

From Terrorism to Peaceful Tourism: Status of Sustainable Tourism in Cotabato Province

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Abstract. Exploring Cotabato Province's shift from conflict to a sustainable tourism hub has noticeable changes over time. Sustainable tourism is one of the dimensions of peace. This study aimed to assess the status of sustainable tourism. Using a phenomenological approach, insights were collected from interviews and focus groups in three municipalities in Cotabato Province. Results show significant strides in peacebuilding and economic empowerment, driven by community-engaging sustainable tourism initiatives. Conflicts created massive displacement, persistent conflict, economic failure, and discrimination. Inter-government and non-government stakeholders offered initiatives to address the existing conflicts. These initiatives are further anchored in peacebuilding, economy, and security. In addition, formalizing the negotiation and peace agreement between stakeholders fostered culture-to-culture and people-to-people toward the development of peace and tourism. The status of sustainable tourism provided women empowerment in the community in promoting tourism. It allowed them to engage in the economic recovery of the locality. The findings highlight sustainable tourism as a key driver for peace and development, providing a replicable model for post-conflict regions. It reversed the perception of the tourists about areas. The newly discovered status in creating sustainable tourism provides a springboard for promoting tourism development policies and standards. This study encourages the exploration of the business tourism aspect in the promotion of peace and sustainable tourism in other provinces.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism; Economic empowerment; Peacebuilding; Security; Cotabato Province; Phenomenological research.

1.0 Introduction

Sustainable tourism is an emerging practice of community economic development. It provides meaningful economic support to communities by encouraging an influx of tourists for local relaxation experiences (Giampiccoli et al., 2020) and poverty alleviation (Cayron, 2017). In addition, it supported global peace by allowing travelers to learn about other cultures and meet people from other nations (Westcott & Anderson, 2021).

Peace and protection are social dimensions of sustainable tourism (Roxas et al., 2020). However, these constructs were destabilized by several conflicts exacerbated by ideological conflicts, family feuds, and armed resistance. In 2019, 54 state-based conflicts were recorded, including Afghanistan and Syria, as the deadliest (Palik et al., 2020). In the Philippines, Southern Mindanao has been dubbed as the land of animosity and terror in the past four decades (Ballesteros, 2020; Loesch, 2017). In addition, some areas were sparsely populated and underdeveloped, with people fearing ongoing conflicts in various provinces. According to Ochiai (2016), there are three key explanations for why the Mindanao conflicts lasted so long: inequalities and injustices, ancestral domain, and political and economic depression.

In the Cotabato Province, some municipalities that once served as conflict-affected areas have been transformed into modern tourism as new attraction areas because of tangible results of stakeholders' peace process. Moreover, unlike other frameworks that look at tourism from the business perspective (Porter et al., 2018), economic development perspective (Hayward & Magennis, 2014), and entrepreneurship and small enterprise perspective (Yoosuf & Premaratne, 2017). Previous studies ascertained local sustainability indicators for tourism, sustainable tourism planning, and management for sustainable livelihoods, sustainable entrepreneurship tourism, and sustainable entrepreneurship implementation (Matiku et al., 2021; Maxim, 2016; Porter et al., 2018; Rivera & Gutierrez, 2019) but few have been conducted on the transition of peace towards sustainable tourism. This paper endeavored by exploring local tourism from the social perspective and unearth a theoretical model of peaceful transition in developing sustainable tourism. Thus, this study aimed to assess the status of sustainable tourism as springboard for promoting peacebuilding, sustainable community development, and local tourism.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design. Using this method, the researcher qualified the underlying narratives of the participants' context, personal experiences, and perceptions about conflict, peace, and sustainable tourism transitions. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), using this method describes and culminates the essence of the experiences of several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. In addition, these narratives captured prevailing concerns and guided conceptualizing themes and descriptions to answer the research questions.

2.2 Research Participants

Participants came from the municipalities of Aleosan, Pikit, and Makilala of Cotabato Province, Philippines. Six participants were interviewed for the Key Informant Interview (KII), comprising the LGU Tourism Officer and BLGU Barangay Captain. They currently hold the office and know about current tourism development and living in times of conflict. For the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), eighteen participants were interviewed, including the owners of the tourist site, the head of BPAT, teachers, vendors, habal-habal drivers, and Brgy. Kagawad. As to their inclusion, they should be barangay residents living in a time of conflict and have some knowledge about tourism development in their area.

