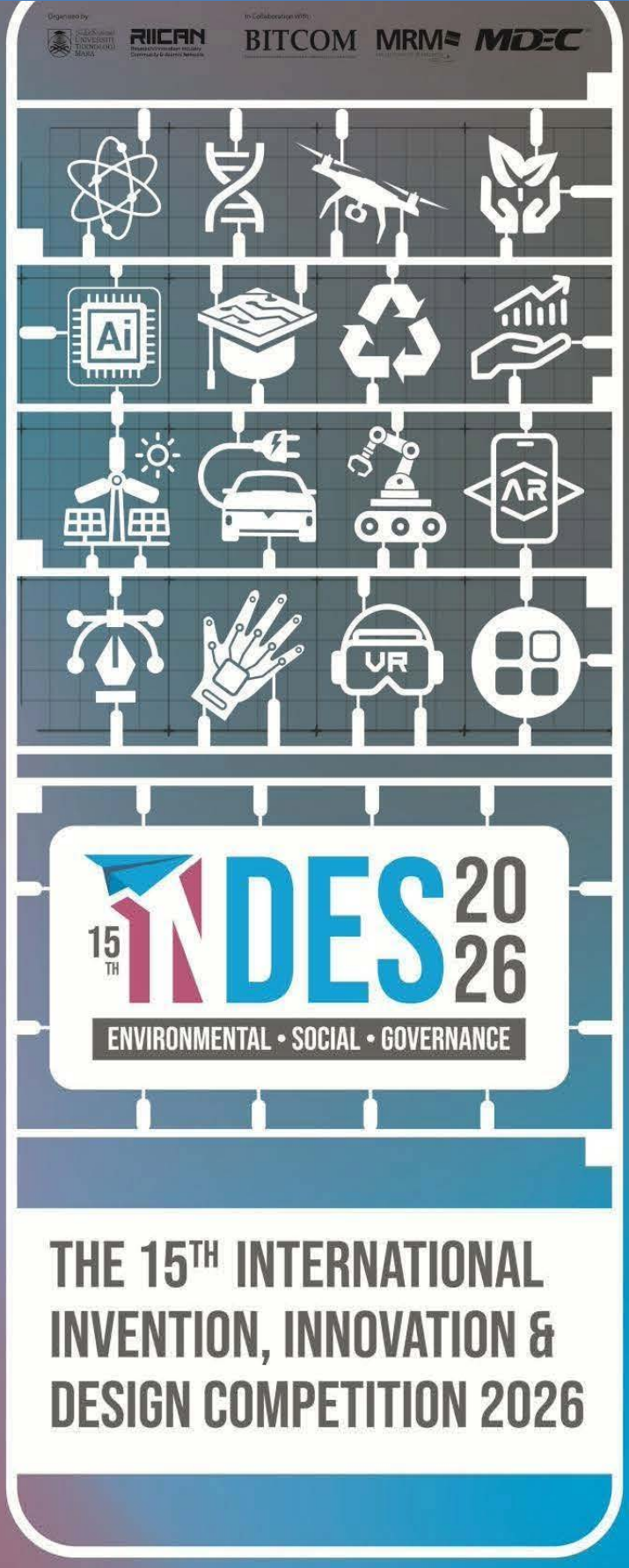


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THE HOLISTIC COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM TRANSFORMER: A THREE-STAGE SCALABLE FRAMEWORK FOR INDIGENOUS HERITAGE RECOVERY

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ABSTRACT

This study develops a Holistic Model of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) to address limitations in existing frameworks that treat sustainability dimensions as static and isolated. While CBT is widely promoted as a pathway for sustainable development, its implementation varies across communities depending on institutional capacity and external validation. Using a comparative qualitative case study of Kobuni Village (Malaysia) and Albuquerque Village (Philippines), data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. The findings reveal two contrasting structural conditions: Kobuni represents a mature, institutionally supported CBT system with inclusive participation, diversified livelihoods, and embedded environmental practices, while Albuquerque initially reflects a localized, product-driven system centered on the artisanal production of Asin Tibuok, characterized by limited governance integration and uneven benefit distribution. A transformation occurred following the inscription of Asin Tibuok on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (December 9, 2025), enhancing legitimacy and participation. Based on this progression, the study proposes a three-stage CBT model comprising localized systems, structured community-based systems, and recognition-driven transformation. The model demonstrates that sustainability emerges from the integration of social, economic, and environmental dimensions, reinforced by external recognition mechanisms. This contributes to a dynamic framework and offers a scalable approach for sustainable tourism development.

Keyword: Community-Based Tourism, Sustainability, Holistic Model, Indigenous Communities, Tourism Innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

Community-based tourism (CBT) has gained increasing attention as a strategy for sustainable development, particularly in rural and indigenous communities where economic opportunities must be balanced with cultural preservation and environmental protection (Hlengwa & Maruta, 2020; Jackson, 2025). Despite its growing adoption, CBT implementation often remains uneven, as many initiatives emphasize primarily economic benefits while neglecting the integration of socio-cultural and environmental dimensions (Giampiccoli et al., 2022; Habiba & Lina, 2023). In addition, existing CBT frameworks are largely static and descriptive, offering limited explanations of how communities evolve over time or how external factors influence their development. In particular, the role of institutional recognition and global validation remains underexplored, despite its potential to reshape local tourism systems, enhance legitimacy, and expand participation (Zielinski et al., 2021).

