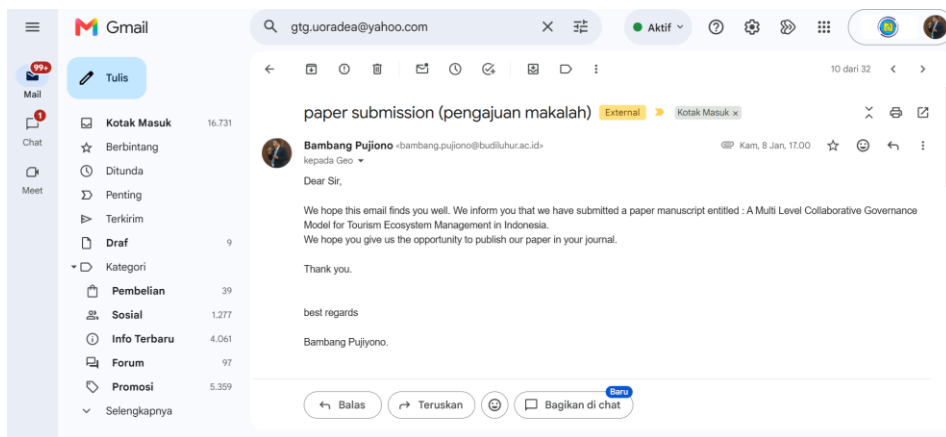


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A Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for Tourism Ecosystem Management: Evidence from a Special Economic Zone in Indonesia

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Abstract

Tourism ecosystem management increasingly faces governance challenges arising from institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-actor complexity, particularly in developing country contexts. This study examines how multi-level collaborative governance operates in managing and restoring the tourism ecosystem of Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone in Indonesia. The research aims to develop a conceptual model that

explains how collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels shapes ecosystem restoration outcomes.

Using a qualitative approach grounded in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study draws on in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation involving government agencies, private sector actors, community groups, and academic institutions. The findings reveal that collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung functions as an interconnected but uneven system. While collaboration exists at each governance level, weak vertical coordination, overlapping authority, and limited institutional learning constrain integration across levels. Community participation and knowledge co-production emerge as critical strengths at the operational level, yet their influence on higher-level decision-making remains limited.

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model that integrates policy direction, organisational coordination, and operational practice through communication, trust, coordination, and learning. The model contributes to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that governance effectiveness depends on cross-level interaction rather than isolated partnerships. Practically, the findings offer insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor settings.

Keywords : collaborative governance; multi-level governance; tourism ecosystem management; Soft Systems Methodology; sustainable tourism; Indonesia

1. Introduction

Tourism governance has become an increasingly complex policy arena, particularly in regions where economic development objectives intersect with ecological vulnerability and institutional fragmentation. While tourism is widely promoted as a catalyst for regional growth, employment creation, and community empowerment, its expansion often generates unintended environmental pressures and governance challenges. In many developing countries, tourism destinations are characterised by overlapping authorities, fragmented regulatory frameworks, and diverse stakeholder interests that complicate efforts to achieve sustainability (Young, 2009). As a result, the effectiveness of tourism development is no longer determined solely by market performance or infrastructure provision, but by the quality of governance arrangements that shape coordination, accountability, and collective action.

In response to these challenges, collaborative governance has gained prominence as a governance approach capable of addressing complex, cross-sectoral problems. Collaborative governance refers to institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state actors directly in collective decision-making and implementation processes to achieve shared public objectives (Ansell & Gash, 2007). Subsequent studies have expanded this perspective by emphasising the

importance of relational dynamics, trust-building, and adaptive learning in sustaining collaboration over time (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2011; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Within the tourism sector, collaborative governance has been associated with improved stakeholder coordination, enhanced legitimacy, and more inclusive management practices. However, much of the existing literature tends to focus on collaboration at a single level of governance—often organisational or project-based partnerships—without sufficiently accounting for the vertical interactions between policy, institutional, and operational domains.

This limitation is particularly evident in tourism destinations that operate within multi-layered administrative systems, such as special economic zones or decentralised governance contexts. In such settings, governance outcomes are shaped not only by horizontal collaboration among stakeholders, but also by the alignment—or misalignment—across different levels of authority. Studies on tourism governance in Indonesia, for example, have highlighted the persistence of sectoral silos, overlapping mandates, and weak coordination between national, provincial, and local governments, which often undermine sustainability initiatives (Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020; Pujiyono et al., 2019). These conditions suggest that collaborative governance cannot be understood as a standalone mechanism operating at a single level, but rather as a multi-level process embedded within broader institutional and political systems.

Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Banten Province, Indonesia, provides a compelling empirical context for examining these dynamics. As a designated growth pole for tourism investment, Tanjung Lesung is expected to accelerate regional economic development while maintaining the integrity of its coastal and marine ecosystems. Yet, the area has experienced significant ecological pressures resulting from rapid development, environmental exploitation, and inconsistent restoration efforts. At the same time, governance arrangements in Tanjung Lesung involve a wide array of actors, including national and regional government agencies, private investors, SEZ management authorities, local communities, and academic institutions. This constellation of actors creates both opportunities for collaboration and risks of fragmentation, making Tanjung Lesung an analytical case for studying multi-level collaborative governance in tourism ecosystem management.

From a theoretical perspective, addressing such complexity requires an approach that captures the interaction between institutional structures, actor relationships, and learning processes across governance levels. Multi-level governance theory highlights the importance of vertical

coordination and policy coherence in systems where authority is dispersed across multiple tiers (Allmendinger, 2011). When combined with collaborative governance, this perspective underscores the need to understand how collaboration is initiated, sustained, and adapted across policy, organisational, and operational domains. However, empirical studies that explicitly model these interactions remain limited, particularly in the context of ecosystem-based tourism governance.

This study seeks to address this gap by proposing a multi-level collaborative governance model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration in Tanjung Lesung. Using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as an analytical and model-building framework, the research examines how collaboration unfolds across three interconnected governance levels—policy, organisational, and operational—and identifies the mechanisms that enable or constrain their integration. The study pursues three objectives: (1) to analyse patterns of collaboration among key stakeholders involved in tourism ecosystem management; (2) to examine the dynamics of collaborative governance across multiple levels of authority; and (3) to develop a conceptual model that integrates ecological restoration with tourism development objectives. By doing so, this research contributes to the literature on collaborative governance by shifting the focus from descriptive accounts of collaboration toward a systemic understanding of how multi-level interactions shape governance outcomes in complex tourism destinations.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex public problems that cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical control or market mechanisms alone. Ansell and Gash (2007) define collaborative governance as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented decision-making process that is formal, deliberative, and collective. This perspective highlights key enabling conditions, such as trust, shared understanding, and facilitative leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al. (2011) further develop this framework by introducing the concept of collaborative governance regimes, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action.

Recent tourism governance studies have emphasised that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance structures and power relations rather than technical management failures

(Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Moreover, collaborative arrangements often struggle to deliver transformative outcomes when they are not supported by effective governance networks and cross-level coordination (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

While these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding collaboration, they often treat governance contexts as relatively flat institutional spaces. In practice, especially in decentralised or multi-tiered systems, collaboration unfolds across multiple levels of authority with distinct roles, resources, and power relations. Multi-level governance theory addresses this complexity by focusing on the dispersion of authority across national, regional, and local levels, as well as the interactions between them (Allmendinger, 2011). In tourism governance, this dispersion is particularly pronounced, as policy formulation, investment regulation, environmental management, and community engagement are frequently handled by different institutions operating at different scales.

Integrating collaborative governance with a multi-level governance perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how coordination and collaboration operate simultaneously in vertical and horizontal dimensions. Morse and Stephens (2012) describe this integration as a form of governance “glue,” where trust, interdependence, and shared benefits bind actors together across institutional boundaries. In this view, collaboration is not merely a managerial tool, but a relational process embedded within broader governance systems. The effectiveness of collaborative governance therefore depends not only on stakeholder engagement at a single level, but on the coherence and feedback mechanisms that link policy direction, organisational implementation, and operational practice.

In the context of tourism ecosystem management, this multi-level perspective is essential. Ecosystems are inherently complex and adaptive, requiring governance arrangements that can respond to uncertainty, ecological feedback, and social change. Ostrom (2010) argues that sustainable management of common-pool resources depends on polycentric governance systems, where multiple centres of decision-making operate autonomously yet are coordinated through shared rules and norms. Applied to tourism, this implies that effective ecosystem restoration requires alignment between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up community initiatives, mediated through organisational networks and learning processes.

To operationalise this complexity, this study adopts Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a complementary analytical framework. Developed by Checkland (1999) and further elaborated by

Checkland and Poulter (2006), SSM is designed to address “messy” problem situations characterised by multiple actors, divergent worldviews (*Weltanschauung*), and ambiguous objectives. Rather than seeking optimal solutions, SSM facilitates learning by modelling human activity systems and comparing conceptual models with real-world practices. Within this study, SSM serves not merely as a data collection method, but as a model-building approach that enables the integration of collaborative governance and multi-level governance perspectives.

By combining collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and SSM, this research conceptualises tourism ecosystem management as a multi-level collaborative system. At the policy level, collaboration shapes strategic direction, legitimacy, and regulatory coherence. At the organisational level, it structures coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and resource mobilisation. At the operational level, collaboration is enacted through community participation, local knowledge, and day-to-day management practices. These levels are interconnected through continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation. This conceptual framework provides the analytical foundation for examining the governance dynamics of Tanjung Lesung and for developing a transferable model of multi-level collaborative governance applicable to other tourism destinations facing similar ecological and institutional challenges.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design with an interpretive paradigm to examine the complexity of collaborative governance in tourism ecosystem management. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to understand institutional interactions, stakeholder perceptions, and governance dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement (Neuman, 2006). Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study aims to develop a conceptual governance model grounded in empirical insights.

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is employed as the primary analytical and model-building framework. SSM is particularly suitable for analysing complex and ill-structured problem situations involving multiple actors, divergent interests, and competing worldviews (Checkland, 1999; Checkland & Poulter, 2006). In this research, SSM is used not merely as a methodological tool, but as a sense-making framework to explore how collaborative governance operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels.

3.2. Study Area and Case Selection

The research was conducted in Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone (SEZ) located in Banten Province, Indonesia. Tanjung Lesung was selected as an analytical case because it represents a governance-intensive tourism destination where economic development objectives intersect with ecosystem vulnerability and multi-actor institutional arrangements. The area involves multiple governance layers, including national and regional government agencies, a special economic zone management authority, private investors, local communities, and academic institutions, making it a relevant context for examining multi-level collaborative governance.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected using multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and triangulation. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in tourism ecosystem management. Informants included representatives from national and regional government agencies, the Tanjung Lesung SEZ management authority, private tourism operators, community leaders, and academic experts engaged in environmental restoration initiatives. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their roles, experience, and involvement in collaborative governance processes.

Second, document analysis was undertaken to examine policy frameworks, development plans, regulatory instruments, and institutional agreements related to tourism development and ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These documents provided contextual insight into policy objectives, governance structures, and formal collaboration mechanisms.

Third, participatory observation was conducted during coordination meetings, community activities, and ecosystem restoration programmes to capture real-time interactions among stakeholders and to understand how collaboration is enacted in practice.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the seven-stage process of Soft Systems Methodology: (1) understanding the problematic situation, (2) expressing the situation through rich pictures, (3) formulating root definitions using the CATWOE framework, (4) developing conceptual models of relevant human activity systems, (5) comparing conceptual models with real-world practices, (6) identifying desirable and feasible changes, and (7) proposing actions for governance improvement (Checkland & Poulter, 2006).

Interview transcripts, documents, and observational notes were coded thematically using an iterative process informed by collaborative governance and multi-level governance concepts. The comparison between conceptual models and empirical conditions enabled the identification of governance gaps, enabling factors, and feedback mechanisms across policy, organisational, and operational levels. Through this process, a multi-level collaborative governance model was constructed to synthesise empirical findings and theoretical insights.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied across data sources, methods, and informants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Member checking was conducted by sharing key interpretations with selected informants to ensure accuracy and reduce misinterpretation. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process to account for potential researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by removing identifiable information from transcripts and research outputs. The study adhered to ethical research standards applicable to social science research in higher education institutions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Governance Fragmentation as a Systemic Problem

The empirical findings indicate that tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung is characterised by systemic fragmentation across governance levels. Rather than functioning as an integrated system, collaboration among actors tends to occur in silos, shaped by sectoral mandates and administrative boundaries. At the policy level, national, provincial, and regency authorities operate under overlapping regulatory frameworks that lack clear mechanisms for vertical coordination. While strategic documents consistently emphasise sustainable tourism and ecosystem preservation, these commitments are often diluted during implementation due to institutional discontinuity and shifting political priorities. This condition reflects what Young (2009) describes as a governance gap, where policy aspirations are not matched by institutional capacity and coherence.

Fragmentation is further reinforced by decentralisation dynamics, which distribute authority without necessarily strengthening coordination. In Tanjung Lesung, provincial government agencies focus on macro-level development and investment facilitation, while local governments bear responsibility for environmental management and community engagement. The absence of a clearly mandated coordinating authority results in blurred accountability, particularly in ecosystem restoration initiatives that require sustained cross-sectoral collaboration. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies of tourism governance in Indonesia, where overlapping mandates and weak intergovernmental alignment undermine sustainability outcomes (Pujiyono et al., 2019; Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020).

From a systems perspective, this fragmentation represents a misalignment between governance structures and the ecological complexity of tourism ecosystems. Ecosystem restoration requires long-term commitment, adaptive management, and continuous feedback across governance levels. However, the findings reveal that policy instruments are often designed as static interventions, insufficiently responsive to local ecological dynamics and social realities. This condition reinforces the argument that conventional, hierarchical governance approaches are ill-suited for managing complex socio-ecological systems such as tourism destinations.

4.2. Multi-Level Collaborative Governance in Practice

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies emerging forms of collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels that collectively shape tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These interactions illustrate how collaborative governance operates as a multi-level process rather than a single institutional arrangement.

4.2.1. Policy Level: Direction, Legitimacy, and Strategic Alignment

At the policy level, collaboration is institutionalised through formal regulatory instruments, strategic development plans, and inter-agency coordination forums. These mechanisms provide legitimacy and strategic direction for tourism development and ecosystem restoration. The establishment of the Tanjung Lesung SEZ has created a policy environment that explicitly links economic growth with environmental sustainability. However, the findings indicate that policy-level collaboration remains largely procedural, focusing on coordination meetings and regulatory compliance rather than substantive integration of ecological objectives into development decisions.

Political turnover and administrative restructuring further weaken policy continuity, limiting the effectiveness of collaborative arrangements. While coordination forums offer spaces for dialogue, they often function as consultative platforms rather than arenas for joint decision-making. This finding aligns with Ansell and Gash's (2007) observation that collaboration without shared ownership and commitment tends to produce symbolic rather than transformative outcomes. Nevertheless, the existence of these policy-level mechanisms provides a critical foundation upon which deeper collaboration can be built, particularly when supported by stable leadership and clear accountability structures.

4.2.2. Organisational Level: Coordination, Partnership, and Knowledge Integration

At the organisational level, collaboration takes the form of partnerships among government agencies, the SEZ management authority, private investors, and academic institutions. These partnerships play a pivotal role in translating policy intentions into programmes and projects. The SEZ management authority acts as an intermediary organisation, facilitating coordination between public and private actors while mediating competing interests.

The findings reveal that organisational collaboration is most effective when it involves knowledge co-production and shared problem-solving. Joint initiatives between universities and tourism operators, for example, have contributed to ecosystem monitoring, environmental impact assessments, and community-based restoration programmes. Such collaborations reflect Emerson and Nabatchi's (2015) concept of collaborative capacity, where institutional arrangements enable actors to pool resources, expertise, and legitimacy.

However, organisational collaboration remains uneven and often project-based. Divergent organisational goals—particularly between regulatory agencies and profit-oriented private actors—limit the depth of collaboration. Environmental restoration initiatives are sometimes perceived as secondary to investment objectives, resulting in selective implementation. This tension underscores the importance of embedding collaborative norms and performance indicators within organisational structures, rather than relying on ad hoc agreements or personal networks.

4.2.3. Operational Level: Community Participation and Adaptive Practice

At the operational level, collaborative governance is enacted most visibly through community participation. Local communities in Tanjung Lesung are directly involved in ecosystem restoration

activities, waste management initiatives, and eco-tourism operations. Their engagement reflects both practical necessity and the mobilisation of local ecological knowledge accumulated through long-term interaction with the coastal environment.