2.3 Research Instrument

The study's instruments used a researcher-made interview guide. Before proceeding to actual data collection, the research tool was subject to validation by the researcher on peace studies. Also, a pilot test was conducted to determine the suitability and accuracy of the questions and probes. The Key Informant Interview (KII) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide questionnaire used the same questions to vouch for their responses which dealt with discovered processes of transitions from peace to sustainable tourism, which seek to search for the involvement of multi-sectors to offer programs addressing tourism needs and interventions to attain sustainable tourism in their locality.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

This study employed interviews and focus group methods. Environmental scanning to validate and affirm the key informants' participation was conducted before the interview and focus group. The participants were identified by the researcher using the criteria provided. A letter was sent to the local tourism officer and barangay captain for approval. After receiving the acceptance letter, the interview was arranged. Interview responses were digitally documented to record the responses of the participants.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The researcher maintained and valued the confidentiality of the participants' information. By their willingness, without any force, they shared their experiences according to the purpose of the study. The researcher also used informed- consent that values the participants' interest. All the data obtained during the interview was used mainly for the study. Proper referencing was also observed to credit the authors' ideas during the analysis and further discussion in the study. The researcher ensured that all participants' rights, safety, and -being were protected throughout the research process. Informed consent was given. The participants were informed about

the risks associated with their involvement in the research and allowed to make a voluntary decision to participate or not participate in the research.

2.6 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following phenomenological research design.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The overarching themes emerged from the analysis namely: Peacebuilding Status, Economic Status, and Security Status.

3.1 Theme 1: Peacebuilding Status of Sustainable Tourism

Table 1 shows the sub-themes of the peacebuilding status of sustainable tourism in Cotabato Province.

Table 1. Peacebuilding status of sustainable tourism

SUB-THEMES	DESCRIPTION
Holistic approach to the peacebuilding process	Local communities, local government units, non-government organizations, the private sector, and churches commit and converge for peacebuilding
Provision of social services for peace and local peacebuilding	Promotion of religious and recreational activities and conduct of training programs that increase awareness of children's rights and welfare and gender and harmful environmental activities.
Development of local infrastructure	Infrastructure projects that sustain peacebuilding and promote tourism are implemented (e.g., concrete roads, the establishment of amusement parks, a water irrigation system, and BPAT and police outposts).
Nationalism as a social dimension of peace	Local communities exhibit love and pride in their town – promote positive local image in social media.

In the recent data on UN peace initiatives from 1946-2015, peace initiatives promote peacekeeping with 9% total effectiveness (Clayton et al., 2020). This study shows that participants' understanding of the peacebuilding status of sustainable tourism can be labeled as holistic. Why? Peacebuilding in a sustainable tourism scenario involves the participation of the community, LGU, and stakeholders in promoting peacekeeping. This participation explains the positive change in the community in terms of their social interaction, visibility of support systems, and stable source of livelihood. Therefore, when the province supported the DoT to open the tourism industry, it became a targeted opportunity for investors, tourists, and stakeholders.

To support this claim, Adam (2016) insists that a more holistic approach to peacebuilding must involve a variety of traditional, religious, or kinship-based institutions and authorities for Mindanao to obtain sustainable peace. However, this involvement is not limited to these identities. Moreover, (Roxas et al., 2020) agrees with this idea and emphasizes other fields like cultural integrity, critical ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems to deliver peacebuilding initiatives better. All these factors contributed to the development of local and community development status. To be precise, peacebuilding status adheres to strengthening the current social and economic tourism means.

Therefore, peacebuilding contains and offers a diversity of supports and gradual development as a form of change that is not the sole work of the agent. Instead, the peacebuilding status of sustainable development calls for working inter-partnerships of agents to rehabilitate life-changing conditions for improvement. It is an improvement of the community's status of self-actualization from unjust experiences like in the event of conflicts. The more involved the community and other agencies are, the better it will provide good status. According to the UNPC and Non-UN, it provides provision for peacebuilding and integrates among its mandates: *"to focus attention on the reconstruction and institution-building efforts necessary for recovery from conflict and to support the development of integrated strategies to lay the foundation for sustainable development"* (Lambourne & Herro, 2008, p.281).

The role of the UN and other agencies is to bring enforcement to conflicted places, a new hope to them, especially in the Cotabato province, which suffered from a series of conflicts. The appearance of provision of social services coming from these agencies served as the foundation of the community to overcome the bad status. Such services are given in relief goods, health care, sanitation orientation, children's feeding programs, and livelihood assistance

(Daylusan - Fiesta, 2019). The DSWD, DOH, and DA emerged to provide these services. Every department is responsive to its tasks within the peacebuilding efforts of sustainable development.

