

## EXPLORING COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE IN RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM NQILENI VILLAGE, SOUTH AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

Collaborative governance is increasingly recognized as a critical mechanism in the advancement of the tourism sector, with partnerships serving as key drivers of sustainable tourism development. The aim of this study was to investigate the underlying and supporting factors that drive or hinder collaborative governance in tourism for the development of rural communities. A qualitative case study design was utilized, incorporating semi-structured interviews with 15 participants actively or indirectly engaged in tourism initiatives in Nqileni village, Eastern Cape province, South Africa. Purposive sampling, a non-probability technique, guided participant selection based on involvement in tourism governance processes. Data analysis proceeded through manual coding, which enabled the identification of key themes. The analysis revealed three overarching themes: broad and equitable collaboration, leadership and shared values, and adequate resources. The findings highlight that broad and equitable collaboration with shared values, legitimate and skilled conveners, and adequate resources are indispensable in fostering collaborative governance for rural tourism development.

*Keywords: partnerships, rural community development stakeholders, tourism collaborative governance*

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## **A VIDÉKI TURIZMUSFEJLESZTÉS KOOPERATÍV IRÁNYÍTÁSÁNAK FELTÁRÁSA: BETEKINTÉS A DÉL-AFRIKAI NQILENI FALU ESETÉBE**

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### **ABSZTRAKT**

Az együttműködésen alapuló kormányzást egyre inkább a turisztikai ágazat kulcsfontosságú fejlesztési mechanizmusaként ismerik el, amelynek keretében a partnerségek a fenntartható turisztikai fejlődés kiemelt jelentőségű mozgatórugói. Tanulmányunk célja a vidéki közösségek fejlesztését szolgáló, a turisztikai együttműködésen alapuló kormányzást előmozdító vagy akadályozó mögöttes és támogató tényezők vizsgálata volt. Kvalitatív esettanulmánytervet alkalmaztunk, amely 15 résztvevővel készített félig strukturált interjúkat tartalmazott, akik aktívan vagy közvetve részt vettek turisztikai kezdeményezésekben a dél-afrikai Eastern Cape tartomány, Nqileni nevű falujában. A célzott mintavétel, amely egy nem valószínűségi technika, a turisztikai irányítási folyamatokban való részvétel alapján irányította a résztvevők kiválasztását. Az adatelemzés manuális kódolással történt, ami lehetővé tette a kulcsfontosságú tényezők azonosítását. Az elemzés három átfogó témát tárt fel: széles körű és méltányos együttműködés, vezetés és közös értékek, valamint megfelelő erőforrások. Az eredmények rávilágítanak arra, hogy a széles körű és méltányos együttműködés közös értékekkel, legitim és képzett résztvevőkkel, valamint megfelelő erőforrásokkal elengedhetetlen a vidéki turizmus fejlesztése érdekében az együttműködésen alapuló kormányzás előmozdításához.

*Kulcsszavak: partnerségek, vidéki közösségfejlesztésben érdekelt felek, turisztikai együttműködésen alapuló irányítás*

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is widely regarded as a dynamic economic activity across developed and developing nations (Jena & Dwivedi, 2021). Rural regions are particularly vulnerable (Jena & Dwivedi, 2021), and tourism has been proposed as an alternative development strategy to agriculture (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Jena & Dwivedi, 2021). This strategy mobilizes resources, activities, and diverse stakeholders, with governments often positioning it as a vehicle for rural development (Saxena et al., 2007). Nonetheless, the long-term effectiveness of rural tourism in advancing sustainable development remains contested (Farsari, 2021; Sharpley, 2022). When the design and implementation of rural tourism initiatives neglect the ecological, economic, and socio-cultural priorities of local communities (Lane, 1994), the outcome may include adverse consequences such as cultural conflicts, inflated living costs, and resource depletion (Shi et al., 2022; Xavier et al., 2019).

Debates continue regarding rural tourism's contribution to sustainable development in developing contexts. According to the OECD (2018), effective rural development is contingent on institutional capacity, encompassing coherent policies, governance mechanisms, and inclusive structures supporting collaborative tourism governance. Empirical evidence from emerging economies such as Botswana, Croatia, Hungary, and South Africa suggests that rural tourism may serve as a sustainable strategy for development in rural territories (Ernawati et al., 2018; Kantar & Svržnjak, 2017; Lakner et al., 2018; Lenao, 2017; Litheko & Potgieter, 2019; Mbaiwa & Hambira, 2019; Yavana Rani et al., 2017). In contexts dominated by rural livelihoods, alternative development models premised on cooperation and networking are increasingly emphasized to ensure sustainable territorial development (Yavana Rani et al., 2017).

Collaborative partnerships are considered an essential component of rural development within tourism governance. They enhance stakeholder capacity, especially among groups with limited participation, while advancing shared objectives and values. Tourism is considered a complex sector due to its multifaceted economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Baggio, 2008). Stakeholder disagreements, particularly over land use in conservation areas, illustrate the persistent challenge of conflicts of interest in tourism governance (Badola et al., 2017).

This study's central aim is to examine how collaborative governance among rural tourism stakeholders can contribute to the development of rural communities. Specifically, the study intends to respond to the following research question: What underlying and supporting factors drive or hinder collaborative governance in tourism for the development of rural communities?