The findings highlight that community-based collaboration enhances the adaptability and sustainability of restoration efforts. Local actors demonstrate a strong sense of ownership, particularly when initiatives align with livelihood opportunities such as community-based tourism and environmental stewardship. This supports Ostrom's (2010) argument that effective management of common-pool resources depends on the active involvement of local users who possess contextual knowledge and a stake in long-term outcomes.

Nevertheless, power asymmetries persist. Community participation is often limited to implementation stages, with limited influence over agenda-setting and investment decisions. This constraint reduces the transformative potential of collaboration and risks reinforcing dependency rather than empowerment. Addressing this imbalance requires governance arrangements that institutionalise community representation and integrate local perspectives into higher-level decision-making processes.

4.3. A Proposed Model of Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Synthesising the findings across governance levels, this study proposes a Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration (Figure 1).

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model to explain how tourism ecosystem management is shaped through interactions across governance levels. The model conceptualises governance as a vertically interconnected system consisting of three analytical levels—policy, organisational, and operational—linked through core collaborative mechanisms that enable coordination, learning, and adaptive management.

At the policy level, national and regional governments provide strategic direction through regulations, development visions, and policy frameworks for tourism and ecosystem management. This level defines macro-level objectives and institutional mandates that guide tourism development within special economic zones. However, policy effectiveness depends on how these strategic directions are translated and operationalised at lower levels.

The organisational level functions as a bridging arena between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation. Key actors at this level include the special economic zone authority, sectoral agencies, and coordinating institutions responsible for aligning policy objectives with organisational capacities and resources. This level plays a critical role in facilitating cross-sector coordination, managing inter-institutional relationships, and translating policy goals into operational programmes.

At the operational level, collaboration occurs through direct engagement among local communities, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions. This level is responsible for implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives, sustainable tourism practices, and community-based programmes. Operational actors also generate context-specific knowledge and practical insights that are essential for adaptive governance but are often weakly integrated into higher-level decision-making.

Across all governance levels, the model identifies four core collaborative mechanisms—communication, trust, coordination, and learning—that function as cross-cutting enablers of effective governance. Communication facilitates information exchange and mutual understanding, trust strengthens commitment and legitimacy, coordination aligns roles and resources, and learning enables feedback loops between practice and policy. The interaction of these mechanisms allows governance processes to evolve adaptively in response to ecological and institutional complexity.

The model suggests that effective tourism ecosystem management emerges not from isolated collaborative arrangements but from sustained interaction and feedback across governance levels. By emphasising vertical integration and institutional learning, the proposed model contributes to collaborative governance theory and offers practical insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor contexts..

4.4. Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings contribute to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that collaboration must be analysed as a multi-level phenomenon. While existing frameworks highlight relational dynamics within collaborative arenas, this study shows that governance outcomes are equally shaped by vertical linkages between policy, organisational, and operational domains. Collaboration becomes meaningful only when these linkages are mutually reinforcing rather than fragmented.

The integration of Soft Systems Methodology adds analytical value by enabling a systemic interpretation of governance complexity. SSM allows researchers and practitioners to move beyond linear cause–effect explanations and to engage with governance as a learning system characterised by ambiguity and contestation. This approach complements collaborative governance theory by foregrounding process design, reflexivity, and adaptation.

This finding reinforces the argument that collaborative governance effectiveness depends on the quality of governance networks and their capacity to balance efficiency, legitimacy, and learning across institutional levels (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). In ecosystem-based contexts, such as tourism destinations, governance arrangements must also remain adaptive to ecological uncertainty and social change, as highlighted in environmental governance literature (Armitage et al., 2012).

Practically, the proposed model offers guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen tourism ecosystem governance. Rather than focusing solely on institutional restructuring, interventions should prioritise mechanisms that enhance communication, trust, and learning across governance levels. Establishing cross-level forums, shared monitoring systems, and inclusive decision-making processes can transform fragmented collaborations into adaptive governance systems capable of sustaining both ecological restoration and tourism development.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the effectiveness of tourism ecosystem management and restoration in Tanjung Lesung is determined not by the strength of individual institutions, but by the quality of interaction and integration among actors operating across different levels of governance. The findings reveal that collaborative governance in this context functions as a complex, evolving system that spans policy, organisational, and operational dimensions. Each level contributes distinct yet interdependent roles: policy actors provide strategic direction and legitimacy,

organisational networks translate policy into coordinated programmes, and local communities enact governance through daily practices grounded in ecological knowledge. However, persistent fragmentation, overlapping authority, and uneven collaborative capacity continue to constrain coherence across these levels.

By applying Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), this research offers a systemic interpretation of collaborative governance that captures the plurality of stakeholder worldviews and the dynamic nature of governance processes. Rather than treating collaboration as a static institutional arrangement, the study conceptualises it as a learning-oriented social system shaped by dialogue, negotiation, and adaptation. The proposed multi-level collaborative governance model integrates three governance subsystems—policy, organisational, and operational—through continuous feedback loops driven by communication, coordination, trust, and learning. These elements function as governance glue that enables alignment across hierarchical and sectoral boundaries, reinforcing the argument that sustainable tourism governance requires relational capacity as much as formal structure (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the collaborative governance literature by extending its analytical focus beyond single-level collaboration toward a multi-level perspective. It shows that collaborative effectiveness emerges not from isolated partnerships, but from the interaction between vertical coordination and horizontal cooperation. The integration of SSM enriches this perspective by providing a methodological lens capable of modelling complexity without oversimplification, thereby complementing existing governance frameworks that often struggle to address ambiguity and institutional diversity. In doing so, the study bridges collaborative governance theory with adaptive and polycentric governance insights (Ostrom, 2010; Young, 2009).

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer important implications for policymakers and practitioners involved in tourism ecosystem management. Strengthening collaborative governance requires more than regulatory harmonisation or organisational restructuring. It demands deliberate investment in processes that cultivate trust, shared understanding, and collective learning across governance levels. Establishing cross-level coordination forums, integrating monitoring and evaluation systems, and institutionalising community participation in decision-making can enhance the durability and legitimacy of restoration initiatives. In tourism-based special economic zones such as Tanjung Lesung, where economic imperatives often dominate, embedding

ecological values within collaborative governance arrangements is essential for long-term sustainability.

Ultimately, the experience of Tanjung Lesung illustrates that sustainable tourism governance is not an endpoint but a continuous process of alignment among actors who share responsibility for a common ecosystem. Collaborative governance, when understood as an adaptive and multi-level system, enables tourism development to function not merely as an engine of growth, but as a catalyst for ecological recovery and community empowerment. By foregrounding interaction, learning, and shared stewardship, the proposed model offers a transferable framework for other tourism destinations confronting similar ecological and institutional challenges in developing country contexts.

Declarations

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions

Author 1 conceptualised the study; Author 2 conducted field data; Author 3 analysed data and wrote the draft.

Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

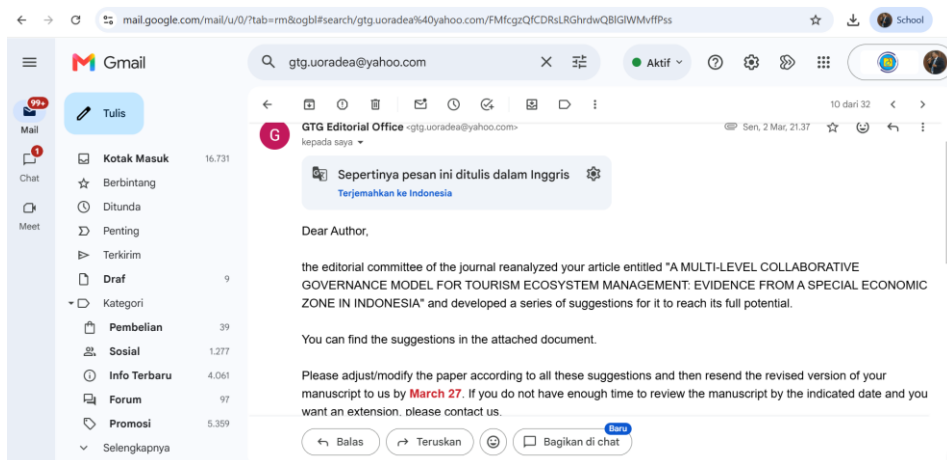
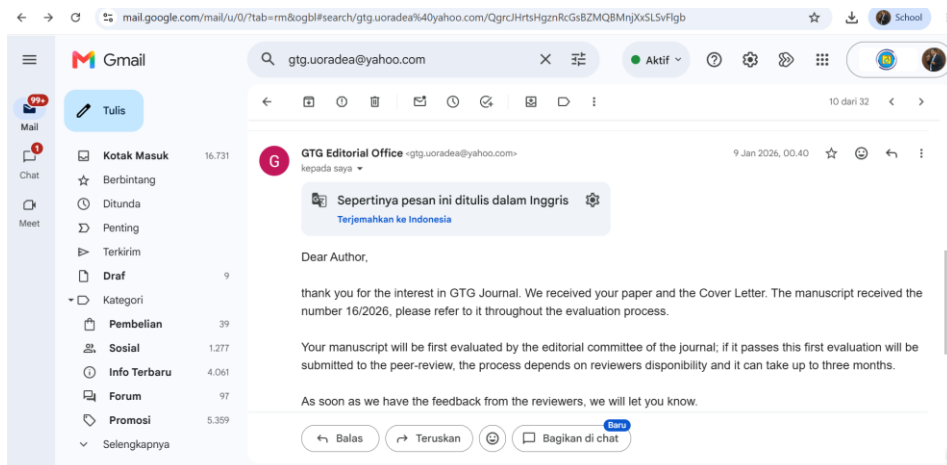
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Abstract

Tourism ecosystem management in developing countries faces institutional fragmentation and multi-level governance complexity. This study examines how collaborative governance operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels in managing the tourism ecosystem of Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach based on Soft Systems Methodology, data were collected through interviews, document analysis, and observation. The findings reveal uneven cross-level integration, weak vertical coordination, and overlapping authority. A multi-level collaborative governance model is proposed, integrating communication, trust, coordination, and learning to strengthen ecosystem-based tourism governance.

Keywords: collaborative governance; multi-level governance; tourism ecosystem management; Soft Systems Methodology; ecosystem restoration; sustainable tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism governance increasingly operates within complex socio-ecological systems characterised by institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-level authority dispersion. Such conditions resemble what public policy scholars define as wicked problems—issues that resist linear solutions due to interdependence, uncertainty, and contested values (Head & Alford, 2015). In tourism destinations, especially in developing countries, governance arrangements are frequently shaped by overlapping mandates, decentralised authority, and sectoral silos that weaken policy coherence and sustainability outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Collaborative governance (CG) has emerged as a prominent response to these governance deficits. Defined as institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state actors in consensus-oriented decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008), CG is widely promoted as a mechanism for managing cross-sectoral complexity. Subsequent scholarship conceptualises collaborative governance regimes as dynamic systems shaped by principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). More recent work emphasises the political and power-laden dimensions of collaboration, arguing that governance effectiveness depends on institutional design, power distribution, and meta-governance capacity (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2020; Torfing et al., 2020).

Despite its normative appeal, collaborative governance frequently unfolds within fragmented multi-level governance systems where authority is dispersed across national, regional, and local tiers (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Empirical studies demonstrate that such dispersion may produce coordination deficits, regulatory overlap, and accountability ambiguity, thereby constraining collaborative effectiveness (Peters, 2015; Trein, Meyer, & Maggetti, 2019). In tourism contexts, limited vertical integration between policy formulation and local implementation remains a persistent challenge (Dredge, 2016; Hall, 2011).

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This study argues that collaborative governance cannot be adequately understood without accounting for its embeddedness in multi-level policy structures. Using Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Indonesia as an empirical case, this research examines how collaboration operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels in tourism ecosystem management. By integrating collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study develops a multi-level collaborative governance model that explains how cross-level interactions shape ecosystem restoration outcomes.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex public problems that cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical control or market mechanisms alone. Ansell and Gash (2007) define collaborative governance as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented decision-making process that is formal, deliberative, and collective. This perspective highlights key enabling conditions, such as trust, shared understanding, and facilitative leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al. (2011) further develop this framework by introducing the concept of collaborative governance regimes, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action.

Recent tourism governance studies have emphasised that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance structures and power relations rather than technical management failures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Moreover, collaborative arrangements often struggle to deliver transformative outcomes when they are not supported by effective governance networks and cross-level coordination (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

While these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding collaboration, they often treat governance contexts as relatively flat institutional spaces. In practice, especially in decentralised or multi-tiered systems, collaboration unfolds across multiple levels of authority with distinct roles, resources, and power relations. Multi-level governance theory addresses this complexity by focusing on the dispersion of authority across national, regional, and local levels, as well as the interactions between them (Allmendinger, 2011). In tourism governance, this dispersion is particularly pronounced, as policy formulation, investment regulation, environmental management, and community engagement are frequently handled by different institutions operating at different scales.

Integrating collaborative governance with a multi-level governance perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how coordination and collaboration operate simultaneously in vertical and horizontal dimensions. Morse and Stephens (2012) describe this integration as a form of governance “glue,” where trust, interdependence, and shared benefits bind actors together across institutional boundaries. In this view, collaboration is not merely a managerial tool, but a relational process embedded within broader governance systems. The effectiveness of collaborative governance therefore depends not only on stakeholder engagement at a single level, but on the coherence and feedback mechanisms that link policy direction, organisational implementation, and operational practice.

In the context of tourism ecosystem management, this multi-level perspective is essential. Ecosystems are inherently complex and adaptive, requiring governance arrangements that can respond to uncertainty, ecological feedback, and social change. Ostrom (2010) argues that sustainable management of common-pool resources depends on polycentric governance systems, where multiple centres of decision-making operate autonomously, yet are coordinated through shared rules and norms. Applied to tourism, this implies that effective ecosystem restoration

requires alignment between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up community initiatives, mediated through organisational networks and learning processes.

To operationalise this complexity, this study adopts Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a complementary analytical framework. Developed by Checkland (1999) and further elaborated by Checkland and Poulter (2006), SSM is designed to address “messy” problem situations characterised by multiple actors, divergent worldviews (Weltanschauung), and ambiguous objectives. Rather than seeking optimal solutions, SSM facilitates learning by modelling human activity systems and comparing conceptual models with real-world practices. Within this study, SSM serves not merely as a data collection method, but as a model-building approach that enables the integration of collaborative governance and multi-level governance perspectives.

By combining collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and SSM, this research conceptualises tourism ecosystem management as a multi-level collaborative system. At the policy level, collaboration shapes strategic direction, legitimacy, and regulatory coherence. At the organisational level, it structures coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and resource mobilisation. At the operational level, collaboration is enacted through community participation, local knowledge, and day-to-day management practices. These levels are interconnected through continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation. This conceptual framework provides the analytical foundation for examining the governance dynamics of Tanjung Lesung and for developing a transferable model of multi-level collaborative governance applicable to other tourism destinations facing similar ecological and institutional challenges.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design grounded in an interpretive paradigm. The objective is not hypothesis testing but model development based on empirical insight. Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is employed as an analytical framework suitable for complex, ill-structured governance problems involving multiple actors and divergent worldviews (Checkland & Poulter, 2006).

The research focuses on Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone in Banten Province, Indonesia. The site represents a governance-intensive tourism destination where economic growth objectives intersect with ecological vulnerability and multi-actor institutional arrangements.

Data were collected through: a). Semi-structured interviews with government officials, SEZ authorities, private operators, community leaders, and academics; b). Document analysis of policy instruments, development plans, and institutional agreements; c). Participatory observation of coordination meetings and restoration initiatives.

Purposive sampling was applied to select informants directly involved in collaborative processes. The informants were taken from government, private, and communities with relation to Tanjung Lesung.

Data analysis followed the seven-stage SSM process, including problem structuring, CATWOE formulation, conceptual modelling, and real-world comparison. Thematic coding was guided by collaborative governance constructs (trust, coordination, shared motivation) and multi-level governance dimensions (vertical and horizontal integration). Triangulation and member checking enhanced credibility (Miles et al., 2014).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Governance Fragmentation as a Systemic Problem

The empirical findings indicate that tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung is characterised by systemic fragmentation across governance levels. Rather than functioning as an

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integrated system, collaboration among actors tends to occur in silos, shaped by sectoral mandates and administrative boundaries. At the policy level, national, provincial, and regency authorities operate under overlapping regulatory frameworks that lack clear mechanisms for vertical coordination. While strategic documents consistently emphasise sustainable tourism and ecosystem preservation, these commitments are often diluted during implementation due to institutional discontinuity and shifting political priorities. This condition reflects what Young (2009) describes as a governance gap, where policy aspirations are not matched by institutional capacity and coherence.