Thus, the change of the community status through social services is not gradual; it also offers an enabling status. These allow the community and tourism industry to benefit from the peacebuilding initiatives interplayed by various agents and stakeholders of peace and development. The municipality of Aleosan, for instance, became a recipient private agency primarily attended by farmers, women, and children with specific needs. The partnership involved in this situation forms conducive support to the community. Water and electricity faculty become accessible, unlike before. These were the problems they encountered. And while the holistic approach in peacebuilding is eminent to the community's social aspects, infrastructure development followed the construction of enabling support to them. This additional peacebuilding initiative is delivered through projects based on LGU and private agencies like concreted roads, hygiene facilities, water and electric system, and security posts. On the contrary, tourism standards on infrastructure must anchor to DRRM policy because it would lead to loss of lives and property, and hence, negative consequences on the economy (Solis, 2019), which needs to be added to the tourism policy and observation of the participants.

One more thing is that peacebuilding provides nationalism to the community. Through tourism, visitors are not only local travelers. It caters to foreign travelers to unwind and experience the people, their culture, the commercial locally made products, and, more importantly, the tourism industry. Thus, peacebuilding status is holistic because of the involvement of LGUs and stakeholders that cannot be denied. Their contribution to uplifting the community's development status becomes visible and efficient. Over the past years, the favorable appearance of peacebuilding to the tourism industry has proven to be efficient, increase community livelihood, and make the entire province a place of higher respect for community support.

3.2 Theme 2: Economic Status of Sustainable Tourism

Table 2 shows the sub-themes of the economic status of sustainable tourism in Cotabato Province.

Table 2. Economic status of sustainable tourism	
SUBTHEMES	DESCRIPTION
Women empowerment as an indicator of economic growth.	Women are provided with job opportunities while attending to their gender roles (e.g., being a mother to children and doing their house chores). Self-actualizing women helps them contribute to sustainable community development.
Localities engage in different entrepreneurial activities.	Citizens sell local products that illustrate their own culture.
Local Tourism Towards Sustainable Economic Development	Local tourism provided employment, livelihood, and a source of revenue for community development.

Tourism is a significant industry in the Philippines, contributing to employment generation and economic growth (Solis, 2019). For the participants, their understanding of the economic status of sustainable tourism opens the door to women's status entrepreneurship. Initially, tourism plays a significant economic field in the community, which provides people with relaxation and experiences (Giampiccoli et al., 2020); economic growth and development (Aguila & Ragot, 2014; Roxas et al., 2020); and poverty alleviation (Cayron, 2017; Giampiccoli et al., 2020). However, the question is, who initiates this economic mobility in the locality? In the economic field, women are exposed to delivering marketing functions and income of the locality. In selected municipalities, women empowerment as a status of sustainable tourism provides a space for women to practice their skills and potential outside the home. By this, Ellerby (2016) testifies that women must be substantively represented in any form of activity. It enables women to create their meaning and identity in society. Therefore, women must be properly included in the economic status of development.

Meanwhile, the employability rate secures job opportunities for women to be recognized. It also means that DSWD and DTI government programs must be directly prioritized for women to join in the skills training where they could boost their knowledge and talents to produce economic value in the locality. Before, the cultural image of women remained a problem. It suspends equality and the opportunity for women to participate. It was mentioned by Coleman (2020) as a gap in women's participation in the workplace. When tourism arrives, it shifts the notion of doing household chores and children's caregivers. Instead, sustainable development's economic status allows

women to be important agents of economic activity. In Makilala, flower production in tourist sites is headed by women. It allows them to venture into the income-generating activity that supports their family needs. Women become models of business activity. Additionally, the municipality of Pikit showcases Muslim women for their famous delicacy of "tinadtag," smoke fish, and native coffee. The market and street roads are common arenas for women's businesses.

Thus, the status of women doing entrepreneurial situates their participation in the economic structure of the locality. Livelihood program for women serves as an efficient source of daily needs. The DSWD and DoT, the other agencies, have to cooperate to strengthen their involvement further. At the same time, recording their accomplishments is necessary to monitor their output. On the contrary, failure to integrate tourism as a livelihood source will destroy tourism assets and make it difficult to establish sustainable tourism (Carter et al., 2015). Therefore, when we speak of sustainable tourism's economic status, it perceives women's role in the entrepreneurial activities of the tourism industry. The recognition of women is a helpful foundation of the economy to welcome them into the larger society.