## 2. Research problem

Although collaborative governance has been examined in diverse domains such as corporate responsibility (Rasche, 2010), environmental management (Woolaston, 2018),

land management (Bettis et al., 2020), sports systems (Edwards & Leadbetter, 2016), civic festivals (Cabral & Krane, 2018), and health and technology (Lang, 2019), limited attention has been given to its application in tourism. Where research on tourism governance exists, the focus has often been on stakeholder interactions, policy evaluation, institutional frameworks, and social capital (Edwards & Leadbetter, 2016; Tomo et al., 2018; Bichler & Lösch, 2019). However, a notable gap persists in understanding how collaborative governance operates specifically within rural communities to advance community development. This study therefore addresses this gap by investigating the potential of collaborative governance to facilitate rural development through tourism.

### 3. Theoretical framework

The current study is grounded in the collaborative governance for rural tourism framework developed by Chen et al. (2025), as shown in *Figure 1*. This framework was advanced as an extension of earlier models by Ansell & Gash (2008) and Emerson et al. (2012). According to Chen et al. (2025), these earlier frameworks were limited in their capacity to fully explain and facilitate rural tourism collaborative governance. The main shortcoming identified was the absence of integration with social exchange theory, which maintains that individuals engage in interactions based on a cost–benefit evaluation (Chen et al., 2025). Notably, Cai (2009) remains the only scholar who applied social exchange theory to conceptualize rural destinations as social structures rather than mere markets. Findings from that study highlighted that exchanges involve both tangible and intangible resources and occur not only between hosts and visitors but also among rural stakeholders themselves. Thus, collaborative governance in rural tourism functions as a social exchange mechanism that balances stakeholder interests through collective decision-making. To address the limitations of earlier models, Chen et al. (2025) incorporated both social exchange and social capital theories into their framework.

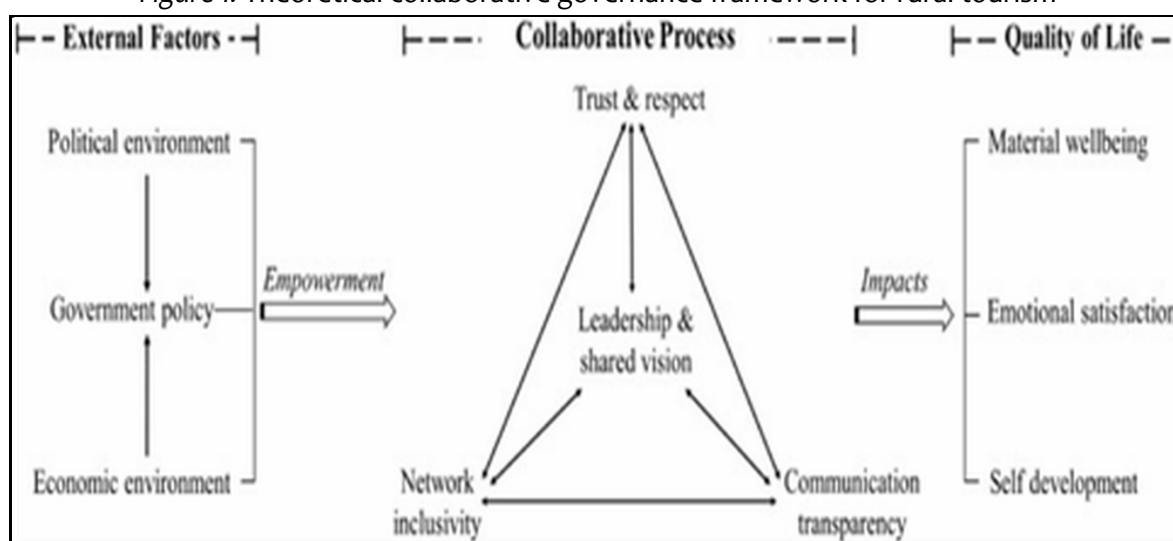
Their theoretical model comprises three primary components: external factors, collaborative processes, and quality of life. Within this framework, external factors include political environments, government policy, and the broader external context. Chen et al. (2025) argued that these elements can either enable or constrain local community empowerment in rural tourism governance. An unstable political environment risks disrupting social order, displacing communities, and diverting resources away from development initiatives. Furthermore, policymaking and the autonomy of rural tourism organisations are significantly influenced by the political context.

The second component identified by Chen et al. (2025) is the collaborative process. This element integrates four constructs previously advanced by Ansell & Gash (2008): broad and equitable collaboration, leadership, shared values, and quality of life. Chen et al. (2025) asserted that leadership conceived not as the role of a single actor but as a collective endeavour guides the establishment of a shared vision. This shared vision aligns stakeholder goals and values, fostering stronger commitment to collective objectives. As argued by Ansell & Gash (2008), alignment of stakeholder values with group objectives

promotes trust and respect in the exchange of intangible resources, while enhancing social capital through transparent communication and inclusive networks. Similarly, Dobbin & Smith (2021) emphasized that exchanges contribute to proactive network and alliance formation, which serve as additional forms of social capital.

The third component of the framework is the quality of life of villagers, which Chen et al. (2025) regarded as the ultimate outcome of collaborative governance. The authors emphasize that earlier studies have recognized the challenges of measuring quality of life outcomes in rural communities (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Research based on social exchange theory has predominantly concentrated on tangible economic benefits, often overlooking broader social and well-being aspects. Chen et al. (2025) argued that this narrow focus is insufficient, as the primary objective of rural tourism governance should be the holistic improvement of residents' quality of life. In line with this perspective, Wang et al. (2023) contended that contemporary studies should extend beyond economic benefits to incorporate broader indicators of quality of life for rural residents.