Fragmentation is further reinforced by decentralisation dynamics, which distribute authority without necessarily strengthening coordination. In Tanjung Lesung, provincial government agencies focus on macro-level development and investment facilitation, while local governments bear responsibility for environmental management and community engagement. The absence of a clearly mandated coordinating authority results in blurred accountability, particularly in ecosystem restoration initiatives that require sustained cross-sectoral collaboration. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies of tourism governance in Indonesia, where overlapping mandates and weak intergovernmental alignment undermine sustainability outcomes (Pujiyono et al., 2019; Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020).

From a systems perspective, this fragmentation represents a misalignment between governance structures and the ecological complexity of tourism ecosystems. Ecosystem restoration requires long-term commitment, adaptive management, and continuous feedback across governance levels. However, the findings reveal that policy instruments are often designed as static interventions, insufficiently responsive to local ecological dynamics and social realities. This condition reinforces the argument that conventional, hierarchical governance approaches are ill-suited for managing complex socio-ecological systems such as tourism destinations.

4.2. Multi-Level Collaborative Governance in Practice

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies emerging forms of collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels that collectively shape tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These interactions illustrate how collaborative governance operates as a multi-level process rather than a single institutional arrangement.

4.2.1. Policy Level: Direction, Legitimacy, and Strategic Alignment

At the policy level, collaboration is institutionalised through formal regulatory instruments, strategic development plans, and inter-agency coordination forums. These mechanisms provide legitimacy and strategic direction for tourism development and ecosystem restoration. The establishment of the Tanjung Lesung SEZ has created a policy environment that explicitly links economic growth with environmental sustainability. However, the findings indicate that policy-level collaboration remains largely procedural, focusing on coordination meetings and regulatory compliance rather than substantive integration of ecological objectives into development decisions.

Political turnover and administrative restructuring further weaken policy continuity, limiting the effectiveness of collaborative arrangements. While coordination forums offer spaces for dialogue, they often function as consultative platforms rather than arenas for joint decision-making. This finding aligns with Ansell and Gash's (2007) observation that collaboration without shared ownership and commitment tends to produce symbolic rather than transformative outcomes. Nevertheless, the existence of these policy-level mechanisms provides a critical foundation upon which deeper collaboration can be built, particularly when supported by stable leadership and clear accountability structures.

4.2.2. Organisational Level: Coordination, Partnership, and Knowledge Integration

At the organisational level, collaboration takes the form of partnerships among government agencies, the SEZ management authority, private investors, and academic institutions. These partnerships play a pivotal role in translating policy intentions into programmes and projects. The SEZ management authority acts as an intermediary organisation, facilitating coordination between public and private actors while mediating competing interests.

The findings reveal that organisational collaboration is most effective when it involves knowledge co-production and shared problem-solving. Joint initiatives between universities and tourism operators, for example, have contributed to ecosystem monitoring, environmental impact assessments, and community-based restoration programmes. Such collaborations reflect Emerson and Nabatchi's (2015) concept of collaborative capacity, where institutional arrangements enable actors to pool resources, expertise, and legitimacy.

However, organisational collaboration remains uneven and often project-based. Divergent organisational goals—particularly between regulatory agencies and profit-oriented private actors—limit the depth of collaboration. Environmental restoration initiatives are sometimes perceived as secondary to investment objectives, resulting in selective implementation. This tension underscores the importance of embedding collaborative norms and performance indicators within organisational structures, rather than relying on ad hoc agreements or personal networks.

4.2.3. Operational Level: Community Participation and Adaptive Practice

At the operational level, collaborative governance is enacted most visibly through community participation. Local communities in Tanjung Lesung are directly involved in ecosystem restoration activities, waste management initiatives, and eco-tourism operations. Their engagement reflects both practical necessity and the mobilisation of local ecological knowledge accumulated through long-term interaction with the coastal environment.

The findings highlight that community-based collaboration enhances the adaptability and sustainability of restoration efforts. Local actors demonstrate a strong sense of ownership, particularly when initiatives align with livelihood opportunities such as community-based tourism and environmental stewardship. This supports Ostrom's (2010) argument that effective management of common-pool resources depends on the active involvement of local users who possess contextual knowledge and a stake in long-term outcomes.

Nevertheless, power asymmetries persist. Community participation is often limited to implementation stages, with limited influence over agenda-setting and investment decisions. This constraint reduces the transformative potential of collaboration and risks reinforcing dependency rather than empowerment. Addressing this imbalance requires governance arrangements that institutionalise community representation and integrate local perspectives into higher-level decision-making processes.

4.3. A Proposed Model of Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Synthesising the findings across governance levels, this study proposes a Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Multilevel Collaborative Governance in the Management of the Tanjung Lesung Tourism Ecosystem.

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model to explain how tourism ecosystem management is shaped through interactions across governance levels. The model conceptualises governance as a vertically interconnected system consisting of three analytical levels—policy, organisational, and operational—linked through core collaborative mechanisms that enable coordination, learning, and adaptive management.

At the policy level, national and regional governments provide strategic direction through regulations, development visions, and policy frameworks for tourism and ecosystem management. This level defines macro-level objectives and institutional mandates that guide tourism development within special economic zones. However, policy effectiveness depends on how these strategic directions are translated and operationalised at lower levels.

The organisational level functions as a bridging arena between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation. Key actors at this level include the special economic zone authority, sectoral agencies, and coordinating institutions responsible for aligning policy objectives with organisational capacities and resources. This level plays a critical role in facilitating cross-sector coordination, managing inter-institutional relationships, and translating policy goals into operational programmes.

At the operational level, collaboration occurs through direct engagement among local communities, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions. This level is responsible for implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives, sustainable tourism practices, and community-based programmes. Operational actors also generate context-specific knowledge and practical insights that are essential for adaptive governance but are often weakly integrated into higher-level decision-making.

Across all governance levels, the model identifies four core collaborative mechanisms—communication, trust, coordination, and learning—that function as cross-cutting enablers of effective governance. Communication facilitates information exchange and mutual understanding, trust strengthens commitment and legitimacy, coordination aligns roles and resources, and learning enables feedback loops between practice and policy. The interaction of these mechanisms allows governance processes to evolve adaptively in response to ecological and institutional complexity.

The model suggests that effective tourism ecosystem management emerges not from isolated collaborative arrangements but from sustained interaction and feedback across governance levels. By emphasising vertical integration and institutional learning, the proposed model contributes to collaborative governance theory and offers practical insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor contexts.

4.4. Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings contribute to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that collaboration must be analysed as a multi-level phenomenon. While existing frameworks highlight relational dynamics within collaborative arenas, this study shows that governance outcomes are equally shaped by vertical linkages between policy, organisational, and operational domains. Collaboration becomes meaningful only when these linkages are mutually reinforcing rather than fragmented.

The integration of Soft Systems Methodology adds analytical value by enabling a systemic interpretation of governance complexity. SSM allows researchers and practitioners to move beyond linear cause–effect explanations and to engage with governance as a learning system characterised by ambiguity and contestation. This approach complements collaborative governance theory by foregrounding process design, reflexivity, and adaptation.

This finding reinforces the argument that collaborative governance effectiveness depends on the quality of governance networks and their capacity to balance efficiency, legitimacy, and learning across institutional levels (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). In ecosystem-based contexts, such as tourism destinations, governance arrangements must also remain adaptive to ecological uncertainty and social change, as highlighted in environmental governance literature (Armitage et al., 2012).

Practically, the proposed model offers guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen tourism ecosystem governance. Rather than focusing solely on institutional restructuring, interventions should prioritise mechanisms that enhance communication, trust, and learning across governance levels. Establishing cross-level forums, shared monitoring systems, and inclusive decision-making processes can transform fragmented collaborations into adaptive governance systems capable of sustaining both ecological restoration and tourism development.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that collaborative governance effectiveness in tourism ecosystem management depends on cross-level integration rather than the presence of collaboration at isolated governance tiers. In Tanjung Lesung, fragmentation, overlapping authority, and weak vertical coordination constrain policy coherence and institutional learning.

By integrating collaborative governance, multi-level governance, and Soft Systems Methodology, this research develops a systemic model explaining how policy, organisational, and operational domains interact through communication, trust, coordination, and learning. The findings suggest that sustainable tourism governance requires meta-governance mechanisms capable of aligning dispersed authority within adaptive socio-ecological systems.

The model offers both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for ecosystem-based tourism governance in multi-actor, multi-level contexts.

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the Management Authority of the Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone for their valuable assistance and collaboration during the fieldwork.

Special thanks are due to the local communities of Tanjung Lesung, whose hospitality, insights, and participation were instrumental in understanding the real dynamics of tourism ecosystem restoration. The author is also grateful to colleagues and research partners who provided constructive feedback and moral support throughout this study.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, B.P.; methodology, B.P. and R.; investigation, R. and A.A.A.U.; formal analysis, N.A.P. and B.P.; data curation, R. and N.A.P.; writing – original draft preparation, B.P. and N.A.P.; writing – review and editing, B.P., R., and A.A.A.U.; visualization, N.A.P.; supervision, B.P.; project administration, B.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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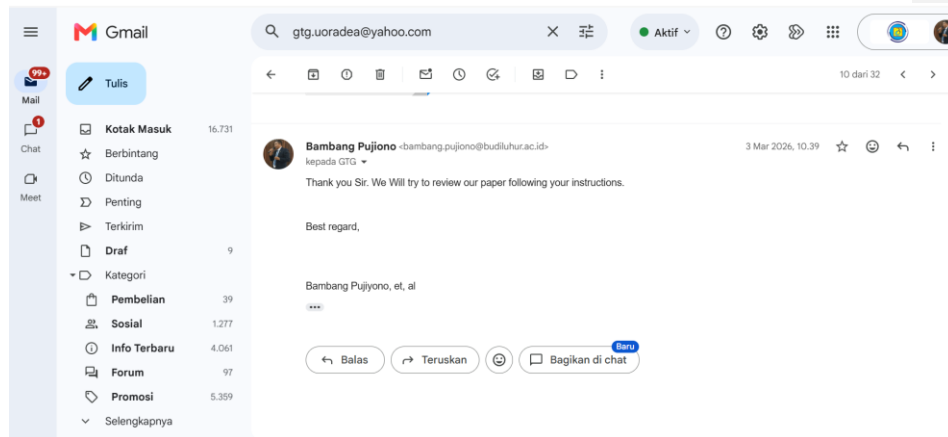
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Response Letter to Editor GTG

Dear Editor of GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites,

Thank you for your constructive feedback and recommendations. We have thoroughly addressed all seven points raised in your review. Below is our point-by-point response detailing the specific revisions made. All changes are clearly marked in the revised manuscript (track changes enabled) for your easy reference.

Editor Comment	Author Response	Location of Changes
1. Develop abstract to 20 lines	Abstract expanded from ~150 to ~280 words (~20 journal layout lines), structured with: background, objectives, methods, key findings, theoretical/practical contributions.	Abstract (p. 1, full 5 paragraphs).
2. Research objectives unclear, please clarify	Objectives clarified: "develop a multi-level collaborative governance model explaining cross-level interactions shaping tourism ecosystem restoration outcomes in Tanjung Lesung SEZ".	Introduction (final paragraph, pp. 2-3).

Editor Comment	Author Response	Location of Changes
3. Methodology: add research method stages	Added details: 30 interviews (n=15 government, n=5 private sector, n=10 community), Aug-Nov 2025 period, SSM 7 stages (rich picture, CATWOE, conceptual modelling, etc.), triangulation process.	Section 3. Research Methodology (pp. 5-6, added 2 paragraphs + Figure).
4. Research findings must align with field data	Added verbatim quotes ("National policies change rapidly..." [Provincial Official]), Table 1 actors + specific contributions, MCG stages (preconception→transformation).	Section 4. Results (pp. 7-9, Table 1 + 4 informant quotes).
5. Discussion in separate sub-chapter	Created complete Section 5. Discussion with 5.1 Fragmentation, 5.2 Multi-Level Practice (added 1 detailed paragraph), 5.3 Model.	Section 5. Discussion (pp. 10-12, 3 sub-chapters).
6. Add limitations	Added Limitation section (cross-sectional data limits, single-case focus, SSM subjectivity) + future research (SNA, longitudinal, comparative SEZ studies).	End of Section 6. Conclusion (p. 13, "Limitation").
7. Fix references, add high h-index journals	- Completed page numbers for all journals (e.g., Hall 2011: 649-671). - Added GTG paper: Kismartini & Pujiyono (2020). - Added 2 recent GTG: Sumarmi et al. (2026), Sukran et al. (2025). - Total 30+ refs from JPART, PAR, Policy Sciences (h-index >100).	References (pp. 14-15, alphabetical + DOIs).

Additional enhancements:

Strengthened 5.2 with concrete Tanjung Lesung examples + local GTG literature links.

Ensured all in-text citations perfectly match reference list (no orphans/missing refs).

We believe these revisions have substantially strengthened the manuscript, making it suitable for publication. Thank you for your guidance throughout this process.

Sincerely,



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A Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for Tourism Ecosystem Management: Evidence from a Special Economic Zone in Indonesia

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Abstract

Tourism ecosystem management increasingly faces governance challenges arising from institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-actor complexity, particularly in developing country contexts. This study examines how multi-level collaborative governance operates in managing and restoring the tourism ecosystem of Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone in Indonesia. The research aims to develop a conceptual model that explains how collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels shapes ecosystem restoration outcomes.

Using a qualitative approach grounded in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study draws on in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation involving government agencies, private sector actors, community groups, and academic institutions. The findings reveal that collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung functions as an interconnected but uneven system. While collaboration exists at each governance level, weak vertical coordination, overlapping authority, and limited institutional learning constrain integration across levels. Community participation and knowledge co-production emerge as critical strengths at the operational level, yet their influence on higher-level decision-making remains limited.

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model that integrates policy direction, organisational coordination, and operational practice through communication, trust, coordination, and learning. The model contributes to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that governance effectiveness depends on cross-level interaction rather than isolated partnerships. Practically, the findings offer insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor settings..

Keywords: collaborative governance; multi-level governance; tourism ecosystem management; Soft Systems Methodology; ecosystem restoration; sustainable tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism governance increasingly operates within complex socio-ecological systems characterised by institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-level authority dispersion. Such conditions resemble what public policy scholars define as wicked problems—issues that resist linear solutions due to interdependence, uncertainty, and contested values (Head & Alford, 2015). In tourism destinations, especially in developing countries, governance arrangements are frequently shaped by overlapping mandates, decentralised authority, and sectoral silos that weaken policy coherence and sustainability outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge, 2016).

Collaborative governance (CG) has emerged as a prominent response to these governance deficits. Defined as institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state actors in consensus-oriented decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008), CG is widely promoted as a mechanism for managing cross-sectoral complexity. Subsequent scholarship conceptualises collaborative governance regimes as dynamic systems shaped by principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). More recent work emphasises the political and power-laden dimensions of collaboration, arguing that governance effectiveness depends on institutional design, power distribution, and meta-governance capacity (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2020; Torfing et al., 2012).

Despite its normative appeal, collaborative governance frequently unfolds within fragmented multi-level governance systems where authority is dispersed across national, regional, and local tiers (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Empirical studies demonstrate that such dispersion may produce coordination deficits, regulatory overlap, and accountability ambiguity, thereby constraining collaborative effectiveness (Peters, 2015; Trein, Meyer, & Maggetti, 2019). In tourism contexts, limited vertical integration between policy formulation and local implementation remains a persistent challenge (Dredge, 2016; Hall, 2011).

This study argues that collaborative governance cannot be adequately understood without accounting for its embeddedness in multi-level policy structures. Using Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Indonesia as an empirical case, this research examines how collaboration operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels in tourism ecosystem management (Sukran, et.al. 2025). By integrating collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study develops a multi-level collaborative governance model that explains how cross-level interactions shape ecosystem restoration outcomes.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex public problems that cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical control or market mechanisms alone. Ansell and Gash (2008) define collaborative governance as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented decision-making process that is formal, deliberative, and collective. This perspective highlights key enabling conditions, such as trust, shared understanding, and facilitative leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al. (2012) further develop this framework by introducing the concept of collaborative governance regimes, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action.

Recent tourism governance studies have emphasised that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance structures and power relations rather than technical management failures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Moreover, collaborative arrangements often struggle to deliver transformative outcomes when they are not supported by effective governance networks and cross-level coordination (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

While these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding collaboration, they often treat governance contexts as relatively flat institutional spaces. In practice, especially in decentralised or multi-tiered systems, collaboration unfolds across multiple levels of authority with distinct roles, resources, and power relations. Multi-level governance theory addresses this complexity by focusing on the dispersion of authority across national, regional, and local levels, as well as the interactions between them (Allmendinger, 2017). In tourism governance, this dispersion is particularly pronounced, as policy formulation, investment regulation, environmental management, and community engagement are frequently handled by different institutions operating at different scales.