Furthermore, including women aims to eliminate discrimination in building economic status in sustainable tourism. Their participation improves human capital to accelerate income and mobility to economic aspects and promote sustainable tourism in the region.

3.3 Theme 3: Security Status of Sustainable Tourism

Table 3 shows the sub-themes of the security status of sustainable tourism in Cotabato Province.

Table 3. Security status of sustainable tourism	
SUB-THEMES	DESCRIPTION
Higher confidence on local tourism due to peace and security	There is an influx of visitors coming to visit tourist attractions due to absence of fear, threat, and local conflict.
Visibility and consistent monitoring of local security forces of peace and security.	CCTVs, checkpoints, and police patrolling are established to maintain peace and security.
Monitoring and meeting of stakeholders about status of local peace and security	The Barangay Peace and Order Council, municipal and barangay local government units, private sector, and local citizens conduct regular meetings and training to raise awareness about local peace and security.

The narratives about the security status of sustainable tourism from selected municipalities deal with the presence of security forces, resulting in higher confidence in local tourism and visibility, and consist of monitoring and meeting of stakeholders. Based on this result, security status, in general, can be drawn as inter-agency of security forces for peace and security. The appearance of security forces at the entrance and existing areas in tourist sites is the reason for the frequent increase in tourist site visits. BPAT and Barangay Peace Council at the barangay level exert effort to enforce safety to all continually.

In addition, the PNP and tourists' police under the DoT management and DILG are designated to monitor the area. In Pikit, the DoT is practicing itinerary and traveler registration, especially from other regions who wish to see the Bahay Kastila. They collaborated with the tour guide, tricycle in case they had no vehicle, and tourist police. The purpose is to properly bring them to the area and capture the historic memory of the building and the site. It is also evident in Makilala and Aleosan tourist destinations. However, one more thing that intensifies their security force is the permanent settlement of CAGU, which strengthens the security for both municipalities. The intensified management for security enables the belief of higher confidence that local tourism can provide. It can stimulate the urgency for other visitors to come again. However, minimal participation of the locals and low tourism income result in a shortage of funds for biodiversity activities. As a result, a rise in crime can be a possible scenario (Giampiccoli et al., 2020).

Figure 1 summarizes the themes and subthemes discussed previously.

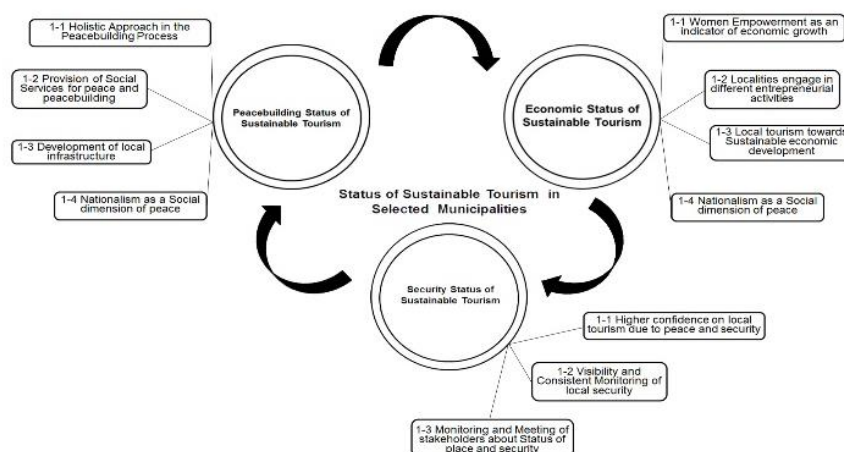


Figure 1. Status of sustainable tourism in selected municipalities

4.0 Conclusion

Emerging tourism activities in the province become a new prospect of development. The status of sustainable tourism reversed the perception of the locality as a conflicted area, as a sign of recovery, offering economic interest and upbringing, holistic scenarios where it caters to the interest and addresses problems of security, poverty, underdevelopment, and underlying misconception to people and daily activities. Peace and order are important before the development of the tourism industry. This study recommends the following: first, the DoT should ensure the delivery of service initiatives to the community by implementing tourism perspectives in peacebuilding, economy, and security, particularly to children, IPs, and women in the locality. Second, LGU, stakeholders, and the community should conduct regular updates and meetings to improve tourism services through the integration of collaborative, peaceful tourism activities and projects. And lastly, conduct the roles of DRRMC in developing sustainable tourism in various tourism spots in the region.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The author has confirmed the equal contribution in each part of this work. The author reviewed and approved the final version of this work.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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