Figure 1. Theoretical collaborative governance framework for rural tourism



Source: Own editing based on Chen et al. (2025).

## 4. Literature review

### 4.1. Collaborative governance and its characteristics

Numerous contexts have incorporated the study of collaborative governance (CG), including corporate responsibility (Rasche, 2010), land management (Bettis et al., 2020), environmental and natural resource management (Woolaston, 2018), the sport system (Edwards & Leadbetter, 2016), and health and technology (Lang, 2019). However, there is still a lack of research on collaborative governance in the tourism industry. The application of cross-administrative and integrated management at different levels (local, regional, and superregional) to support sustainable resource management and break down barriers between the government and community is made possible by CG in the context of environmental and conservation management (Montero et al., 2006; Guerrero et al.,

2015). The state is crucial in launching, organizing, and providing money for CG projects. Nonetheless, without robust and unambiguous regulations, CG might not yield substantial results (Brower, 2016; Eckerberg et al., 2015).

CG extends beyond the traditional view of government as merely state activity (Panyik, 2015). It involves a decision-making process involving various stakeholders, such as civil society, the private sector, and the state, working together to create actions with a public purpose (Emerson et al., 2012). Governance is seen as a new form of government that emphasises the inclusion of different stakeholders, fostering a trust-based environment where common interests are articulated and power is shared to make decisions that benefit public objectives within a territory (Bono i Gispert & Clavé, 2020; Siakwah et al., 2019). In tourism, CG has become fundamental for research and development (Sentanu et al., 2023). Keyim (2017) highlights the necessity of CG processes that involve broad, equitable collaboration, a legitimate and skilled convener, and sufficient resources, particularly for rural tourism development. Thus, CG can be approached from a multilevel perspective (Jessop, 2016).

Governance primarily concerns processes and structures (Pechlaner et al., 2014). It includes political, economic, and administrative affairs (Eagles, 2009) when looking at tourism governance from a horizontal perspective (Bramwell, 2011), whereas, on a vertical level (Bramwell & Lane, 2011), governance is linked to management and interwoven with civil society. Therefore, governance accounts for multiple relatively autonomous actors in a polycentric constellation (Denters, 2011). Tourism governance has been defined differently (Bevir, 2011; Denters, 2011), but specific characteristics can be distilled: governance encompasses more than government, concerns the way society is governed, ruled, or steered, and includes multiple actors (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). There are two major research streams contributing to tourism governance. In the first stream, governance refers to "the way companies are directed and controlled" (Cadbury Report, 1992), while in the second stream, it refers to decision-making and power (Eagles, 2009). The concept of governance is defined by Rhodes (1997) as the self-organization of inter-organizational networks that depend on each other, exchange resources, and operate independently of the state. The definitions of politics and corporations help clarify the context of tourism. The management of tourism destinations requires cooperation and coordination between various stakeholders (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007). However, because tourism is an interconnected and interdependent industry, strong actors and organizations have developed to control the industry's growth. Therefore, the public and private sectors' roles, including their networks and intermediates, were emphasized more in the earlier formulations of tourism governance (Beritelli et al., 2007; Nordin & Svensson, 2007). The goal of tourism governance was condensed by Presenza et al. (2015) to coordinate local stakeholders to design and develop destinations, fostering different valuable forms of commitments, synergies, and collaborations between public/private actors and assisting policymakers in implementing sustainable development.

Early research extensively explored tourism governance (Vargas, 2020; Dangi &

Petrick, 2021). Tourism governance is necessary to achieve sustainable destination development, claim Bruyn & Alonso (2015). Tourism governance involves a comprehensive and challenging collaboration process among three stakeholders (the public sector, commercial sector, and community) to increase a destination's long-term survival. This process calls for flexibility, creativity, and innovation. According to several studies, successful tourism development depends on better governance (Siakwah et al., 2019). While tourism contributes significantly to economic growth, market forces, and government regulation remain key industry governance components. Practical cooperation with other industries and government action are crucial for developing the tourism industry. Sectoral policies and state types should receive more attention when implementing tourism governance (Erkuş-Öztürk, 2011). A similar idea can be found in the study of Wesley & Pforr, which notes that the main factors governing coastal tourism these days are political power, conflicting interests and agendas, and a lack of community consultation (Wesley & Pforr, 2010).

In the governance of tourism, Dangi and Petrick (2021) draw attention to the problems of collaborative involvement, where decision-making is mainly done by those occupying higher positions within the organization. The success of tourist development is impacted by the underrepresentation and lack of community involvement in tourism governance (Siakwah et al., 2019). Conversely, Vanneste & Ryckaert (2011) find that although business owners in the tourism industry are willing to attend workshops and meetings, only one-third actively participate. The main reasons for low involvement are a lack of time and dedication. Enhancing tourism governance, which strongly emphasizes collaborative participation, responsiveness, representation, and involvement of multi-stakeholders at all levels, can help to lessen the problems associated with collaborative participation in tourism (Dangi & Petrick, 2021).