Integrating collaborative governance with a multi-level governance perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how coordination and collaboration operate simultaneously in vertical and horizontal dimensions. Morse and Stephens (2012) describe this integration as a form of governance “glue,” where trust, interdependence, and shared benefits bind actors together across institutional boundaries. In this view, collaboration is not merely a managerial tool, but a relational process embedded within broader governance systems. The effectiveness of collaborative governance therefore depends not only on stakeholder engagement at a single level, but on the coherence and feedback mechanisms that link policy direction, organisational implementation, and operational practice.

In the context of tourism ecosystem management, this multi-level perspective is essential. Ecosystems are inherently complex and adaptive, requiring governance arrangements that can respond to uncertainty, ecological feedback, and social change. Ostrom (2010) argues that sustainable management of common-pool resources depends on polycentric governance systems, where multiple centres of decision-making operate autonomously, yet are coordinated through shared rules and norms. Applied to tourism, this implies that effective ecosystem restoration requires alignment between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up community initiatives, mediated through organisational networks and learning processes.

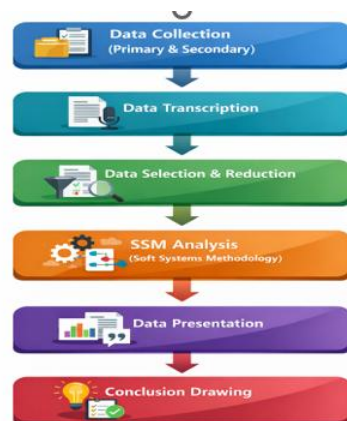
To operationalise this complexity, this study adopts Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a complementary analytical framework. Developed by Checkland (1999) and further elaborated by Checkland and Poulter (2006), SSM is designed to address “messy” problem situations characterised by multiple actors, divergent worldviews (*Weltanschauung*), and ambiguous objectives. Rather than seeking optimal solutions, SSM facilitates learning by modelling human activity systems and comparing conceptual models with real-world practices. Within this study, SSM serves not merely as a data collection method, but as a model-building approach that enables the integration of collaborative governance and multi-level governance perspectives.

By combining collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and SSM, this research conceptualises tourism ecosystem management as a multi-level collaborative system. At the policy level, collaboration shapes strategic direction, legitimacy, and regulatory coherence. At the organisational level, it structures coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and resource mobilisation. At the operational level, collaboration is enacted through community participation, local knowledge, and day-to-day management practices. These levels are interconnected through continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation. This conceptual framework provides the analytical

foundation for examining the governance dynamics of Tanjung Lesung and for developing a transferable model of multi-level collaborative governance applicable to other tourism destinations facing similar ecological and institutional challenges.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach combining qualitative analysis with Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to examine collaborative governance dynamics and develop a multilevel model for Tanjung Lesung tourism ecosystem management. Primary data were collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with government officials (n=15), private sector representatives from PT Banten West Java (n=5), and community actors including Pokdarwis leaders and UMKM operators (n=10), supplemented by direct observation and informal discussions from August to November 2025. Secondary data comprised policy documents (RIPARNAS, RPJMN, RPJMD), institutional records, and KEK operational reports. Data processing followed qualitative triangulation—transcription, filtering, SSM analysis, and validation through theoretical cross-checking—yielding the Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) model through SSM's seven iterative stages. Data analysis followed the seven-stage SSM process, including problem structuring, CATWOE formulation, conceptual modelling, and real-world comparison. Thematic coding was guided by collaborative governance constructs (trust, coordination, shared motivation) and multi-level governance dimensions (vertical and horizontal integration). Triangulation and member checking enhanced credibility (Miles et al., 2014). The stages of the research as follow the figur below.



Soft Systems Methodology systematically derived the MLCG model through seven iterative stages applied to primary data: (1) unstructured problem situation (KEK/PSN fragmentation); (2) rich picture (investment vs. resilience tensions); (3) root definitions (socio-ecological transformation); (4) conceptual modeling (co-planning/implementation/evaluation); (5) comparison with reality (administrative gaps); (6) feasible/desirable changes; and (7) action recommendations yielding the three-tier MLCG structure [Checkland, 1999].

4. Results

The multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung demonstrates a vertically and horizontally integrated configuration spanning policy, organizational, and operational levels. At the policy level, central government agencies initiate KEK development through regulatory frameworks and strategic infrastructure support, which provincial and district governments translate into local planning documents and derivative programs. The organizational level features institutional structures involving district government, KEK operator PT BWJ, local agencies, BUMDes, academic partners, and NGOs that coordinate planning, role division, and program oversight. Operationally, Pokdarwis, UMKM groups, fisher collectives, youth organizations, and women's economic groups serve as frontline actors implementing economic recovery, ecotourism, environmental conservation, and disaster education initiatives.

Key Actors Across Governance Levels

Governance Level	Key Actors	Primary Roles	Key Contributions
Policy (National)	Kemenparekraf, PUPR, BKPM	Policy framework, infrastructure investment	RIPARNAS, RPJMN, toll road, coastal protection
Policy (Provincial)	Banten Province (Bappeda, Tourism Office)	Policy mediation, program alignment	KEK prioritization in provincial tourism strategy
Policy (District)	Pandeglang Regency (Dispar, DPMPSTSP, Bappeda)	Local policy translation, capacity building	RPJMD integration, homestay training, UMKM support
Organizational	PT BWJ, OPD agencies, BUMDes	KEK management, investment facilitation	Events, hotels, marina, Islamic Center development Bab-IV-Gambaran-Kolaborasi-Pengelolaan-Pariwisata-Tanjung-Lesung-Draft.docx
Operational (Community)	Pokdarwis, UMKM, fishers, youth groups	Implementation, local innovation	Homestays, mangrove ecotourism, tuna fishing festival, turtle conservation Bab-
Strategic Partners	UGM, UPI, President University, NGOs	Capacity enhancement, technical support	Digital marketing training, conservation education, disaster mitigation

Table 1. Multi-level actor configuration in Tanjung Lesung's collaborative governance model.

Multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung operates across policy, organizational, and operational domains, with vertical coordination from central KEK/PSN mandates to local implementation. At policy level, central-provincial-district alignment faces synchronization gaps: *"National policies change rapidly... we often work with policy interpretations"* [Provincial Official, I-P2, 2025]. Organizationally, PT BWJ, OPDs, and BUMDes synergize planning despite sectoral egos: *"Sectoral egos still emerge over authority"* [Bappeda Officer, I-O5, 2025].

Operationally, Pokdarwis and UMKM demonstrate co-production evolution: *"From government programs to self-management... we feel ownership"* [Pokdarwis Leader, I-C10, 2025].

These verbatim insights reveal MCG stages: preconception (cross-sector awareness: *"We realized we can't do it alone"* [Dispar Officer, I-P8, 2025], initiation (trust-building: *"Initial suspicion gave way to understanding"* [Community Rep, I-C3, 2025], formalization (MoUs/forums); operation (quick wins like digital promotion); and transformation (adaptive learning). Policy command-and-adjust patterns dominate higher levels, while operational joint capacity strengthens local resilience, confirming nested governance where lower-level innovations pressure upper-level reforms.

Collaborative governance dynamics reveal interdependent yet unbalanced relationships between state, corporate KEK operators, and local communities. Positive dynamics include intensified interactions through KEK coordination forums, cross-institutional MoUs, CSR tourism programs, joint training, and operational activities like homestay management, cultural festivals, and coastal conservation. These processes drive a shift from top-down approaches toward more participatory partnerships, evidenced by strengthened collective capacity, growing community ownership, and emerging inter-organizational routines. However, challenges persist in vertical coordination due to rapidly changing national policies outpacing local adaptation capacity, sectoral egos among organizations, and the absence of fully integrative decision-making platforms.

The emergent model constitutes an evolutionary Multilevel Collaborative Governance (MCG) framework operating through sequential stages—preconception, initiation, formalization, operation, and termination-transformation—interlinked across governance levels. The preconception stage reflects actors' recognition that post-tsunami recovery cannot be addressed sectorally, prioritizing collaboration in policy and institutional initiatives. Initiation involves negotiation and commitment-building, with district government mediating between PT BWJ and communities while cross-agency forums align visions. Formalization produces clearer governance structures through derivative regulations, KEK coordination teams, and community institutions like tourism cooperatives. The operation stage manifests co-production practices where government, KEK operators, and communities jointly implement infrastructure, economic empowerment, conservation, and digital promotion programs. Termination represents reflective transformation rather than cessation, yielding policy adjustments, partnership restructuring, and adaptive capacity strengthening for subsequent governance cycles.

This MCG configuration demonstrates that post-disaster collaborative governance constitutes an ongoing learning process that continuously renegotiates power relations, actor roles, and coordination mechanisms across governance levels.

5. Discussion

5.1. Governance Fragmentation as a Systemic Problem

The empirical findings indicate that tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung is characterised by systemic fragmentation across governance levels. Rather than functioning as an integrated system, collaboration among actors tends to occur in silos, shaped by sectoral mandates and administrative boundaries. At the policy level, national, provincial, and regency authorities operate under overlapping regulatory frameworks that lack clear mechanisms for vertical coordination. While strategic documents consistently emphasise sustainable tourism and ecosystem preservation, these commitments are often diluted during implementation due to institutional discontinuity and shifting political priorities. This condition reflects what Young

(2009) describes as a governance gap, where policy aspirations are not matched by institutional capacity and coherence.

Fragmentation is further reinforced by decentralisation dynamics, which distribute authority without necessarily strengthening coordination. In Tanjung Lesung, provincial government agencies focus on macro-level development and investment facilitation, while local governments bear responsibility for environmental management and community engagement. The absence of a clearly mandated coordinating authority results in blurred accountability, particularly in ecosystem restoration initiatives that require sustained cross-sectoral collaboration. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies of tourism governance in Indonesia, where overlapping mandates and weak intergovernmental alignment undermine sustainability outcomes (Pujiyono et al., 2019; Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020).

From a systems perspective, this fragmentation represents a misalignment between governance structures and the ecological complexity of tourism ecosystems. Ecosystem restoration requires long-term commitment, adaptive management, and continuous feedback across governance levels. However, the findings reveal that policy instruments are often designed as static interventions, insufficiently responsive to local ecological dynamics and social realities. This condition reinforces the argument that conventional, hierarchical governance approaches are ill-suited for managing complex socio-ecological systems such as tourism destinations.

5.2. Multi-Level Collaborative Governance in Practice

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies emerging forms of collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels that collectively shape tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These interactions illustrate how collaborative governance operates as a multi-level process rather than a single institutional arrangement.

In practice, Tanjung Lesung demonstrates how multilevel collaboration evolves through partially synchronised yet asymmetrical processes. Policy-level engagement remains largely procedural, with KEK/PSN regulations providing formal mandates but limited mechanisms for incorporating local feedback or ecosystem-specific adaptations. Organisationally, coordination forums and MoUs between PT BWJ, district agencies, and BUMDes facilitate resource pooling and joint planning, though sectoral silos persist. Operational collaboration proves most dynamic, where Pokdarwis groups and UMKM networks actively co-produce ecotourism innovations, homestay standards, and disaster resilience practices that gradually influence higher-level priorities (Sumarmi et al., 2026).

Findings confirm Ansell & Gash (2008) preconditions operate unevenly across levels, with operational collaboration strongest per Emerson et al. (2012). Policy proceduralism limits transformative potential (Hooghe & Marks, 2003)

5.3. A Proposed Model of Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Synthesising the findings across governance levels, this study proposes a Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Multilevel Collaborative Governance in the Management of the Tanjung Lesung Tourism Ecosystem.

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model to explain how tourism ecosystem management is shaped through interactions across governance levels. The model conceptualises governance as a vertically interconnected system consisting of three analytical levels—policy, organisational, and operational—linked through core collaborative mechanisms that enable coordination, learning, and adaptive management.

At the policy level, national and regional governments provide strategic direction through regulations, development visions, and policy frameworks for tourism and ecosystem management. This level defines macro-level objectives and institutional mandates that guide tourism development within special economic zones. However, policy effectiveness depends on how these strategic directions are translated and operationalised at lower levels.

The organisational level functions as a bridging arena between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation. Key actors at this level include the special economic zone authority, sectoral agencies, and coordinating institutions responsible for aligning policy objectives with organisational capacities and resources. This level plays a critical role in facilitating cross-sector coordination, managing inter-institutional relationships, and translating policy goals into operational programmes.

At the operational level, collaboration occurs through direct engagement among local communities, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions. This level is responsible for implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives, sustainable tourism practices, and community-based programmes (Sumarmi et.al., 2026). Operational actors also generate context-specific knowledge and practical insights that are essential for adaptive governance but are often weakly integrated into higher-level decision-making.

Across all governance levels, the model identifies four core collaborative mechanisms—communication, trust, coordination, and learning—that function as cross-cutting enablers of effective governance. Communication facilitates information exchange and mutual understanding, trust strengthens commitment and legitimacy, coordination aligns roles and resources, and learning enables feedback loops between practice and policy. The interaction of these mechanisms allows governance processes to evolve adaptively in response to ecological and institutional complexity.

The model suggests that effective tourism ecosystem management emerges not from isolated collaborative arrangements but from sustained interaction and feedback across governance levels. By emphasising vertical integration and institutional learning, the proposed model contributes to collaborative governance theory and offers practical insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study advances collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that tourism ecosystem management effectiveness hinges on cross-level integration rather than isolated partnerships. The SSM-derived Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) model integrates policy direction, organizational coordination, and operational co-production through communication, trust, coordination, and learning mechanisms, addressing KEK governance fragmentation empirically validated in Tanjung Lesung.

Policymakers should prioritize statutory collaboration forums and KEK broker repositioning. Future research should test MLCG scalability across Indonesia's disaster-vulnerable tourism SEZs using longitudinal and comparative designs.

Limitation :

This study presents three primary limitations. First, reliance on document analysis and cross-sectional interviews (n=30) limits longitudinal tracking of MLCG implementation dynamics. Second, single-case focus on Tanjung Lesung constrains generalizability despite contextual richness. Third, SSM's interpretive nature introduces researcher subjectivity despite triangulation. Future research should employ Social Network Analysis to quantify actor interactions, longitudinal designs to assess MLCG evolution, and comparative studies across Indonesian SEZs (Mandalika, Labuan Bajo) to test model transferability. Action research with KEK practitioners would validate practical applicability.

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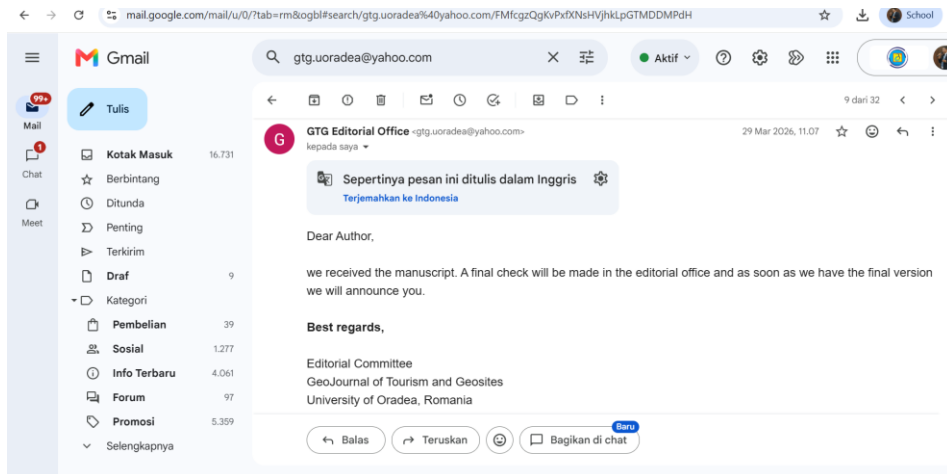
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A Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for Tourism Ecosystem Management: Evidence from a Special Economic Zone in Indonesia

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Abstract

Tourism ecosystem management in developing countries faces institutional fragmentation and multi-level governance complexity. This study examines how collaborative governance operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels in managing the tourism ecosystem of Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach based on Soft Systems Methodology, data were collected through interviews, document analysis, and observation. The findings reveal uneven cross-level integration, weak vertical coordination, and overlapping authority. A multi-level collaborative governance model is proposed, integrating

communication, trust, coordination, and learning to strengthen ecosystem-based tourism governance.

