this context, ecotourism is viewed with great hope as a "way out" of poverty, but in reality, the perceived benefits are still very limited and unevenly distributed. Of the approximately 30 homestays identified, only about 5-7 are managed by families with connections to Dili or consistently operating NGOs. The rest struggle with very low occupancy rates, often less than 10% annually.

The community's greatest strength lies in its social legitimacy over the land and its local ecological knowledge, embodied in the customary law of Tara Bandu. This practice, a combination of traditional rituals and social sanctions, has proven highly effective as a conservation mechanism. For example, the application of Tara Bandu in the core zone of Lake Ira Lalaro for two years successfully increased the

population of Timor's endemic crocodiles and the diversity of waterbirds, which have now become a major attraction for birdwatchers. However, the power of this customary law is still confined to the internal community sphere and has not yet gained strong formal recognition within Timor-Leste's national legal system. This leaves them vulnerable to land claims from outsiders or development projects approved by the central government without adequate consultation, placing them in a very weak bargaining position in the collaborative arena.

### **c. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

In a situation where the government's role is often vacant, local and international NGOs have taken a proactive role as the main initiators, facilitators, and innovators in ecotourism development in NKSNP. They act as a crucial bridge connecting the community to external resources, be it funding, technical expertise, or market access. Programs such as nature and culture guide training by Conservation International have produced around 40 trained youths, some of whom are now leading guides in the area. Meanwhile, a program to improve facilities and provide basic hospitality training for homestay managers by the Haburas Foundation has reached 15 households, significantly raising basic service standards. However, this NGO-dominated intervention model also creates structural challenges. High dependency on foreign donor funding cycles often leads to "project islands" that are unsustainable and sometimes overlapping. For instance, one NGO might train guides while another focuses on homestays without an integrated marketing strategy to link the two. When a project ends after 2-3 years, the momentum is often lost, the provided equipment is not maintained, and the established groups become inactive. This phenomenon creates "project fatigue" among the community and fosters a cycle of dependency, where local initiatives struggle to grow without external stimulus. The role of NGOs as mediators can also be ambiguous, as they must balance the conservation agendas of their donors with the pressing economic aspirations of the community.

### **d. Private Sector**

The private sector ecosystem in NKSNP tourism is still in a very nascent and fragmented stage. The main actors are small-scale tour operators based in Dili and a few non-local entrepreneurs who manage guesthouses or lodges with higher standards. These tour operators do bring in tourists, but their business model often creates significant economic leakage. They tend to use guides, vehicles, and logistical supplies from Dili, leaving very little economic contribution to the local community, such as informal entrance fees to some sites or the purchase of handicrafts. It is estimated that over 80% of tourist spending in such tour packages does not stay in the local economy of Lautém.

On the other hand, local micro-entrepreneurs, especially homestay managers, face significant challenges in competing and growing. Their main limitations lie in three areas: digital marketing, product standardization, and business management. "We don't know how to set prices. Sometimes guests bargain too low, and we get confused," said a homestay owner in Com Village. The absence of a local tourism

association or cooperative means they lack the collective power to market together, set quality and price standards, or negotiate with the government and tour operators. Each entrepreneur operates individually, creating unhealthy competition and hindering the overall growth of the local tourism industry. This condition confirms that without support for organization and business capacity building, the local private sector will remain marginalized.

### **3.2 Analysis of the Collaborative Process Based on the Ansell & Gash Model**

#### **a. Starting Conditions**

The collaboration process in NKSNP began on a very fragile and challenging foundation, which has significantly hampered its progress. The power imbalance among stakeholders is the most dominant factor. The government and international NGOs come to the negotiation table holding almost all the "trump cards": legal authority, access to scientific data, technical expertise, and most importantly, financial resources. In contrast, the indigenous community possesses only social legitimacy over their ancestral lands and local ecological knowledge, which is often not considered an equivalent "capital" in the formal policy arena. This imbalance is manifested in the decision-making process, where community participation is often reduced to mere consultation for legitimacy, rather than an equitable partnership.