Numerous scholarly investigations have established tourism governance models to tackle the problems of involvement and cooperation. The adaptive co-management strategy was used by Islam et al. (2018) to enhance the governance of protected areas, and it proved effective in promoting the participation and cooperation of tourism stakeholders in protected areas. Meanwhile, Bruyn & Alonso (2015) proposed a tourism governance model. It is founded on accountability, coherence, innovation, transparency, strong leadership, dialogue, participation, and consultation. However, Zahra (2011) contends that the principle should be the foundation for regulating tourism. Establishing credibility and trust, fostering open dialogue and engagement, and contributing to conserving tourism assets are all necessary for effective tourism governance in an area. Despite the potential benefits of enhancing tourism governance, no model has been developed that encourages cooperation in the consensus-building process of making decisions.

#### **4.2. Rural tourism and governance**

Rural tourism (RT) introduces new income sources that complement, rather than replace, existing activities (Saxena et al., 2007). It leverages rural amenities and fosters

coordination among stakeholders, playing a crucial role in implementing and monitoring RT strategies at the regional level (Fleischer & Tchetchik, 2005; Saxena et al., 2007). According to Saxena et al. (2007) and Valderrama & Polanco (2022), key elements influencing RT dynamics include rural tourism networks, endogeneity, and empowerment. Various authors have explored the relationship between networks in RT (Cunha et al., 2020; Ilbery & Saxena, 2011; MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019; Ying et al., 2015). Social networks, which can be formal or informal (Jesus & Franco, 2016), represent innovative interactions among individuals or groups within rural social systems (Tian et al., 2016).

In RT, networks can be established to manage local resources (Cunha et al., 2020), boost interest in tourism development (Su, 2013), and enhance strategic rural tourism actions among stakeholders (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2017; Ying et al., 2015). These networks enable stakeholders to collaborate and form dynamic social relationships to achieve rural tourism objectives (Kelliher et al., 2018). Endogeneity in RT involves maximizing local benefits by utilizing and adding value to local resources, focusing on the needs and capacities of the local population (Kelliher et al., 2018). This approach allows the local community to manage RT activities, fostering a belief in rural tourism initiatives (Soulard et al., 2023), increasing local management (Ilbery & Saxena, 2011; Marzo-Navarro et al., 2017), and benefiting residents through resource management (Scutariu & Scutariu, 2023).

Empowerment enhances local participation and capacity building, which is essential for achieving development and conservation goals in rural areas (Petriello et al., 2021). The growth of rural tourism encourages local involvement in creating and managing various tourism products (Jena & Dwivedi, 2021; Soulard et al., 2023), fostering empowerment and a sense of belonging among residents. This process promotes the appreciation of rural tourism attractions (Scutariu & Scutariu, 2023).

#### **4.3. Rural tourism on rural community development**

Global research underscores rural tourism's role in fostering rural community development. Gannon (1994) highlighted its significance, while Hwang et al. (2012) demonstrated that sustainable RT positively influences community development in five Jeju Island communities in South Korea. Similarly, Hambira et al. (2021) analysed data from household surveys in Botswana and found that RT is vital for community development. Idziak et al. (2015) used community participation to indicate community development and concluded that sustainable RT boosts community involvement. Amir et al. (2015) explored Malaysia, focusing on the resilience of rural communities through sustainability planning in rural tourism, which includes the roles of local government, community resilience elements, and the background of rural sustainable development.

Amir et al. (2015) found through extensive literature reviews and site observations that sustainable RT development enhances local community resilience, a conclusion later corroborated by Idziak et al. (2015). Mair (2005) examined seven rural communities in Ontario, Canada, and discovered that rural tourism empowers communities to advance rural development. Huang and Stewart (1996) observed that by bringing together



individuals from various cultural backgrounds, RT can influence community diversity and structure, thereby promoting sustainable community development. Wijijayanti et al. (2020) employed descriptive and qualitative methods to investigate the impact of RT on local village communities from an economic development perspective, finding that it elevates the status of rural communities and is closely tied to community support. Lenaoa and Saarinen (2015) conducted qualitative research in Kalakamati, Botswana, to examine the link between RT and community engagement. They discovered that RT is increasingly utilized as a strategy for local development, enhancing the long-term sustainability of community participation. Overall, the consensus among scholars is that RT has a positive impact on community development.

## **5. Research design and methods**

To examine how collaborative governance can be used to aid the development of rural communities by evaluating the underlying and supporting factors that drive or hinder CG in tourism for the development of rural communities, this study uses a qualitative case-study methodology. According to Mitchell (2011), a case study is an in-depth analysis of a social scenario that the researcher feels illustrates the application of a wide theoretical theory. The case study method is utilized in most collaborative governance research to comprehend better the fundamental concepts and phenomena that arise from collaborative governance. This study focuses on the community of Nqileni, which was chosen as a case study for this research due in part to its reliance on tourism-related activities for employment and overall community development. This makes the village an intriguing subject to research in the context of tourism collaborative governance (Gomm et al., 2011).