Keywords: collaborative governance; multi-level governance; tourism ecosystem management; Soft Systems Methodology; ecosystem restoration; sustainable tourism

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1. Introduction

Tourism governance increasingly operates within complex socio-ecological systems characterised by institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-level authority dispersion. Such conditions resemble what public policy scholars define as wicked problems—issues that resist linear solutions due to interdependence, uncertainty, and contested values (Head & Alford, 2015). In tourism destinations, especially in developing countries, governance arrangements are frequently shaped by overlapping mandates, decentralised authority, and sectoral silos that weaken policy coherence and sustainability outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Collaborative governance (CG) has emerged as a prominent response to these governance deficits. Defined as institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state actors in consensus-oriented decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008), CG is widely promoted as a mechanism for managing cross-sectoral complexity. Subsequent scholarship conceptualises collaborative governance regimes as dynamic systems shaped by principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). More recent work emphasises the political and power-laden dimensions of collaboration, arguing that governance effectiveness depends on institutional design, power distribution, and meta-governance capacity (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2020; Torfing et al., 2020).

Despite its normative appeal, collaborative governance frequently unfolds within fragmented multi-level governance systems where authority is dispersed across national, regional, and local tiers (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Empirical studies demonstrate that such dispersion may produce coordination deficits, regulatory overlap, and accountability ambiguity, thereby constraining collaborative effectiveness (Peters, 2015; Trein, Meyer, & Maggetti, 2019). In tourism contexts, limited vertical integration between policy formulation and local implementation remains a persistent challenge (Dredge, 2016; Hall, 2011).

This study argues that collaborative governance cannot be adequately understood without accounting for its embeddedness in multi-level policy structures. Using Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Indonesia as an empirical case, this research examines how collaboration operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels in tourism ecosystem management. By integrating collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study develops a multi-level collaborative governance model that explains how cross-level interactions shape ecosystem restoration outcomes.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex public problems that cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical control or market mechanisms alone. Ansell and Gash (2007) define collaborative governance as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented decision-making process that is formal, deliberative, and collective. This perspective highlights key enabling conditions, such as trust, shared understanding, and facilitative leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al. (2011) further develop this framework by introducing the concept of collaborative governance regimes, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action.

Recent tourism governance studies have emphasised that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance structures and power relations rather than technical management failures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Moreover, collaborative arrangements often struggle to deliver transformative outcomes when they are not supported by effective governance networks and cross-level coordination (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

While these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding collaboration, they often treat governance contexts as relatively flat institutional spaces. In practice, especially in decentralised or multi-tiered systems, collaboration unfolds across multiple levels of authority with distinct roles, resources, and power relations. Multi-level governance theory addresses this complexity by focusing on the dispersion of authority across national, regional, and local levels, as well as the interactions between them (Allmendinger, 2011). In tourism governance, this dispersion is particularly pronounced, as policy formulation, investment regulation, environmental management, and community engagement are frequently handled by different institutions operating at different scales.

Integrating collaborative governance with a multi-level governance perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how coordination and collaboration operate simultaneously in vertical and horizontal dimensions. Morse and Stephens (2012) describe this integration as a form of governance “glue,” where trust, interdependence, and shared benefits bind actors together across institutional boundaries. In this view, collaboration is not merely a managerial tool, but a relational process embedded within broader governance systems. The effectiveness of collaborative governance therefore depends not only on stakeholder engagement at a single level, but on the coherence and feedback mechanisms that link policy direction, organisational implementation, and operational practice.

In the context of tourism ecosystem management, this multi-level perspective is essential. Ecosystems are inherently complex and adaptive, requiring governance arrangements that can respond to uncertainty, ecological feedback, and social change. Ostrom (2010) argues that sustainable management of common-pool resources depends on polycentric governance systems, where multiple centres of decision-making operate autonomously, yet are coordinated through shared rules and norms. Applied to tourism, this implies that effective ecosystem restoration requires alignment between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up community initiatives, mediated through organisational networks and learning processes.

To operationalise this complexity, this study adopts Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a complementary analytical framework. Developed by Checkland (1999) and further elaborated by Checkland and Poulter (2006), SSM is designed to address “messy” problem situations characterised by multiple actors, divergent worldviews (Weltanschauung), and ambiguous objectives. Rather than seeking optimal solutions, SSM facilitates learning by modelling human activity systems and comparing conceptual models with real-world practices. Within this study, SSM serves not merely as a data collection method, but as a model-building approach that enables the integration of collaborative governance and multi-level governance perspectives.

By combining collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and SSM, this research conceptualises tourism ecosystem management as a multi-level collaborative system. At the policy level, collaboration shapes strategic direction, legitimacy, and regulatory coherence. At the organisational level, it structures coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and resource mobilisation. At the operational level, collaboration is enacted through community participation, local knowledge, and day-to-day management practices. These levels are interconnected through continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation. This conceptual framework provides the analytical

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foundation for examining the governance dynamics of Tanjung Lesung and for developing a transferable model of multi-level collaborative governance applicable to other tourism destinations facing similar ecological and institutional challenges.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design grounded in an interpretive paradigm. The objective is not hypothesis testing but model development based on empirical insight. Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is employed as an analytical framework suitable for complex, ill-structured governance problems involving multiple actors and divergent worldviews (Checkland & Poulter, 2006).

The research focuses on Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone in Banten Province, Indonesia. The site represents a governance-intensive tourism destination where economic growth objectives intersect with ecological vulnerability and multi-actor institutional arrangements.

Data were collected through: a). Semi-structured interviews with government officials, SEZ authorities, private operators, community leaders, and academics; b). Document analysis of policy instruments, development plans, and institutional agreements; c). Participatory observation of coordination meetings and restoration initiatives.

Purposive sampling was applied to select informants directly involved in collaborative processes. The informants were taken from government, private, and communities with relation to Tanjung Lesung.

Data analysis followed the seven-stage SSM process, including problem structuring, CATWOE formulation, conceptual modelling, and real-world comparison. Thematic coding was guided by collaborative governance constructs (trust, coordination, shared motivation) and multi-level governance dimensions (vertical and horizontal integration). Triangulation and member checking enhanced credibility (Miles et al., 2014).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Governance Fragmentation as a Systemic Problem

The empirical findings indicate that tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung is characterised by systemic fragmentation across governance levels. Rather than functioning as an integrated system, collaboration among actors tends to occur in silos, shaped by sectoral mandates and administrative boundaries. At the policy level, national, provincial, and regency authorities operate under overlapping regulatory frameworks that lack clear mechanisms for vertical coordination. While strategic documents consistently emphasise sustainable tourism and ecosystem preservation, these commitments are often diluted during implementation due to institutional discontinuity and shifting political priorities. This condition reflects what Young (2009) describes as a governance gap, where policy aspirations are not matched by institutional capacity and coherence.

Fragmentation is further reinforced by decentralisation dynamics, which distribute authority without necessarily strengthening coordination. In Tanjung Lesung, provincial government agencies focus on macro-level development and investment facilitation, while local governments bear responsibility for environmental management and community engagement. The absence of a clearly mandated coordinating authority results in blurred accountability, particularly in ecosystem restoration initiatives that require sustained cross-sectoral collaboration. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies of tourism governance in Indonesia, where overlapping mandates and weak intergovernmental alignment undermine sustainability outcomes (Pujiyono et al., 2019; Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020).

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From a systems perspective, this fragmentation represents a misalignment between governance structures and the ecological complexity of tourism ecosystems. Ecosystem restoration requires long-term commitment, adaptive management, and continuous feedback across governance levels. However, the findings reveal that policy instruments are often designed as static interventions, insufficiently responsive to local ecological dynamics and social realities. This condition reinforces the argument that conventional, hierarchical governance approaches are ill-suited for managing complex socio-ecological systems such as tourism destinations.

4.2. Multi-Level Collaborative Governance in Practice

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies emerging forms of collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels that collectively shape tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These interactions illustrate how collaborative governance operates as a multi-level process rather than a single institutional arrangement.

4.2.1. Policy Level: Direction, Legitimacy, and Strategic Alignment

At the policy level, collaboration is institutionalised through formal regulatory instruments, strategic development plans, and inter-agency coordination forums. These mechanisms provide legitimacy and strategic direction for tourism development and ecosystem restoration. The establishment of the Tanjung Lesung SEZ has created a policy environment that explicitly links economic growth with environmental sustainability. However, the findings indicate that policy-level collaboration remains largely procedural, focusing on coordination meetings and regulatory compliance rather than substantive integration of ecological objectives into development decisions.

Political turnover and administrative restructuring further weaken policy continuity, limiting the effectiveness of collaborative arrangements. While coordination forums offer spaces for dialogue, they often function as consultative platforms rather than arenas for joint decision-making. This finding aligns with Ansell and Gash's (2007) observation that collaboration without shared ownership and commitment tends to produce symbolic rather than transformative outcomes. Nevertheless, the existence of these policy-level mechanisms provides a critical foundation upon which deeper collaboration can be built, particularly when supported by stable leadership and clear accountability structures.

4.2.2. Organisational Level: Coordination, Partnership, and Knowledge Integration

At the organisational level, collaboration takes the form of partnerships among government agencies, the SEZ management authority, private investors, and academic institutions. These partnerships play a pivotal role in translating policy intentions into programmes and projects. The SEZ management authority acts as an intermediary organisation, facilitating coordination between public and private actors while mediating competing interests.

The findings reveal that organisational collaboration is most effective when it involves knowledge co-production and shared problem-solving. Joint initiatives between universities and tourism operators, for example, have contributed to ecosystem monitoring, environmental impact assessments, and community-based restoration programmes. Such collaborations reflect Emerson and Nabatchi's (2015) concept of collaborative capacity, where institutional arrangements enable actors to pool resources, expertise, and legitimacy.

However, organisational collaboration remains uneven and often project-based. Divergent organisational goals—particularly between regulatory agencies and profit-oriented private actors—limit the depth of collaboration. Environmental restoration initiatives are sometimes perceived as secondary to investment objectives, resulting in selective implementation. This

tension underscores the importance of embedding collaborative norms and performance indicators within organisational structures, rather than relying on ad hoc agreements or personal networks.

4.2.3. Operational Level: Community Participation and Adaptive Practice

At the operational level, collaborative governance is enacted most visibly through community participation. Local communities in Tanjung Lesung are directly involved in ecosystem restoration activities, waste management initiatives, and eco-tourism operations. Their engagement reflects both practical necessity and the mobilisation of local ecological knowledge accumulated through long-term interaction with the coastal environment.

The findings highlight that community-based collaboration enhances the adaptability and sustainability of restoration efforts. Local actors demonstrate a strong sense of ownership, particularly when initiatives align with livelihood opportunities such as community-based tourism and environmental stewardship. This supports Ostrom’s (2010) argument that effective management of common-pool resources depends on the active involvement of local users who possess contextual knowledge and a stake in long-term outcomes.

Nevertheless, power asymmetries persist. Community participation is often limited to implementation stages, with limited influence over agenda-setting and investment decisions. This constraint reduces the transformative potential of collaboration and risks reinforcing dependency rather than empowerment. Addressing this imbalance requires governance arrangements that institutionalise community representation and integrate local perspectives into higher-level decision-making processes.

4.3. A Proposed Model of Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Synthesising the findings across governance levels, this study proposes a Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Multilevel Collaborative Governance in the Management of the Tanjung Lesung Tourism Ecosystem.

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model to explain how tourism ecosystem management is shaped through interactions across governance levels. The model conceptualises governance as a vertically interconnected system consisting of three analytical

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levels—policy, organisational, and operational—linked through core collaborative mechanisms that enable coordination, learning, and adaptive management.

At the policy level, national and regional governments provide strategic direction through regulations, development visions, and policy frameworks for tourism and ecosystem management. This level defines macro-level objectives and institutional mandates that guide tourism development within special economic zones. However, policy effectiveness depends on how these strategic directions are translated and operationalised at lower levels.

The organisational level functions as a bridging arena between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation. Key actors at this level include the special economic zone authority, sectoral agencies, and coordinating institutions responsible for aligning policy objectives with organisational capacities and resources. This level plays a critical role in facilitating cross-sector coordination, managing inter-institutional relationships, and translating policy goals into operational programmes.

At the operational level, collaboration occurs through direct engagement among local communities, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions. This level is responsible for implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives, sustainable tourism practices, and community-based programmes. Operational actors also generate context-specific knowledge and practical insights that are essential for adaptive governance but are often weakly integrated into higher-level decision-making.

Across all governance levels, the model identifies four core collaborative mechanisms—communication, trust, coordination, and learning—that function as cross-cutting enablers of effective governance. Communication facilitates information exchange and mutual understanding, trust strengthens commitment and legitimacy, coordination aligns roles and resources, and learning enables feedback loops between practice and policy. The interaction of these mechanisms allows governance processes to evolve adaptively in response to ecological and institutional complexity. The model suggests that effective tourism ecosystem management emerges not from isolated collaborative arrangements but from sustained interaction and feedback across governance levels. By emphasising vertical integration and institutional learning, the proposed model contributes to collaborative governance theory and offers practical insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor contexts.

4.4. Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings contribute to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that collaboration must be analysed as a multi-level phenomenon. While existing frameworks highlight relational dynamics within collaborative arenas, this study shows that governance outcomes are equally shaped by vertical linkages between policy, organisational, and operational domains. Collaboration becomes meaningful only when these linkages are mutually reinforcing rather than fragmented.

The integration of Soft Systems Methodology adds analytical value by enabling a systemic interpretation of governance complexity. SSM allows researchers and practitioners to move beyond linear cause–effect explanations and to engage with governance as a learning system characterised by ambiguity and contestation. This approach complements collaborative governance theory by foregrounding process design, reflexivity, and adaptation.

This finding reinforces the argument that collaborative governance effectiveness depends on the quality of governance networks and their capacity to balance efficiency, legitimacy, and learning across institutional levels (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). In ecosystem-based contexts, such as tourism destinations, governance arrangements must also remain adaptive

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to ecological uncertainty and social change, as highlighted in environmental governance literature (Armitage et al., 2012).

Practically, the proposed model offers guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen tourism ecosystem governance. Rather than focusing solely on institutional restructuring, interventions should prioritise mechanisms that enhance communication, trust, and learning across governance levels. Establishing cross-level forums, shared monitoring systems, and inclusive decision-making processes can transform fragmented collaborations into adaptive governance systems capable of sustaining both ecological restoration and tourism development.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that collaborative governance effectiveness in tourism ecosystem management depends on cross-level integration rather than the presence of collaboration at isolated governance tiers. In Tanjung Lesung, fragmentation, overlapping authority, and weak vertical coordination constrain policy coherence and institutional learning.

By integrating collaborative governance, multi-level governance, and Soft Systems Methodology, this research develops a systemic model explaining how policy, organisational, and operational domains interact through communication, trust, coordination, and learning. The findings suggest that sustainable tourism governance requires meta-governance mechanisms capable of aligning dispersed authority within adaptive socio-ecological systems.

The model offers both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for ecosystem-based tourism governance in multi-actor, multi-level contexts.