This condition is worsened by a historical legacy of distrust. For decades, policies for managing forests and protected areas have tended to be top-down and centralistic, often positioning local communities as threats or encroachers rather than partners. This historical experience has created deep-seated skepticism within the community. A traditional leader sharply stated, "In the past, they came in uniforms to forbid us from entering our ancestral forests. Now they come in nice shirts to invite us to work together. We need real proof on the ground, not just sweet promises in meeting rooms."

Furthermore, although the incentives to collaborate seem clear to all parties, the perceptions and urgency behind them are vastly different. For the government in Dili, ecotourism is a macroeconomic agenda to achieve GDP targets and diversification. For NGOs, it is a conservation project with measurable success indicators. However, for the indigenous community, it is a matter of daily survival a hope to earn cash income to pay for their children's schooling or buy basic necessities. This fundamental difference in the perception of incentives has often failed to be bridged in dialogue, causing the parties to talk past each other and struggle to find an authentic common ground.

#### **b. Institutional Design**

The most fundamental failure in the collaborative governance process in NKSNP is the absence of a formal, clear, and mutually agreed-upon institutional design. To date, there is no permanent "home" or platform such as a multi-stakeholder management board or a national park forum that has a legal mandate to serve as an arena for stakeholders to meet regularly, negotiate, make binding decisions, and resolve conflicts. The collaboration that occurs is ad-hoc, heavily dependent on the initiatives and funding of short-term NGO projects. Consequently, the sustainability of

the process is extremely vulnerable; when a project ends, the dialogue forum it established also disappears.

The absence of this formal structure has a direct impact on several crucial aspects. First, there is no clarity on the roles and responsibilities of each party, which often leads to program overlaps or, conversely, leaves important areas unaddressed by anyone. Second, transparency in decision-making is very low. Important meetings often involve only a handful of elites or representatives deemed cooperative, with no clear mechanism to report the outcomes back to the wider community.

Third, and most critically, is the lack of a fair and transparent benefit-sharing mechanism. This has become the greatest source of frustration and cynicism at the community level. "Tourists come, pay a lot to tour operators in Dili, take beautiful pictures, and then leave. What do we, as the guardians of this place, get?" asked a young village guide. Without clear rules on how revenue from tourism (e.g., from park entrance fees, levies, or taxes) will be managed and redistributed for conservation and community development, the community's motivation for long-term active participation will continue to erode. They feel they are merely objects, not subjects who also enjoy the fruits of their natural and cultural assets.

### **c. Fragmented Facilitative Leadership**

In the context of collaborative governance, effective leadership is ideally facilitative empowering, bridging, and maintaining momentum. However, in NKSNP, this leadership function is fragmented and inconsistent. The government, which structurally should take on the role of the main conductor in this collaborative orchestration, often fails to perform its role. Limited capacity of skilled human resources at the municipal level, coupled with a slow and centralized bureaucracy in Dili, makes the government's presence often ceremonial or reactive, rather than proactive and facilitative. They more often act as regulators enforcing rules than as partners who listen and seek solutions together.

This leadership vacuum is often filled by NGOs. Dedicated and skilled NGO staff have often succeeded in acting as effective mediators, building trust between the government and the community, and facilitating initial dialogues. However, leadership originating from NGOs has inherent limitations. First, it is temporary and tied to project cycles. Second, they are often perceived as not being neutral, as they are accountable to the agendas and indicators set by their donors, which may not always align fully with the community's priorities.

On the other hand, at the community level, there is a very strong and respected traditional leadership structure. The *lian na'in* (traditional leaders) have extraordinary influence in mobilizing the community for ritual and social affairs. However, this great influence often cannot be translated into power in the formal policy arena. Limitations in language (many elders are not fluent in Portuguese or English, the dominant languages in policy forums), understanding of bureaucratic procedures, and networks to the national level mean their voices are often unheard or not fully understood by decision-makers. As a result, no single actor or coalition of actors is capable of consistently and sustainably performing the crucial facilitative leadership role needed to keep the wheels of collaboration turning.