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants directly involved in tourism governance in Nqileni. This included community leaders, government representatives, tourism entrepreneurs, and members of local organisations. Purposive sampling enables the selection of information-rich cases that provide deep insights into the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). The diversity of perspectives enhanced the study's ability to capture the complexity of governance processes. For data analysis, a thematic approach was adopted, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework. This involved systematic coding, categorisation, and interpretation of patterns across the dataset. Themes were developed both inductively from the data and deductively based on the collaborative governance framework that underpinned this study. This study adopted semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants directly and indirectly involved in tourism activities in Nqileni village, capable of providing comprehensive information on implementing tourism governance (Jennings, 2005). The 15 key informants were an exhaustive list of all key stakeholders that are directly and indirectly involved in the tourism activities in Nqileni village who could provide comprehensive information regarding the implementation of tourism CG. Interviews took between 20 and 30 minutes in the local language (isiXhosa), and were recorded and later translated by a language specialist to

English before being transcribed. Data was analysed using NVivo software to generate thematic analysis and the themes were generated through word clouds, cluster analysis, tree maps, and word trees. The data were triangulated to avoid bias and ensure data validity from multiple sources (Sugiyono, 2014). The data triangulation methods included contrasting observation results with interviews and comparing the perspectives of government officials, tourism industry practitioners, and local community representatives (Ghony & Almanshur, 2016).

In terms of ethical guidelines, ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (REC): Social, Behavioural and Educational Research (SBER) at Stellenbosch University. The research ethics application was reviewed by the Department/Faculty Ethics Screening Committee (DESC/FESC): School of Public Leadership (Environmental Management) in July 2024 and was subsequently classified as a low-risk project. This committee approved the application, and the approval certificate was issued along with the ethical clearance certificate, which included project ID: 27322. The ethics certificate granted permission for data collection, and all participants in the study completed an informed consent form, ensuring that they were fully aware of their decision to participate. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were carefully maintained, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The researchers also assured that anonymity would be upheld when disseminating and publishing the research findings.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Demographic profile

This section describes the results of the demographic profiles of participants, illustrated by *Table 1*. The results showed that a variety of tourism stakeholders, directly involved in the tourism sector, were part of the study. Interestingly, six of these participants are entrepreneurs who render services to the tourists in the study area.

*Table 1. Profile of respondents*

Identifier	Position of the participant in the Village
P1	Mbashe Local Municipal Ward Councillor
P2	Manager of Bulungula Lodge
P3	Village Chief Representative
P4	Marketing Manager (Bulungula Lodge)
P5	Bulungula Incubator Manager
P6	Administrator/Receptionist at Bulungula Lodge
P7	Fishing Entrepreneur
P8	Canoeing Entrepreneur
P9	Hiking Entrepreneur
P10	Village Tour Entrepreneur
P11	Herbalist Tour Entrepreneur
P12	Surfing Entrepreneur

P13	Sunrise Pancakes Entrepreneur
P14	Secret Beach Tour Entrepreneur
P15	Community Member

Source: Own editing.

## 6.2. Themes generated

This section presents the results from the collected data. These results are based on the response to the research question: What underlying and supporting factors drive or hinder collaborative governance in tourism for the development of rural communities? The collected data provided themes of what the tourism stakeholders consider to be the underlying and supporting factors that drive or hinder CG in tourism for the development of rural communities.

### 6.2.1. Broad and equitable collaboration with shared values

Tourism in rural areas is often fragmented, involving multiple actors from the public sector, businesses, and local communities (Soltani & Ghaderi, 2025). No single entity has enough resources to promote sustainable community development through tourism alone. Therefore, broad and equitable collaboration among state and non-state actors is necessary to pool resources like knowledge, expertise, and capital, maximizing tourism's socioeconomic benefits for rural communities. Such collaboration in decision-making and implementation can dynamically resolve local tourism planning and development conflicts, effectively mobilizing local human, cultural, and natural resources (Vernon et al., 2005). However, this collaboration is influenced by socioeconomic and institutional determinants, including endogenous and exogenous factors (Czernek, 2013). Endogenous factors may include conflicting economic interests, demographic characteristics (e.g., age, education), sociocultural features (e.g., leadership, trust), and local economic development levels.

Participants' narrations regarding collaborative governance in tourism in rural areas are reflected below.

*We are working together as a community with the ward councillor representing the village municipality and the village Chief. As a community, we submit our requests to the municipality and the village Chief, who try their best to help us. (Participant 1).*

*We are planning things and working together. So, what could be improved might be to discuss how we can better utilize our tourism resources to develop our community. This approach will help us create more employment opportunities for our people. (Participant 10).*

*We have Bulungula Lodge, which is community-owned, and the committee responsible for managing the lodge in 2023 engaged with the municipality seeking assistance with solar for the operation of the lodge. The committee also requested support with refurbishing the rondavel's houses for the guests, and the municipality came to our rescue and provided the necessary support. (Participant 2).*

However, within this theme, there were dissenting voices that lamented the lack of recognition of youth in the collaboration process. Young people, who are mostly

entrepreneurs, feel that cultural values are depriving them of opportunities to make meaningful contributions to CG that can advance rural community development and one claimed that:

*One of the challenges I have as a young entrepreneur is that the leaders of our village do not want to hear and take suggestions from young people if those suggestions differ from theirs. This is mainly a cultural issue wherein young people must always listen and obey the decisions of their elders. They do not listen to small enterprises in rural areas, and it is very sad. (Participant 8).*

*Meetings regarding the governance and the direction of where and how tourism should operate are dominated by elders of our village. These elders find it difficult to hear young people voices and this is a challenge for me because as young people, we gave some brilliant ideas on how tourism can develop our village but because these ideas are from young people, our elders feel like we are treating them as people without ideas, especially if the ideas are opposing their views, they do not accept them at all. (Participant 10).*