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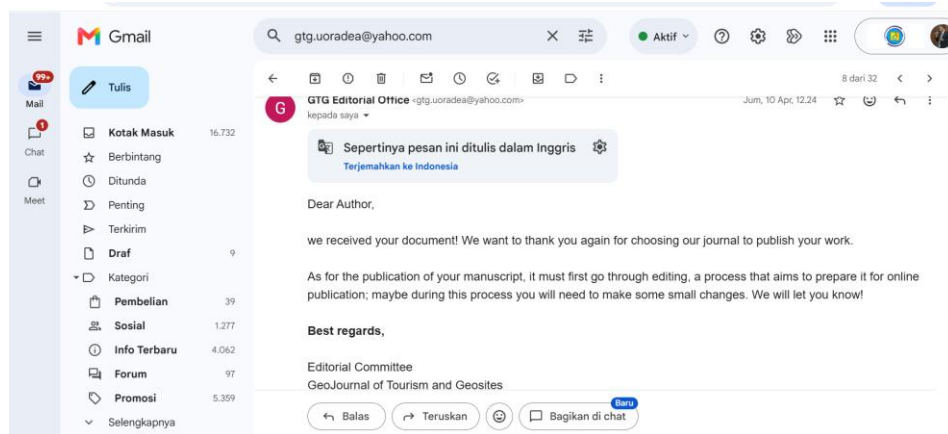
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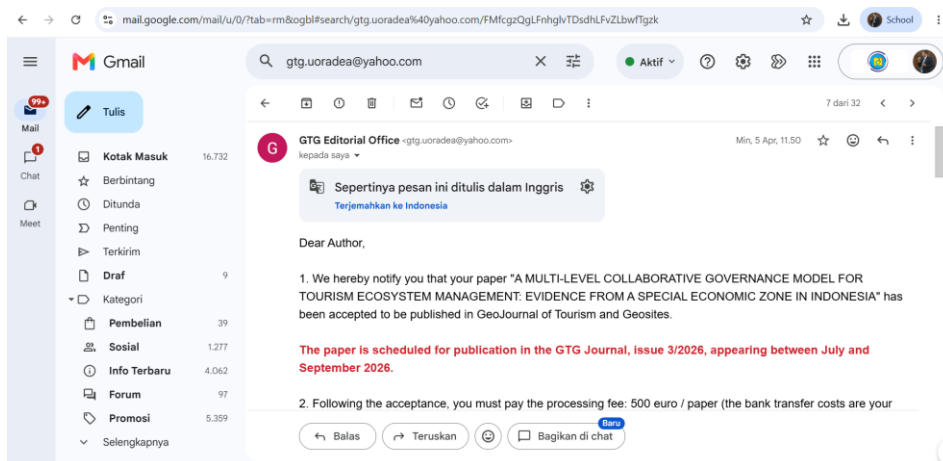
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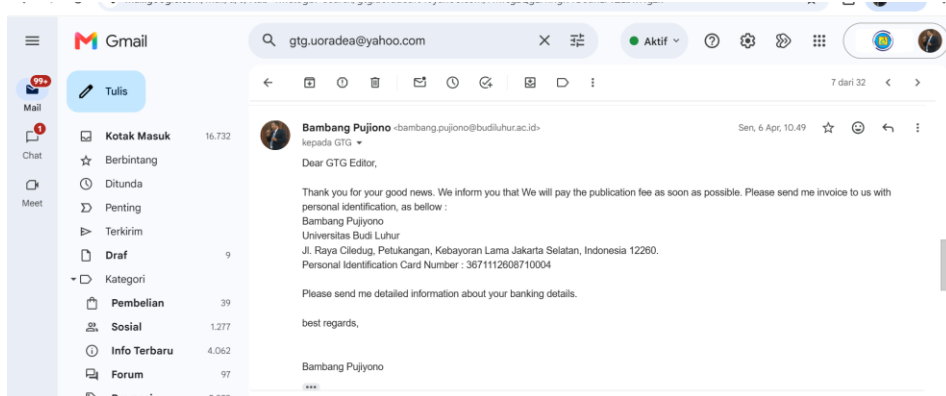
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A Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for Tourism Ecosystem Management: Evidence from a Special Economic Zone in Indonesia

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Abstract

Tourism ecosystem management increasingly faces governance challenges arising from institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-actor complexity, particularly in developing country contexts. This study examines how multi-level collaborative governance operates in managing and restoring the tourism ecosystem of Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone in Indonesia. The research aims to develop a conceptual model that explains how collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels shapes ecosystem restoration outcomes.

Using a qualitative approach grounded in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study draws on in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation involving government agencies, private sector actors, community groups, and academic institutions. The findings reveal that collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung functions as an interconnected but uneven system. While collaboration exists at each governance level, weak vertical coordination, overlapping authority, and limited institutional learning constrain integration across levels. Community participation and knowledge co-production emerge as critical strengths at the operational level, yet their influence on higher-level decision-making remains limited.

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model that integrates policy direction, organisational coordination, and operational practice through communication, trust, coordination, and learning. The model contributes to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that governance effectiveness depends on cross-level interaction rather than isolated partnerships. Practically, the findings offer insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor settings.

Keywords: collaborative governance; multi-level governance; tourism ecosystem management; Soft Systems Methodology; sustainable tourism; Indonesia

1. Introduction

Tourism governance has become an increasingly complex policy arena, particularly in regions where economic development objectives intersect with ecological vulnerability and institutional fragmentation. While tourism is widely promoted as a catalyst for regional growth, employment creation, and community empowerment, its expansion often generates unintended environmental pressures and governance challenges. In many developing countries, tourism destinations are characterised by overlapping authorities, fragmented regulatory frameworks, and diverse stakeholder interests that complicate efforts to achieve sustainability (Young, 2009). As a result, the effectiveness of tourism development is no longer determined solely by market performance or infrastructure provision, but by the quality of governance arrangements that shape coordination, accountability, and collective action.

In response to these challenges, collaborative governance has gained prominence as a governance approach capable of addressing complex, cross-sectoral problems. Collaborative governance refers to institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state actors directly in collective decision-making and implementation processes to achieve shared public objectives (Ansell & Gash, 2007). Subsequent studies have expanded this perspective by emphasising the importance of relational dynamics, trust-building, and adaptive learning in sustaining collaboration over time (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2011; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Within the tourism sector, collaborative governance has been associated with improved stakeholder coordination, enhanced legitimacy, and more inclusive management practices. However, much of the existing literature tends to focus on collaboration at a single level of governance—often organisational or project-based partnerships—without sufficiently accounting for the vertical interactions between policy, institutional, and operational domains.

This limitation is particularly evident in tourism destinations that operate within multi-layered administrative systems, such as special economic zones or decentralised governance contexts. In such settings, governance outcomes are shaped not only by horizontal collaboration among stakeholders, but also by the alignment—or misalignment—across different levels of authority. Studies on tourism governance in Indonesia, for example, have highlighted the persistence of sectoral silos, overlapping mandates, and weak coordination between national, provincial, and local governments, which often undermine sustainability initiatives (Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020; Pujiyono et al., 2019). These conditions suggest that collaborative governance cannot be

understood as a standalone mechanism operating at a single level, but rather as a multi-level process embedded within broader institutional and political systems.

Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Banten Province, Indonesia, provides a compelling empirical context for examining these dynamics. As a designated growth pole for tourism investment, Tanjung Lesung is expected to accelerate regional economic development while maintaining the integrity of its coastal and marine ecosystems. Yet, the area has experienced significant ecological pressures resulting from rapid development, environmental exploitation, and inconsistent restoration efforts. At the same time, governance arrangements in Tanjung Lesung involve a wide array of actors, including national and regional government agencies, private investors, SEZ management authorities, local communities, and academic institutions. This constellation of actors creates both opportunities for collaboration and risks of fragmentation, making Tanjung Lesung an analytical case for studying multi-level collaborative governance in tourism ecosystem management.

From a theoretical perspective, addressing such complexity requires an approach that captures the interaction between institutional structures, actor relationships, and learning processes across governance levels. Multi-level governance theory highlights the importance of vertical coordination and policy coherence in systems where authority is dispersed across multiple tiers (Allmendinger, 2011). When combined with collaborative governance, this perspective underscores the need to understand how collaboration is initiated, sustained, and adapted across policy, organisational, and operational domains. However, empirical studies that explicitly model these interactions remain limited, particularly in the context of ecosystem-based tourism governance.

This study seeks to address this gap by proposing a multi-level collaborative governance model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration in Tanjung Lesung. Using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as an analytical and model-building framework, the research examines how collaboration unfolds across three interconnected governance levels—policy, organisational, and operational—and identifies the mechanisms that enable or constrain their integration. The study pursues three objectives: (1) to analyse patterns of collaboration among key stakeholders involved in tourism ecosystem management; (2) to examine the dynamics of collaborative governance across multiple levels of authority; and (3) to develop a conceptual model that integrates ecological restoration with tourism development objectives. By doing so, this research contributes to the

literature on collaborative governance by shifting the focus from descriptive accounts of collaboration toward a systemic understanding of how multi-level interactions shape governance outcomes in complex tourism destinations.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex public problems that cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical control or market mechanisms alone. Ansell and Gash (2007) define collaborative governance as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented decision-making process that is formal, deliberative, and collective. This perspective highlights key enabling conditions, such as trust, shared understanding, and facilitative leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al. (2011) further develop this framework by introducing the concept of collaborative governance regimes, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action.

Recent tourism governance studies have emphasised that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance structures and power relations rather than technical management failures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Moreover, collaborative arrangements often struggle to deliver transformative outcomes when they are not supported by effective governance networks and cross-level coordination (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

While these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding collaboration, they often treat governance contexts as relatively flat institutional spaces. In practice, especially in decentralised or multi-tiered systems, collaboration unfolds across multiple levels of authority with distinct roles, resources, and power relations. Multi-level governance theory addresses this complexity by focusing on the dispersion of authority across national, regional, and local levels, as well as the interactions between them (Allmendinger, 2011). In tourism governance, this dispersion is particularly pronounced, as policy formulation, investment regulation, environmental management, and community engagement are frequently handled by different institutions operating at different scales.

Integrating collaborative governance with a multi-level governance perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how coordination and collaboration operate simultaneously in vertical and horizontal dimensions. Morse and Stephens (2012) describe this integration as a form of

governance “glue,” where trust, interdependence, and shared benefits bind actors together across institutional boundaries. In this view, collaboration is not merely a managerial tool, but a relational process embedded within broader governance systems. The effectiveness of collaborative governance therefore depends not only on stakeholder engagement at a single level, but on the coherence and feedback mechanisms that link policy direction, organisational implementation, and operational practice.

In the context of tourism ecosystem management, this multi-level perspective is essential. Ecosystems are inherently complex and adaptive, requiring governance arrangements that can respond to uncertainty, ecological feedback, and social change. Ostrom (2010) argues that sustainable management of common-pool resources depends on polycentric governance systems, where multiple centres of decision-making operate autonomously, yet are coordinated through shared rules and norms. Applied to tourism, this implies that effective ecosystem restoration requires alignment between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up community initiatives, mediated through organisational networks and learning processes.

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By combining collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and SSM, this research conceptualises tourism ecosystem management as a multi-level collaborative system. At the policy level, collaboration shapes strategic direction, legitimacy, and regulatory coherence. At the organisational level, it structures coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and resource mobilisation. At the operational level, collaboration is enacted through community participation, local knowledge, and day-to-day management practices. These levels are interconnected through continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation. This conceptual framework provides the analytical foundation for examining the governance dynamics of Tanjung Lesung and for developing a

transferable model of multi-level collaborative governance applicable to other tourism destinations facing similar ecological and institutional challenges.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design with an interpretive paradigm to examine the complexity of collaborative governance in tourism ecosystem management. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to understand institutional interactions, stakeholder perceptions, and governance dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement (Neuman, 2006). Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study aims to develop a conceptual governance model grounded in empirical insights.

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is employed as the primary analytical and model-building framework. SSM is particularly suitable for analysing complex and ill-structured problem situations involving multiple actors, divergent interests, and competing worldviews (Checkland, 1999; Checkland & Poulter, 2006). In this research, SSM is used not merely as a methodological tool, but as a sense-making framework to explore how collaborative governance operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels.

3.2. Study Area and Case Selection

The research was conducted in Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone (SEZ) located in Banten Province, Indonesia. Tanjung Lesung was selected as an analytical case because it represents a governance-intensive tourism destination where economic development objectives intersect with ecosystem vulnerability and multi-actor institutional arrangements. The area involves multiple governance layers, including national and regional government agencies, a special economic zone management authority, private investors, local communities, and academic institutions, making it a relevant context for examining multi-level collaborative governance.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected using multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and triangulation. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in tourism ecosystem management. Informants included representatives from national and regional government agencies, the Tanjung Lesung SEZ management authority, private tourism operators, community leaders, and academic experts engaged in environmental restoration initiatives.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their roles, experience, and involvement in collaborative governance processes.

Second, document analysis was undertaken to examine policy frameworks, development plans, regulatory instruments, and institutional agreements related to tourism development and ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These documents provided contextual insight into policy objectives, governance structures, and formal collaboration mechanisms.

Third, participatory observation was conducted during coordination meetings, community activities, and ecosystem restoration programmes to capture real-time interactions among stakeholders and to understand how collaboration is enacted in practice.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the seven-stage process of Soft Systems Methodology: (1) understanding the problematic situation, (2) expressing the situation through rich pictures, (3) formulating root definitions using the CATWOE framework, (4) developing conceptual models of relevant human activity systems, (5) comparing conceptual models with real-world practices, (6) identifying desirable and feasible changes, and (7) proposing actions for governance improvement (Checkland & Poulter, 2006).

Interview transcripts, documents, and observational notes were coded thematically using an iterative process informed by collaborative governance and multi-level governance concepts. The comparison between conceptual models and empirical conditions enabled the identification of governance gaps, enabling factors, and feedback mechanisms across policy, organisational, and operational levels. Through this process, a multi-level collaborative governance model was constructed to synthesise empirical findings and theoretical insights.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied across data sources, methods, and informants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Member checking was conducted by sharing key interpretations with selected informants to ensure accuracy and reduce misinterpretation. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process to account for potential researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by removing identifiable information from transcripts and research outputs. The

study adhered to ethical research standards applicable to social science research in higher education institutions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Governance Fragmentation as a Systemic Problem

The empirical findings indicate that tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung is characterised by systemic fragmentation across governance levels. Rather than functioning as an integrated system, collaboration among actors tends to occur in silos, shaped by sectoral mandates and administrative boundaries. At the policy level, national, provincial, and regency authorities operate under overlapping regulatory frameworks that lack clear mechanisms for vertical coordination. While strategic documents consistently emphasise sustainable tourism and ecosystem preservation, these commitments are often diluted during implementation due to institutional discontinuity and shifting political priorities. This condition reflects what Young (2009) describes as a governance gap, where policy aspirations are not matched by institutional capacity and coherence.

Fragmentation is further reinforced by decentralisation dynamics, which distribute authority without necessarily strengthening coordination. In Tanjung Lesung, provincial government agencies focus on macro-level development and investment facilitation, while local governments bear responsibility for environmental management and community engagement. The absence of a clearly mandated coordinating authority results in blurred accountability, particularly in ecosystem restoration initiatives that require sustained cross-sectoral collaboration. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies of tourism governance in Indonesia, where overlapping mandates and weak intergovernmental alignment undermine sustainability outcomes (Pujiyono et al., 2019; Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020).

From a systems perspective, this fragmentation represents a misalignment between governance structures and the ecological complexity of tourism ecosystems. Ecosystem restoration requires long-term commitment, adaptive management, and continuous feedback across governance levels. However, the findings reveal that policy instruments are often designed as static interventions, insufficiently responsive to local ecological dynamics and social realities. This condition reinforces the argument that conventional, hierarchical governance approaches are ill-suited for managing complex socio-ecological systems such as tourism destinations.

4.2. Multi-Level Collaborative Governance in Practice

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies emerging forms of collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels that collectively shape tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These interactions illustrate how collaborative governance operates as a multi-level process rather than a single institutional arrangement.

4.2.1. Policy Level: Direction, Legitimacy, and Strategic Alignment

At the policy level, collaboration is institutionalised through formal regulatory instruments, strategic development plans, and inter-agency coordination forums. These mechanisms provide legitimacy and strategic direction for tourism development and ecosystem restoration. The establishment of the Tanjung Lesung SEZ has created a policy environment that explicitly links economic growth with environmental sustainability. However, the findings indicate that policy-level collaboration remains largely procedural, focusing on coordination meetings and regulatory compliance rather than substantive integration of ecological objectives into development decisions.

Political turnover and administrative restructuring further weaken policy continuity, limiting the effectiveness of collaborative arrangements. While coordination forums offer spaces for dialogue, they often function as consultative platforms rather than arenas for joint decision-making. This finding aligns with Ansell and Gash's (2007) observation that collaboration without shared ownership and commitment tends to produce symbolic rather than transformative outcomes. Nevertheless, the existence of these policy-level mechanisms provides a critical foundation upon which deeper collaboration can be built, particularly when supported by stable leadership and clear accountability structures.

4.2.2. Organisational Level: Coordination, Partnership, and Knowledge Integration

At the organisational level, collaboration takes the form of partnerships among government agencies, the SEZ management authority, private investors, and academic institutions. These partnerships play a pivotal role in translating policy intentions into programmes and projects. The SEZ management authority acts as an intermediary organisation, facilitating coordination between public and private actors while mediating competing interests.

The findings reveal that organisational collaboration is most effective when it involves knowledge co-production and shared problem-solving. Joint initiatives between universities and tourism operators, for example, have contributed to ecosystem monitoring, environmental impact assessments, and community-based restoration programmes. Such collaborations reflect Emerson and Nabatchi's (2015) concept of collaborative capacity, where institutional arrangements enable actors to pool resources, expertise, and legitimacy.