#### **d. Collaborative Process**

Despite various workshops, seminars, and village meetings being held, the collaboration process in NKSNP tends to be stagnant and has not been able to transform into a productive cycle. The face-to-face dialogues that occur often do not move beyond the stage of "socializing" top-down programs to a genuine "negotiation" stage where interests are traded and mutually beneficial compromises are sought. The government and NGOs come to present their plans, while the community comes to listen. The space for authentic two-way dialogue, where local knowledge and aspirations can substantively change existing plans, remains very limited.

Consequently, trust-building is a very slow and fragile process. The trust that is built is often personal, between specific individuals (e.g., between an NGO field staff member and a village chief), and is not institutionalized. When that individual is reassigned, the process has to start all over again. There have been some "small wins," such as a joint agreement among several villages to establish ecological trekking routes and set standard prices for local guide services. However, these partial successes have failed to become stepping stones to address larger, more strategic issues, such as the development of a participatory tourism master plan, an ecotourism levy scheme, or a conflict resolution mechanism for land use.

More deeply, the existing process has failed to create a shared understanding of the problems and goals. On the surface, all parties agree with the jargon of "sustainable ecotourism." However, upon deeper inspection, the meaning behind it varies greatly. For bureaucrats at the MTCI, sustainability is measured by a stable increase in tourist numbers and revenue. For NGO activists, the measure is the maintenance of forest cover and key species populations. For the Fataluku indigenous community, sustainability means their sacred sites (lulik) are not disturbed, and they earn enough income to send their children to school without having to destroy nature. These fundamental differences in interpreting this core concept have never been openly discussed and negotiated, leaving the commitments voiced by the parties to the collaboration process often rhetorical and superficial.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The collaborative governance model for managing indigenous community-based ecotourism in Nino Konis Santana National Park is still in a formative stage, operating informally and driven by short-term project initiatives rather than a long-term, institutionalized strategy. Although the main stakeholders have been identified and interaction among them has occurred, this collaborative process is not effectively structured to address the existing complexities. Based on an analysis using the Ansell and Gash (2008) framework, the fundamental weaknesses lie in the absence of a formal institutional design to provide a "home" for collaboration, fragmented leadership causing a lack of strategic direction, and a persistent power imbalance that hinders meaningful community participation. The central role of the Fataluku indigenous community and the local wisdom of Tara Bandu are the greatest assets and the foundation of social legitimacy for the area's management, yet this potential has not been optimally utilized and integrated into the formal governance structure. Without an institutionalized collaborative forum and clear mechanisms for decision-making and benefit-sharing, ecotourism management in NKSNP risks being partial, unsustainable, and failing to achieve its goals of conservation and well-being.

#### 4.1 Recommendations

1. For the Government of Timor-Leste: To urgently initiate the process of establishing and legalizing a Collaborative Management Body (or Multi-Stakeholder Forum) for NKSNP. This body must have a clear mandate, a representative membership structure (including equal representation for traditional leaders), and be supported by an adequate budget. Additionally, the government should develop derivative regulations that explicitly recognize the role of the indigenous community and Tara Bandu customary law in spatial planning and area management, as well as design a fair and transparent benefit-sharing scheme from tourism revenue (e.g., from entrance fees).
2. For NGOs: To continue their role as facilitators and catalysts, shifting their focus from direct project implementation to strengthening institutional capacity at the community level. This includes training in organizational management, financial literacy, and negotiation skills for community groups (e.g., tourism awareness groups) so they can participate equally and confidently in collaborative forums.
3. For the Indigenous Community: To proactively consolidate and strengthen their traditional institutions to act as a single, representative voice. They need to document their traditional knowledge and rules (including mapping their customary territories) as an advocacy tool to voice their aspirations and interests collectively and more forcefully to other stakeholders.
4. For Future Research: It is recommended to conduct longitudinal research to monitor the evolution of this collaborative process over time. Furthermore, quantitative research is needed to concretely measure the economic and social impacts of ongoing ecotourism activities on the well-being, income distribution, and socio-cultural changes within the local communities.

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