The participants' views on working together with the government stated above, inclusive of working with the municipality and the role both these structures of government play, reflect the opinions of Wisnumurti et al. (2021), who contended that the government is responsible for the provision of supporting infrastructure to the tourism industry. The participants concur with Gede Oka Wisnumurti et al. (2019) in noting that the government has a responsibility to improve the skills of community members and must capacitate community members concerning aiding access funding to provide grants and other forms of financial assistance. Furthermore, the government is responsible for training local community members in areas of entrepreneurship and business-related skills. The above debates and views are summed up by the views of (Spitzeck & Hansen, 2010) who advocated that governance encompasses the broader decision-making process and the implementation of decisions by both governmental and non-governmental actors.

Note should be taken for dissenting voices from young people as they are the future of the village. Meetings of the tourism stakeholders should create a conducive environment where all are provided with a platform to suggest their views on tourism governance issues regardless of their age and such ideas to be implemented if they are beneficial to the long-term project of enhancing community development through tourism.

### **6.2.2. Legitimate and skilled conveners**

Zaman et al. (2022) contend that tourism partnerships and collaborations are more effective when led by a convener perceived as legitimate. Soltani and Ghaderi (2025) identify conveners as government agencies, industrial firms, groups like the local Chamber of Commerce, or tourist organizations such as visitor bureaus characterized by legitimacy, expertise, resources, and authority. However, local authorities often dominate economic and political resources in rural areas due to their advanced skills, experience, capital resources, and authority (Jones & Little, 2000). This dominance can lead to local authorities

controlling development processes, which contradicts the ideal collaborative governance model that aims to distribute power equally among state and non-state actors. Ideally, governments should shift from a steering function to a support function, moving from a hierarchical state bureaucracy to greater use of networks beyond the state, as well as markets and quasi-markets (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). In some areas, local governments may control local development processes, including socioeconomic development in rural communities, due to their relative advantage in authority and resources. Despite the responsibility of local state authorities to shift towards partnership governance, rural governance often remains dominated by state sectors through their direction, funding, and resourcing of partnership activities (Edwards et al., 2001).

In tourism, power dynamics influence the interactions of individuals, organizations, and agencies in formulating and implementing tourism policy (Valeri, 2021). Due to the power and resource imbalances between actors, collaborative arrangements in destinations can become dominated by local elites rather than involving a representative range of stakeholders (Gustafsson & Amer, 2023). Local authorities and their elite business partners dominate tourism collaboration in such cases. The lack of participation in decision-making processes by non-state actors, such as local communities, small entrepreneurs, and resident associations can negatively impact all aspects of tourism development policies and operations (de Araujo & Bramwell, 2002). Bichler (2021) and Rocca & Zielinski (2022) argued that incomplete representation, unequal power relations among stakeholders, or lack of accountability can weaken the effectiveness of policies and initiatives. Effective CG requires broad-based involvement of actors who can fully represent their groups and non-hierarchical, flexible alliances among them. The views of participants regarding legitimate and skilled convenors in their village are reflected as follows:

*The Ward Councillor, who represents the municipality, plays an important role in local tourism development through his lobbying of the municipality council to invest in public infrastructure development, land-use plans, and involvement in tourism marketing of the village. He is trying to get us the help we need to develop our village using tourism in the most challenging circumstances. I consider him a legitimate leader because his vision is to help our community develop and create jobs for our people. (Participant 11).*

*Leaders in collaborative governance play a prominent role in providing leadership and guidance that ensures good working conditions amongst the stakeholders. (Participant 1).*

*I will start with the board members. Our responsibility is mainly when there is a problem here at the lodge; the board members first sit, and if they do not come up with a solution, we extend it to the headmen. (Participant 10).*

*The role of leaders in our community is to assist us when we cannot solve something. When something has happened, we take it to the community leaders, and when that problem needs the involvement of the police, we then take it to the police. (Participant 9).*

*Without these skilled and legitimate leaders, tourism in our village may not benefit the community; it may end up benefiting a few people in the village. (Participant 12).*

*Skilled and legitimate leaders are known to the community, and their role is to ensure*

*that tourism governance is implemented correctly and adequately. (Participant 2).*

The opinions of participants above are supported by Parker (2000), who noted that partnerships and collaboration in the tourism industry perform better under the direction of a convener who is regarded as legitimate. Earlier, Jamal & Getz (1995) advanced that a convener can be a local tourism organization, an industry firm or association, a government institution, or a local leader who possesses power, legitimacy, knowledge, and resources. The investigation findings revealed that the village chief and village headman were in this case. The participants in the investigation believe that their leaders are providing proper direction in managing tourism in the village.