However, organisational collaboration remains uneven and often project-based. Divergent organisational goals—particularly between regulatory agencies and profit-oriented private actors—limit the depth of collaboration. Environmental restoration initiatives are sometimes perceived as secondary to investment objectives, resulting in selective implementation. This tension underscores the importance of embedding collaborative norms and performance indicators within organisational structures, rather than relying on ad hoc agreements or personal networks.

4.2.3. Operational Level: Community Participation and Adaptive Practice

At the operational level, collaborative governance is enacted most visibly through community participation. Local communities in Tanjung Lesung are directly involved in ecosystem restoration activities, waste management initiatives, and eco-tourism operations. Their engagement reflects both practical necessity and the mobilisation of local ecological knowledge accumulated through long-term interaction with the coastal environment.

The findings highlight that community-based collaboration enhances the adaptability and sustainability of restoration efforts. Local actors demonstrate a strong sense of ownership, particularly when initiatives align with livelihood opportunities such as community-based tourism and environmental stewardship. This supports Ostrom's (2010) argument that effective management of common-pool resources depends on the active involvement of local users who possess contextual knowledge and a stake in long-term outcomes.

Nevertheless, power asymmetries persist. Community participation is often limited to implementation stages, with limited influence over agenda-setting and investment decisions. This constraint reduces the transformative potential of collaboration and risks reinforcing dependency rather than empowerment. Addressing this imbalance requires governance arrangements that institutionalise community representation and integrate local perspectives into higher-level decision-making processes.

4.3. A Proposed Model of Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Synthesising the findings across governance levels, this study proposes a Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration (Figure 1).

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model to explain how tourism ecosystem management is shaped through interactions across governance levels. The model conceptualises governance as a vertically interconnected system consisting of three analytical levels—policy, organisational, and operational—linked through core collaborative mechanisms that enable coordination, learning, and adaptive management.

At the policy level, national and regional governments provide strategic direction through regulations, development visions, and policy frameworks for tourism and ecosystem management. This level defines macro-level objectives and institutional mandates that guide tourism development within special economic zones. However, policy effectiveness depends on how these strategic directions are translated and operationalised at lower levels.

The organisational level functions as a bridging arena between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation. Key actors at this level include the special economic zone authority, sectoral agencies, and coordinating institutions responsible for aligning policy objectives with organisational capacities and resources. This level plays a critical role in facilitating cross-sector coordination, managing inter-institutional relationships, and translating policy goals into operational programmes.

At the operational level, collaboration occurs through direct engagement among local communities, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions. This level is responsible for implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives, sustainable tourism practices, and community-based programmes. Operational actors also generate context-specific knowledge and practical insights that are essential for adaptive governance but are often weakly integrated into higher-level decision-making.

Across all governance levels, the model identifies four core collaborative mechanisms—communication, trust, coordination, and learning—that function as cross-cutting enablers of effective governance. Communication facilitates information exchange and mutual understanding, trust strengthens commitment and legitimacy, coordination aligns roles and resources, and learning enables feedback loops between practice and policy. The interaction of these mechanisms allows governance processes to evolve adaptively in response to ecological and institutional complexity.

The model suggests that effective tourism ecosystem management emerges not from isolated collaborative arrangements but from sustained interaction and feedback across governance levels. By emphasising vertical integration and institutional learning, the proposed model contributes to collaborative governance theory and offers practical insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor contexts.

4.4. Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings contribute to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that collaboration must be analysed as a multi-level phenomenon. While existing frameworks highlight relational dynamics within collaborative arenas, this study shows that governance outcomes are equally shaped by vertical linkages between policy, organisational, and operational domains. Collaboration becomes meaningful only when these linkages are mutually reinforcing rather than fragmented.

The integration of Soft Systems Methodology adds analytical value by enabling a systemic interpretation of governance complexity. SSM allows researchers and practitioners to move beyond linear cause–effect explanations and to engage with governance as a learning system characterised by ambiguity and contestation. This approach complements collaborative governance theory by foregrounding process design, reflexivity, and adaptation.

This finding reinforces the argument that collaborative governance effectiveness depends on the quality of governance networks and their capacity to balance efficiency, legitimacy, and learning across institutional levels (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). In ecosystem-based contexts, such as tourism destinations, governance arrangements must also remain adaptive to ecological uncertainty and social change, as highlighted in environmental governance literature (Armitage et al., 2012).

Practically, the proposed model offers guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen tourism ecosystem governance. Rather than focusing solely on institutional restructuring, interventions should prioritise mechanisms that enhance communication, trust, and learning across governance levels. Establishing cross-level forums, shared monitoring systems, and inclusive decision-making processes can transform fragmented collaborations into adaptive governance systems capable of sustaining both ecological restoration and tourism development.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the effectiveness of tourism ecosystem management and restoration in Tanjung Lesung is determined not by the strength of individual institutions, but by the quality of interaction and integration among actors operating across different levels of governance. The findings reveal that collaborative governance in this context functions as a complex, evolving system that spans policy, organisational, and operational dimensions. Each level contributes distinct yet interdependent roles: policy actors provide strategic direction and legitimacy,

organisational networks translate policy into coordinated programmes, and local communities enact governance through daily practices grounded in ecological knowledge. However, persistent fragmentation, overlapping authority, and uneven collaborative capacity continue to constrain coherence across these levels.

By applying Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), this research offers a systemic interpretation of collaborative governance that captures the plurality of stakeholder worldviews and the dynamic nature of governance processes. Rather than treating collaboration as a static institutional arrangement, the study conceptualises it as a learning-oriented social system shaped by dialogue, negotiation, and adaptation. The proposed multi-level collaborative governance model integrates three governance subsystems—policy, organisational, and operational—through continuous feedback loops driven by communication, coordination, trust, and learning. These elements function as governance glue that enables alignment across hierarchical and sectoral boundaries, reinforcing the argument that sustainable tourism governance requires relational capacity as much as formal structure (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the collaborative governance literature by extending its analytical focus beyond single-level collaboration toward a multi-level perspective. It shows that collaborative effectiveness emerges not from isolated partnerships, but from the interaction between vertical coordination and horizontal cooperation. The integration of SSM enriches this perspective by providing a methodological lens capable of modelling complexity without oversimplification, thereby complementing existing governance frameworks that often struggle to address ambiguity and institutional diversity. In doing so, the study bridges collaborative governance theory with adaptive and polycentric governance insights (Ostrom, 2010; Young, 2009).

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer important implications for policymakers and practitioners involved in tourism ecosystem management. Strengthening collaborative governance requires more than regulatory harmonisation or organisational restructuring. It demands deliberate investment in processes that cultivate trust, shared understanding, and collective learning across governance levels. Establishing cross-level coordination forums, integrating monitoring and evaluation systems, and institutionalising community participation in decision-making can enhance the durability and legitimacy of restoration initiatives. In tourism-based special economic zones such as Tanjung Lesung, where economic imperatives often dominate, embedding

ecological values within collaborative governance arrangements is essential for long-term sustainability.

Ultimately, the experience of Tanjung Lesung illustrates that sustainable tourism governance is not an endpoint but a continuous process of alignment among actors who share responsibility for a common ecosystem. Collaborative governance, when understood as an adaptive and multi-level system, enables tourism development to function not merely as an engine of growth, but as a catalyst for ecological recovery and community empowerment. By foregrounding interaction, learning, and shared stewardship, the proposed model offers a transferable framework for other tourism destinations confronting similar ecological and institutional challenges in developing country contexts.

Declarations

Funding

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions

Author 1 conceptualised the study; Author 2 conducted field data; Author 3 analysed data and wrote the draft.

Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

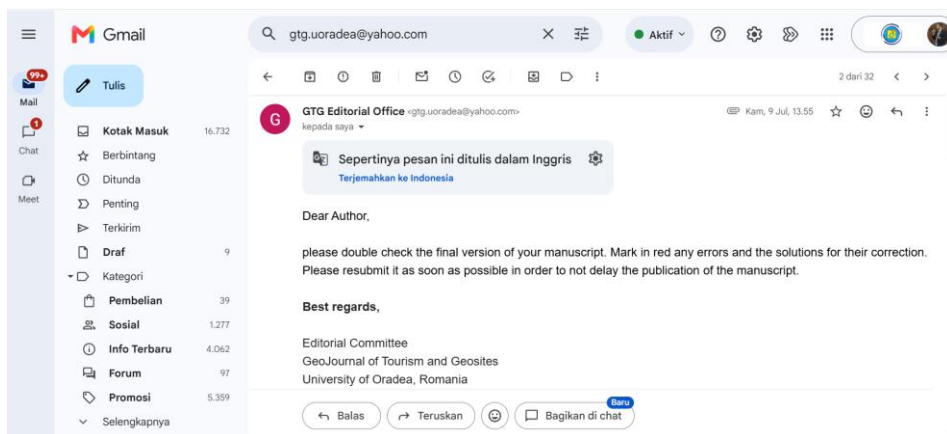
Ethics Approval (if required)

Not applicable / Approved by [Ethics Committee] ...

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A MULTI-LEVEL COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE MODEL FOR TOURISM ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT: EVIDENCE FROM A SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE IN INDONESIA

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Abstract: Tourism ecosystem management increasingly faces governance challenges arising from institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-actor complexity, particularly in developing country contexts. This study examines how multi-level collaborative governance operates in managing and restoring the tourism ecosystem of Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone in Indonesia. The research aims to develop a conceptual model that explains how collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels shapes ecosystem restoration outcomes. Using a qualitative approach grounded in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study draws on in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation involving government agencies, private sector actors, community groups, and academic institutions. The findings reveal that collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung functions as an interconnected but uneven system. While collaboration exists at each governance level, weak vertical coordination,

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overlapping authority, and limited institutional learning constrain integration across levels. Community participation and knowledge co-production emerge as critical strengths at the operational level, yet their influence on higher-level decision-making remains limited. This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model that integrates policy direction, organisational coordination, and operational practice through communication, trust, coordination, and learning. The model contributes to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that governance effectiveness depends on cross-level interaction rather than isolated partnerships. Practically, the findings offer insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor settings.

Keywords: collaborative governance, multi-level governance, tourism ecosystem management, Soft Systems Methodology, ecosystem restoration, sustainable tourism

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INTRODUCTION ALL CHANGES SHOULD BE MARKED IN RED

Tourism governance increasingly operates within complex socio-ecological systems characterised by institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-level authority dispersion. Such conditions resemble what public policy scholars define as wicked problems—issues that resist linear solutions due to interdependence, uncertainty, and contested values (Head & Alford, 2015). In tourism destinations, especially in developing countries, governance arrangements are frequently shaped by overlapping mandates, decentralised authority, and sectoral silos that weaken policy coherence and sustainability outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge, 2016).

Collaborative governance (CG) has emerged as a prominent response to these governance deficits. Defined as institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state actors in consensus-oriented decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008), CG is widely promoted as a mechanism for managing cross-sectoral complexity. Subsequent scholarship conceptualises collaborative governance regimes as dynamic systems shaped by principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action (Emerson et al., 2012). More recent work emphasises the political and power-laden dimensions of collaboration, arguing that governance effectiveness depends on institutional design, power distribution, and meta-governance capacity (Ansell et al., 2020; Torfing et al., 2012).

Despite its normative appeal, collaborative governance frequently unfolds within fragmented multi-level governance systems where authority is dispersed across national, regional, and local tiers (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Empirical studies demonstrate that such dispersion may produce coordination deficits, regulatory overlap, and accountability ambiguity, thereby constraining collaborative effectiveness (Peters, 2015; Trein et al., 2019). In tourism contexts, limited vertical integration between policy formulation and local implementation remains a persistent challenge (Dredge, 2016; Hall, 2011).

This study argues that collaborative governance cannot be adequately understood without accounting for its embeddedness in multi-level policy structures. Using Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Indonesia as an empirical case, this research examines how collaboration operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels in tourism ecosystem management (Sukran, et. al., 2025). By integrating collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study develops a multi-level collaborative governance model that explains how cross-level interactions shape ecosystem restoration outcomes.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex public problems that cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical control or market mechanisms alone. Ansell & Gash (2008) define collaborative governance as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented decision-making process that is formal, deliberative, and collective. This perspective highlights key enabling conditions, such as trust, shared understanding, and facilitative leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al., (2012) further develop this framework by introducing the concept of collaborative governance regimes, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action.

Recent tourism governance studies have emphasised that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance structures and power relations rather than technical management failures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Moreover, collaborative arrangements often struggle to deliver transformative outcomes when they are not supported by effective governance networks and cross-level coordination (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

While these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding collaboration, they often treat governance contexts as relatively flat institutional spaces. In practice, especially in decentralised or multi-tiered systems, collaboration unfolds across multiple levels of authority with distinct roles, resources, and power relations.

Multi-level governance theory addresses this complexity by focusing on the dispersion of authority across national, regional, and local levels, as well as the interactions between them (Allmendinger, 2017).

In tourism governance, this dispersion is particularly pronounced, as policy formulation, investment regulation, environmental management, and community engagement are frequently handled by different institutions operating at different scales. Integrating collaborative governance with a multi-level governance perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how coordination and collaboration operate simultaneously in vertical and horizontal dimensions. Morse & Stephens (2012) describe this integration as a form of governance “glue,” where trust, interdependence, and shared benefits bind actors together across institutional boundaries. In this view, collaboration is not merely a managerial tool, but a relational process embedded within broader governance systems. The effectiveness of collaborative governance therefore depends not only on stakeholder engagement at a single level, but on the coherence and feedback mechanisms that link policy direction, organisational implementation, and operational practice.

In the context of tourism ecosystem management, this multi-level perspective is essential. Ecosystems are inherently complex and adaptive, requiring governance arrangements that can respond to uncertainty, ecological feedback, and social change. Ostrom (2010) argues that sustainable management of common-pool resources depends on polycentric governance systems, where multiple centres of decision-making operate autonomously, yet are coordinated through shared rules and norms. Applied to tourism, this implies that effective ecosystem restoration requires alignment between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up community initiatives, mediated through organisational networks and learning processes.

To operationalise this complexity, this study adopts Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a complementary analytical framework. Developed by Checkland (1999) and further elaborated by Checkland & Poulter (2006), SSM is designed to address “messy” problem situations characterised by multiple actors, divergent worldviews (Weltanschauung), and ambiguous objectives. Rather than seeking optimal solutions, SSM facilitates learning by modelling human activity systems and comparing conceptual models with real-world practices.

Within this study, SSM serves not merely as a data collection method, but as a model-building approach that enables the integration of collaborative governance and multi-level governance perspectives. By combining collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and SSM, this research conceptualises tourism ecosystem management as a multi-level collaborative system. At the policy level, collaboration shapes strategic direction, legitimacy, and regulatory coherence. At the organisational level, it structures coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and resource mobilisation. At the operational level, collaboration is enacted through community participation, local knowledge, and day-to-day management practices. These levels are interconnected through continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation.

This conceptual framework provides the analytical foundation for examining the governance dynamics of Tanjung Lesung and for developing a transferable model of multi-level collaborative governance applicable to other tourism destinations facing similar ecological and institutional challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method approach combining qualitative analysis with Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to examine collaborative governance dynamics and develop a multilevel model for Tanjung Lesung tourism ecosystem management. Primary data were collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with government officials (n=15), private sector representatives from PT Banten West Java (n=5), and community actors including Pokdarwis leaders and UMKM operators (n=10), supplemented by direct observation and informal discussions from August to November 2025. Secondary data comprised policy documents (RIPARNAS, RPJMN, RPJMD), institutional records, and KEK operational reports. Data processing followed qualitative triangulation—transcription, filtering, SSM analysis, and validation through theoretical cross-checking—yielding the Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) model through SSM's seven iterative stages. Data analysis followed the seven-stage SSM process, including problem structuring, CATWOE formulation, conceptual modelling, and real-world comparison. Thematic coding was guided by collaborative governance constructs (trust, coordination, shared motivation) and multi-level governance dimensions (vertical and horizontal integration). Triangulation and member checking enhanced credibility (Miles et al., 2014).

The stages of the research as follow the figure below. Soft Systems Methodology systematically derived the MLCG model through seven iterative stages applied to primary data: (1) unstructured problem situation (KEK/PSN fragmentation); (2) rich picture (investment vs. resilience tensions); (3) root definitions (socio-ecological transformation); (4) conceptual modeling (co-planning/implementation/evaluation); (5) comparison with reality (administrative gaps); (6) feasible/desirable changes; and (7) action recommendations yielding the three-tier MLCG structure [Checkland, 1999].



Figure 1. ?????????????????????? This is figure 1, please write what it represents.