This study addresses these gaps by examining two contrasting cases: Kobuni Village (Malaysia), which represents a structured and institutionally supported CBT system, and Albuquerque Village (Philippines), which initially operated as a localized and commercially driven system centered on the traditional Asin Tibuok salt-making practice. The subsequent inscription of Asin Tibuok on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (December 2025) provides a unique opportunity to analyse how external recognition influences community transformation. ‘

The study aims to develop a Holistic Model of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), conceptualizing CBT as a dynamic process shaped by internal community structures and external validation mechanisms.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design focusing on Kobuni Village in Sabah, Malaysia, and Albuquerque Village in Bohol, Philippines. These sites were selected due to their active engagement in community-based tourism (CBT) and their contrasting levels of institutional development and recognition.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three key informants, including community leaders and tourism operators directly involved in local tourism initiatives. The interviews explored themes related to economic activities, cultural practices, environmental management, and community well-being.

Table 1 Informants interviewed

Informant	Position	Study site	Gender	Age	Nationality
K1	Head of Villager	Kobuni Village, Malaysia	Male	57	Malaysian
K2	Homestay coordinator		Female	47	Malaysian
K3	Top management of the Asin Tibuok	Bohol Village, Philippines	Female	63	Filipino

3. FINDINGS

The findings indicate that community-based tourism operates under different structural conditions shaped by levels of institutional support and external recognition. Kobuni Village demonstrates a structured and mature CBT system, characterized by strong governance, inclusive participation, diversified income sources, and embedded environmental practices, contributing to collective well-being and long-term sustainability (Hlengwa & Maruta, 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2023). In contrast, Albuquerque Village initially reflects a localized and product-driven system centred on the artisanal production of Asin Tibuok, where economic value and cultural identity are present but supported by limited institutional integration and uneven benefit distribution (Giampiccoli, 2020; Zielinski et al., 2021).

A significant transformation occurred following the inscription of Asin Tibuok on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (December 9, 2025). This recognition enhanced the visibility and legitimacy of the practice, leading to increased community participation and broader involvement in tourism-related activities (UNESCO, 2024). However, this transition also introduced new pressures, including risks of commercialization and environmental strain, indicating that recognition alone does not ensure sustainable outcomes (Rusmana et al., 2025; Van Schaaijk et al., 2020).

Based on this progression, the study develops Developing a Holistic Model of Community-Based Tourism, conceptualized as a guided transformation process comprising three conditions: (1) localized systems characterized by informal and product-based activities, (2) structured holistic systems exemplified by Kobuni as a functional benchmark with integrated environmental, economic, and social dimensions, and (3) recognition-driven expansion, where external validation enhances legitimacy and participation but requires alignment with structured community practices to achieve stability. This model demonstrates that CBT sustainability evolves through the interaction between internal governance structures and external recognition mechanisms, highlighting that long-term resilience depends on both (Jugmohan et al., 2020; Zielinski et al., 2021).

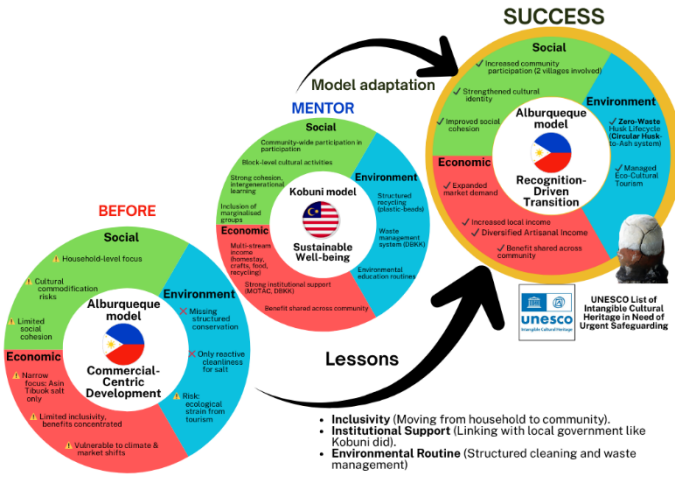


Figure 1 Multi-Dimensional Transition of the Alburquerque Model through Kobuni-Inspired Mentorship.

4. CONCLUSION

This study advances the understanding of community-based tourism by conceptualizing it as a dynamic and guided transformation process rather than a static framework. The comparative analysis of Kobuni and Albuquerque demonstrates that structured governance and inclusive community practices are fundamental to sustainability, while external recognition, such as UNESCO inscription, acts as a catalyst that enhances legitimacy, visibility, and participation but does not independently guarantee stable outcomes. The proposed model, developing a Holistic Model of Community-Based Tourism, highlights that sustainable CBT emerges from the interaction between internal structural capacity and external validation. Kobuni represents a stabilized and integrated configuration that serves as a functional benchmark, while Albuquerque illustrates how recognition can accelerate transformation but also introduces new socio-economic and environmental pressures if not supported by structured community systems. This study contributes a process-based framework that is transferable to other rural and indigenous contexts. It emphasizes that long-term sustainability requires not only economic opportunities and cultural visibility but also institutional alignment, inclusive participation, and adaptive governance. The model provides a practical basis for policymakers and communities to design tourism systems that are resilient, balanced, and capable of connecting local practices to broader platforms.

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