### **6.2.3. Adequate resources**

Apostolopoulos et al. (2020) argue that adequate resources, such as expertise, time, and money, are essential for processing and implementing tourism collaboration. The collaboration process necessitates investments to build and enhance social capital, including leadership and other skills, organizational and physical infrastructure, community confidence and identity, entrepreneurship, networks, and trust (Valderrama & Polanco, 2022). However, as previously mentioned, while local state authorities generally have sufficient resources to support collaboration, local communities may be limited in fully participating in tourism development due to a lack of ownership, capital, skills, knowledge, and resources (Yang et al., 2021). The determinants of collaborative governance, which are broad and equitable collaboration with shared values, a legitimate and skilled convener, and adequate resources, are interconnected, and the overall fairness and effectiveness of such governance depend on the influence of each determinant (Ramukumba, 2025). Resource limitations, encompassing both financial and human aspects, present a significant obstacle to effective collaboration (Siwelani & Nyikana, 2025; Rhodes et al., 2015). Findings from this study revealed that financial challenges are a major factor hindering collaborative efforts within the tourism sector. Similarly, Rantsatsi et al. (2020) highlighted that inadequate resources serve as a critical determinant affecting the success of collaboration in the tourism industry. Participants further emphasized that these constraints hinder community development, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

*We have a serious problem with the main road that comes to this village from the town of Mnganduli. The road is in terrible condition and is mainly suitable for 4 X 4 cars! The road is one of the main problems because, for instance, small cars have difficulties in reaching this place because of the poor condition of the road . . . but as we all know, Mbashe local municipality does not have money to repair the road. (Participant 6).*

*One of the significant challenges we have here in the village is the insufficiency of financial resources; the village must rely on financial support from the municipality and private investors. The financial support from the municipality is not enough to help the tourism sector to drive community development. We want to organize some local tourism events but cannot because of a lack of financial resources. The current overall financial situation of the municipality is a challenge. (Participant 13).*

*Rural areas have been overlooked and are treated poorly because of the current economic situation in South Africa. The government (municipality) has no plans to invest in rural areas. (Participant 9).*

*The village has unfavourable economic conditions, and our village economy is weak. We are also witnessing a decline in municipal public finance support. The government prefers to financially support bigger tourism entrepreneurs in urban areas, which hinders the village's tourism-based socio-economic development. (Participant 12).*

The views advanced above by the participants suggest that while collaborative governance offers a valuable framework, its effectiveness depends on continuous effort to address inequalities and ensure accountability. The South African rural tourism context further underscores the need for governance structures that are responsive to local realities. Structural constraints such as scarce financial resources limit the capacity of rural communities to fully harness tourism opportunities (Litheko & Potgieter, 2019).

## **7. Discussion and results**

The findings from this study highlight three interrelated determinants that underpin collaborative governance in rural tourism: broad and equitable collaboration with shared values, legitimate and skilled conveners, and adequate resources. These determinants align with established scholarship on CG in tourism (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Ramukumba, 2025), but they also reflect the unique sociocultural, institutional, and economic dynamics of rural South Africa.

The study confirms that collaboration is indispensable in rural tourism contexts, where no single actor has sufficient resources to drive sustainable development independently (Soltani & Ghaderi, 2025). Consistent with Vernon et al. (2005), participants described collective decision-making and joint initiatives involving local authorities, traditional leaders, and community members as essential for mobilizing knowledge, skills, and resources. Examples included joint planning efforts and municipal support for community tourism enterprises such as Bulungula Lodge. However, the findings also revealed tensions rooted in endogenous socio-cultural determinants (Czernek, 2013), such as generational divides in decision-making. For instance, young entrepreneurs lamented their exclusion from leadership spaces, citing cultural norms privileging elder authority. Such dynamics suggest that while collaboration may be formally inclusive, in practice it can reproduce social hierarchies and limit the participation of marginalized groups. This tension reflects Spitzack and Hansen's (2010) assertion that governance must extend beyond formal structures to ensure inclusive, participatory decision-making processes. Thus, while broad collaboration exists in principle, achieving equitable collaboration remains constrained by power imbalances and cultural traditions.

The second theme underscored the importance of leadership legitimacy in sustaining collaborative arrangements. Participants identified municipal ward councillors, village chiefs, and board members of community-owned enterprises as legitimate conveners who

provided direction, mediated disputes, and lobbied for resources. This finding reinforces Zaman et al. (2022), who argued that legitimacy enhances the credibility and effectiveness of conveners and aligns with Jamal and Getz's (1995) assertion that conveners must possess both authority and knowledge to lead effectively. Nonetheless, the reliance on local state authorities reflects a continuity of hierarchical governance. Local governments often dominate development processes, given their control over financial resources and political authority (Jones & Little, 2000). As Edwards et al. (2001) caution, such dominance can compromise genuine partnership governance, reinforcing elite influence at the expense of community autonomy. The participant narratives suggest both appreciation of skilled leadership and concerns about potential concentration of power, particularly the risk that tourism benefits may accrue to a few rather than the broader community. This idea echoes concerns raised by Gustafsson & Amer (2023) about elite capture in tourism governance. Hence, while legitimate conveners can enhance collaboration, their legitimacy must be grounded in accountability and broad-based representation to prevent exclusionary practices.

The third theme highlighted the centrality of resources: financial, infrastructural, and human capital in enabling effective collaboration. Echoing Apostolopoulos et al. (2020) and Valderrama & Polanco (2022), participants emphasized the need for investments in infrastructure, entrepreneurship, and skills development. However, persistent financial and infrastructural deficits, such as poor road conditions and declining municipal support, were reported as significant barriers. These findings align with Rantsatsi et al. (2020) and Rhodes et al. (2015), who identified resource limitations as a critical determinant of collaboration failure in tourism. Participants further noted that rural areas are marginalized within broader state development agendas, with government support skewed towards urban tourism enterprises. This perception underscores structural inequalities within tourism governance and reflects broader critiques of uneven development in South Africa (Litheko & Potgieter, 2019). Without adequate resources, even the most legitimate leadership and equitable governance structures risk being undermined by material constraints.

The three determinants, equitable collaboration, legitimate conveners, and adequate resources, are mutually reinforcing. Effective collaboration requires inclusive structures, but without legitimate leaders to convene and mobilize stakeholders, such inclusivity may lack direction. Conversely, even skilled conveners cannot sustain collaboration without sufficient financial and infrastructural support. As Ramukumba (2025) highlights, the fairness and effectiveness of collaborative governance depend on the dynamic interplay among these factors. The findings of this study reinforce this interdependence, suggesting that shortcomings in any one determinant whether exclusion of youth voices, dominance of elites, or resource scarcity, can weaken the overall governance framework.

## **8. Linking the results with the theoretical framework**

The findings of this study resonate strongly with the collaborative governance for rural



tourism framework developed by Chen et al. (2025), which grounded this study. This theoretical framework emphasizes the role of external factors such as political and economic environments in shaping collaborative governance processes. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of municipal and government involvement in providing infrastructure, training, and financial support. These inputs reflect the enabling influence of government policy as an external factor, which, when aligned with community needs, empowers local actors to actively participate in tourism development. However, the narratives also revealed structural challenges such as inadequate financial resources and poor infrastructure, underscoring the limitations of external environments in promoting sustainable rural tourism.

Within the collaborative process, the results demonstrated the significance of leadership, trust, inclusivity, and transparent communication. Community members valued the involvement of ward councillors, village chiefs, and board members as legitimate conveners who guided local tourism initiatives and mediated conflicts. This reflects the framework's emphasis on leadership and shared vision as central to building trust and respect among stakeholders. Yet, challenges such as the exclusion of youth voices from decision-making processes illustrate shortcomings in network inclusivity, where cultural traditions reinforce unequal participation. These findings highlight that for collaboration to be effective, all stakeholders including marginalized groups must be meaningfully included in transparent and respectful dialogue.

Finally, the study outcomes align with the impacts on quality of life suggested by the framework. Participants perceived tourism as a potential driver of material well-being through job creation, infrastructure development, and community-owned enterprises. Emotional satisfaction and self-development were also implicit in their aspirations for improved opportunities and recognition of local entrepreneurs. However, the persistence of financial limitations and elite dominance risks undermining these benefits, as not all community members may share equally in tourism gains. Thus, while collaborative governance holds promise for enhancing quality of life, its success depends on balancing external support, equitable collaboration processes, and resource availability to ensure inclusive and sustainable community development.

## **9. Conclusion**

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of collaborative governance by situating it within the sociocultural and institutional context of rural South Africa. It extends existing frameworks such as those of Chen et al. (2025) and Bramwell & Lane (2011) by highlighting how cultural hierarchies, generational divides, and leadership dynamics shape collaboration in rural tourism development. The findings reveal that barriers to equitable participation are institutional, embedded in traditional social structures, particularly the exclusion of youth voices. This perspective advances collaborative governance theory by integrating sociocultural determinants into analysing governance effectiveness in developing regions.

Empirically, the study deepens understanding of the role of legitimate and skilled conveners in rural governance. It demonstrates that while local leaders, such as ward councillors and chiefs, provide essential direction and coordination, excessive dependence on traditional authority may reinforce elite dominance and limit inclusivity. By showing that legitimacy must coexist with accountability and broad-based participation, this study refines the theoretical construct of legitimacy within collaborative governance. It underscores the need for more democratic leadership models in tourism governance processes.

Practically, the study contributes to policy and practice by identifying resource interdependence as a crucial determinant of successful collaboration. The findings highlight that even well-intentioned collaborative frameworks are unlikely to succeed without adequate financial, infrastructural, and human resources. The study therefore advances theoretical and practical knowledge by proposing a context-sensitive model of CG that is socially inclusive, culturally adaptive, and resource-conscious. This integrated perspective offers a valuable foundation for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers seeking to promote sustainable rural development through tourism.

This study has demonstrated that CG in rural tourism is contingent on three interrelated determinants: equitable collaboration with shared values, legitimate and skilled conveners, and adequate resources. These findings confirm existing scholarship while revealing the unique socio-cultural and institutional challenges facing rural South African communities, such as generational exclusion, hierarchical governance, and persistent resource deficits. The evidence suggests that while collaboration exists in principle, its equitable realisation is constrained by entrenched power imbalances, elite dominance, and uneven resource allocation. Consequently, effective collaborative governance requires not only shared values and legitimate leadership but also structural reforms to ensure fair participation across all social groups, including youth and small-scale entrepreneurs.

Linking these findings to the CG framework of Chen et al. (2025), the study underscores the importance of external political and economic factors, inclusive collaborative processes, and their ultimate impacts on quality of life. Governmental support, leadership legitimacy, trust, and inclusivity emerged as key drivers of successful collaboration, yet their effectiveness was undermined by limited financial resources and infrastructural deficits. The findings highlight the need for governance models that are both responsive to local cultural contexts and adequately resourced to deliver tangible community benefits. Ultimately, strengthening collaborative governance in rural tourism requires balancing state support with grassroots participation, fostering accountability, and addressing structural inequalities to ensure sustainable community development and improved quality of life.

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