RESULTS

The multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung demonstrates a vertically and horizontally integrated configuration spanning policy, organizational, and operational levels. At the policy level, central government agencies initiate KEK development through regulatory frameworks and strategic infrastructure support, which provincial and district governments translate into local planning documents and derivative programs. The organizational level features institutional structures involving district government, KEK operator PT BWJ, local agencies, BUMDes, academic partners, and NGOs that coordinate planning, role division, and program oversight. Operationally, Pokdarwis, UMKM groups, fisher collectives, youth organizations, and women's economic groups serve as frontline actors implementing economic recovery, ecotourism, environmental conservation, and disaster education initiatives.

Key Actors Across Governance Levels

Multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung operates across policy, organizational, and operational domains, with vertical coordination from central KEK/PSN mandates to local implementation.

Table 1. Multi-level actor configuration in Tanjung Lesung's collaborative governance model

Governance Level	Key Actors	Primary Roles	Key Contributions
Policy (National)	Kemenparekraf, PUPR, BKPM	Policy framework, infrastructure investment	RIPARNAS, RPJMN, toll road, coastal protection
Policy (Provincial)	Banten Province (Bappeda, Tourism Office)	Policy mediation, program alignment	KEK prioritization in provincial tourism strategy
Policy (District)	Pandeglang Regency (Dispar, DPMPSTP, Bappeda)	Local policy translation, capacity building	RPJMD integration, homestay training, UMKM support
Organizational	PT BWJ, OPD agencies, BUMDes	KEK management, investment facilitation	Events, hotels, marina, Islamic Center development Bab-IV-Gambaran-Kolaborasi-Pengelolaan-Pariwisata-Tanjung-Lesung-Draft.docx
Operational (Community)	Pokdarwis, UMKM, fishers, youth groups	Implementation, local innovation	Homestays, mangrove ecotourism, tuna fishing festival, turtle conservation Bab-
Strategic Partners	UGM, UPI, President University, NGOs	Capacity enhancement, technical support	Digital marketing training, conservation education, disaster mitigation

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At policy level, central-provincial-district alignment faces synchronization gaps: "National policies change rapidly... we often work with policy interpretations" [Provincial Official, I-P2, 2025]. Organizationally, PT BWJ, OPDs, and BUMDes synergize planning despite sectoral egos: "Sectoral egos still emerge over authority" [Bappeda

Officer, I-O5, 2025]. Operationally, Pokdarwis and UMKM demonstrate co-production evolution: "From government programs to self-management... we feel ownership" [Pokdarwis Leader, I-C10, 2025].

These verbatim insights reveal MCG stages: preconception (cross-sector awareness: "We realized we can't do it alone" [Dispar Officer, I-P8, 2025], initiation (trust-building: "Initial suspicion gave way to understanding" [Community Rep, I-C3, 2025], formalization (MoUs/forums); operation (quick wins like digital promotion); and transformation (adaptive learning). Policy command-and-adjust patterns dominate higher levels, while operational joint capacity strengthens local resilience, confirming nested governance where lower-level innovations pressure upper-level reforms. Collaborative governance dynamics reveal interdependent yet unbalanced relationships between state, corporate KEK operators, and local communities. Positive dynamics include intensified interactions through KEK coordination forums, cross-institutional MoUs, CSR tourism programs, joint training, and operational activities like homestay management, cultural festivals, and coastal conservation. These processes drive a shift from top-down approaches toward more participatory partnerships, evidenced by strengthened collective capacity, growing community ownership, and emerging inter-organizational routines. However, challenges persist in vertical coordination due to rapidly changing national policies outpacing local adaptation capacity, sectoral egos among organizations, and the absence of fully integrative decision-making platforms.

The emergent model constitutes an evolutionary Multilevel Collaborative Governance (MCG) framework operating through sequential stages—preconception, initiation, formalization, operation, and termination-transformation—interlinked across governance levels. The preconception stage reflects actors' recognition that post-tsunami recovery cannot be addressed sectorally, prioritizing collaboration in policy and institutional initiatives. Initiation involves negotiation and commitment-building, with district government mediating between PT BWJ and communities while cross-agency forums align visions. Formalization produces clearer governance structures through derivative regulations, KEK coordination teams, and community institutions like tourism cooperatives. The operation stage manifests co-production practices where government, KEK operators, and communities jointly implement infrastructure, economic empowerment, conservation, and digital promotion programs. Termination represents reflective transformation rather than cessation, yielding policy adjustments, partnership restructuring, and adaptive capacity strengthening for subsequent governance cycles.

This MCG configuration demonstrates that post-disaster collaborative governance constitutes an ongoing learning process that continuously renegotiates power relations, actor roles, and coordination mechanisms across governance levels.

DISCUSSION

1. Governance Fragmentation as a Systemic Problem

The empirical findings indicate that tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung is characterised by systemic fragmentation across governance levels. Rather than functioning as an integrated system, collaboration among actors tends to occur in silos, shaped by sectoral mandates and administrative boundaries. At the policy level, national, provincial, and regency authorities operate under overlapping regulatory frameworks that lack clear mechanisms for vertical coordination. While strategic documents consistently emphasise sustainable tourism and ecosystem preservation, these commitments are often diluted during implementation due to institutional discontinuity and shifting political priorities.

This condition reflects what Young (2009) describes as a governance gap, where policy aspirations are not matched by institutional capacity and coherence. Fragmentation is further reinforced by decentralisation dynamics, which distribute authority without necessarily strengthening coordination. In Tanjung Lesung, provincial government agencies focus on macro-level development and investment facilitation, while local governments bear responsibility for environmental management and community engagement. The absence of a clearly mandated coordinating authority results in blurred accountability, particularly in ecosystem restoration initiatives that require sustained cross-sectoral collaboration. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies of tourism governance in Indonesia, where overlapping mandates and weak intergovernmental alignment undermine sustainability outcomes (Pujiyono et al., 2019; Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020).

From a systems perspective, this fragmentation represents a misalignment between governance structures and the ecological complexity of tourism ecosystems. Ecosystem restoration requires long-term commitment, adaptive management, and continuous feedback across governance levels. However, the findings reveal that policy instruments are often designed as static interventions, insufficiently responsive to local ecological dynamics and social realities. This condition reinforces the argument that conventional, hierarchical governance approaches are ill-suited for managing complex socio-ecological systems such as tourism destinations.

2. Multi-Level Collaborative Governance in Practice

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies emerging forms of collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels that collectively shape tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These interactions illustrate how collaborative governance operates as a multi-level process rather than a single institutional arrangement.

In practice, Tanjung Lesung demonstrates how multilevel collaboration evolves through partially synchronised yet asymmetrical processes. Policy-level engagement remains largely procedural, with KEK/PSN regulations providing formal mandates but limited mechanisms for incorporating local feedback or ecosystem-specific adaptations. Organisationally, coordination forums and MoUs between PT BWJ, district agencies, and BUMDes facilitate resource pooling and joint planning, though sectoral silos persist. Operational collaboration proves most dynamic, where Pokdarwis groups and UMKM networks actively co-produce ecotourism innovations, homestay standards, and disaster resilience practices that gradually influence higher-level priorities (Sumarmi et al., 2026).

Findings confirm Ansell & Gash (2008) preconditions operate unevenly across levels, with operational collaboration strongest per Emerson et al., (2012). Policy proceduralism limits transformative potential (Hooghe & Marks, 2003)

3. A Proposed Model of Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Synthesising the findings across governance levels, this study proposes a Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Multilevel Collaborative Governance in the Management of the Tanjung Lesung Tourism Ecosystem

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model to explain how tourism ecosystem management is shaped through interactions across governance levels. The model conceptualises governance as a vertically interconnected system consisting of three analytical levels—policy, organisational, and operational—linked through core collaborative mechanisms that enable coordination, learning, and adaptive management.

At the policy level, national and regional governments provide strategic direction through regulations, development visions, and policy frameworks for tourism and ecosystem management. This level defines macro-level objectives and institutional mandates that guide tourism development within special economic zones. However, policy effectiveness depends on how these strategic directions are translated and operationalised at lower levels. The organisational level functions as a bridging arena between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation. Key actors at this level include the special economic zone authority, sectoral agencies, and coordinating institutions responsible for aligning policy objectives with organisational capacities and resources. This level plays a critical role in facilitating cross-sector coordination, managing inter-institutional relationships, and translating policy goals into operational programmes.

At the operational level, collaboration occurs through direct engagement among local communities, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions. This level is responsible for implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives, sustainable tourism practices, and community-based programmes (Sumarmi et al.,

2026). Operational actors also generate context-specific knowledge and practical insights that are essential for adaptive governance but are often weakly integrated into higher-level decision-making.

Across all governance levels, the model identifies four core collaborative mechanisms—communication, trust, coordination, and learning—that function as cross-cutting enablers of effective governance. Communication facilitates information exchange and mutual understanding, trust strengthens commitment and legitimacy, coordination aligns roles and resources, and learning enables feedback loops between practice and policy. The interaction of these mechanisms allows governance processes to evolve adaptively in response to ecological and institutional complexity.

The model suggests that effective tourism ecosystem management emerges not from isolated collaborative arrangements but from sustained interaction and feedback across governance levels. By emphasising vertical integration and institutional learning, the proposed model contributes to collaborative governance theory and offers practical insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study advances collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that tourism ecosystem management effectiveness hinges on cross-level integration rather than isolated partnerships. The SSM-derived Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) model integrates policy direction, organizational coordination, and operational co-production through communication, trust, coordination, and learning mechanisms, addressing KEK governance fragmentation empirically validated in Tanjung Lesung.

Policymakers should prioritize statutory collaboration forums and KEK broker repositioning. Future research should test MLCG scalability across Indonesia's disaster-vulnerable tourism SEZs using longitudinal and comparative designs.

LIMITATION

This study presents three primary limitations. First, reliance on document analysis and cross-sectional interviews (n=30) limits longitudinal tracking of MLCG implementation dynamics. Second, single-case focus on Tanjung Lesung constrains generalizability despite contextual richness. Third, SSM's interpretive nature introduces researcher subjectivity despite triangulation. Future research should employ Social Network Analysis to quantify actor interactions, longitudinal designs to assess MLCG evolution, and comparative studies across Indonesian SEZs (Mandalika, Labuan Bajo) to test model transferability. Action research with KEK practitioners would validate practical applicability.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, B.P.; methodology, B.P. and R.; investigation, R. and A.A.A.U.; formal analysis, N.A.P. and B.P.; data curation, R. and N.A.P.; writing – original draft preparation, B.P. and N.A.P.; writing – review and editing, B.P., R., and A.A.A.U.; visualization, N.A.P.; supervision, B.P.; project administration, B.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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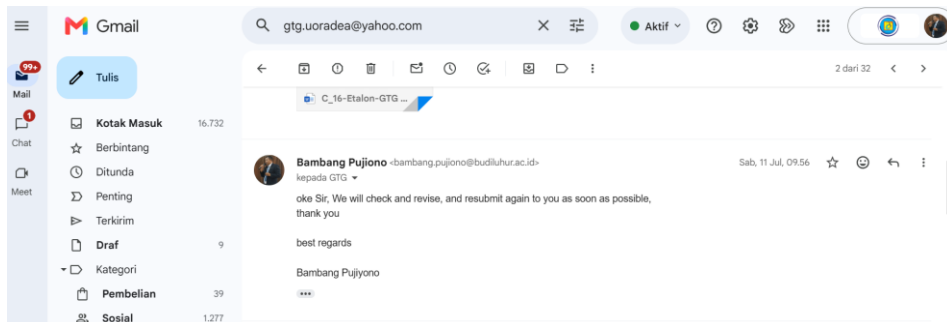
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A MULTI-LEVEL COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE MODEL FOR TOURISM ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT: EVIDENCE FROM A SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE IN INDONESIA

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Abstract: Tourism ecosystem management increasingly faces governance challenges arising from institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-actor complexity, particularly in developing country contexts. This study examines how multi-level collaborative governance operates in managing and restoring the tourism ecosystem of Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone in Indonesia. The research aims to develop a conceptual model that explains how collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels shapes ecosystem restoration outcomes. Using a qualitative approach grounded in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study draws on in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation involving government agencies, private sector actors, community groups, and academic institutions. The findings reveal that collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung functions as an interconnected but uneven system. While collaboration exists at each governance level, weak vertical coordination, overlapping authority, and limited institutional learning constrain integration across levels. Community participation and knowledge co-production emerge as critical strengths at the operational level, yet their influence on higher-level decision-making remains limited. This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model that integrates policy direction, organisational coordination, and operational practice through communication, trust, coordination, and learning. The model contributes to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that governance effectiveness depends on cross-level interaction rather than isolated partnerships. Practically, the findings offer insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor settings.

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Keywords: collaborative governance, multi-level governance, tourism ecosystem management, Soft Systems Methodology, ecosystem restoration, sustainable tourism

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INTRODUCTION ALL CHANGES SHOULD BE MARKED IN RED

Tourism governance increasingly operates within complex socio-ecological systems characterised by institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-level authority dispersion. Such conditions resemble what public policy scholars define as wicked problems—issues that resist linear solutions due to interdependence, uncertainty, and contested values (Head & Alford, 2015). In tourism destinations, especially in developing countries, governance arrangements are frequently shaped by overlapping mandates, decentralised authority, and sectoral silos that weaken policy coherence and sustainability outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge, 2016).

Collaborative governance (CG) has emerged as a prominent response to these governance deficits. Defined as institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state actors in consensus-oriented decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008), CG is widely promoted as a mechanism for managing cross-sectoral complexity. Subsequent scholarship conceptualises collaborative governance regimes as dynamic systems shaped by principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action (Emerson et al., 2012). More recent work emphasises the political and power-laden dimensions of collaboration, arguing that governance effectiveness depends on institutional design, power distribution, and meta-governance capacity (Ansell et al., 2025; Torfing et al., 2012).

Despite its normative appeal, collaborative governance frequently operates within fragmented multi-level governance systems where authority is distributed across national, regional, and local tiers (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Such institutional fragmentation often creates coordination challenges, overlapping policy responsibilities, and blurred accountability, making it more difficult to sustain effective collaboration across governance levels (Peters, 2015; Trein et al., 2019).

Previous studies have shown that tourism policy implementation is frequently constrained by weak vertical coordination between national policy formulation and local implementation, resulting in fragmented governance and inconsistent policy outcomes. (Krutwaysho, & Bramwell, 2010; Wang & Ap, 2013). In tourism contexts, limited vertical integration between policy formulation and local implementation remains a persistent challenge (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Hall, 2011).

This study argues that collaborative governance cannot be adequately understood without accounting for its embeddedness in multi-level policy structures. Using Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Indonesia as an empirical case, this research examines how collaboration operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels in tourism ecosystem management (Sukran, et. al., 2025). By integrating collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study develops a multi-level collaborative governance model that explains how cross-level interactions shape ecosystem restoration outcomes.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex public problems that cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical control or market mechanisms alone. Ansell & Gash (2008) define collaborative governance as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented decision-making process that is formal, deliberative, and collective. This perspective highlights key enabling conditions, such as trust, shared understanding, and facilitative leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al., (2012) further develop this framework by introducing the concept of collaborative governance regimes, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action.

Recent tourism governance studies have emphasised that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance structures and power relations rather than technical management failures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Moreover, collaborative arrangements often struggle to deliver transformative outcomes when they are not supported by effective governance networks and cross-level coordination (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

While these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding collaboration, they often treat governance contexts as relatively flat institutional spaces. In practice, especially in decentralised or multi-tiered systems, collaboration unfolds across multiple levels of authority with distinct roles, resources, and power relations.

Multi-level governance theory addresses this complexity by focusing on the dispersion of authority across national, regional, and local levels, as well as the interactions between them (Allmendinger, 2017). Its shift from top-down regulation to networked decision-making requires conservation practitioners to adapt by engaging with

diverse actors, integrating social equity into planning, and applying flexible, adaptive strategies across different scales to effectively manage ecological resilience (Amitage et.al.,2012).

In tourism governance, this dispersion is particularly pronounced, as policy formulation, investment regulation, environmental management, and community engagement are frequently handled by different institutions operating at different scales. Integrating collaborative governance with a multi-level governance perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of how coordination occurs simultaneously across vertical and horizontal institutional arrangements. Rather than functioning solely as a managerial mechanism, collaborative governance operates as a relational process in which trust, mutual understanding, interdependence, and shared motivation enable actors to coordinate collective action across institutional boundaries (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). This relational perspective is especially important in multi-level governance settings, where policy coherence depends on continuous interaction and feedback among actors operating at national, regional, and local levels. The effectiveness of collaborative governance therefore depends not only on stakeholder engagement at a single level, but also on the coherence and adaptive feedback mechanisms that connect policy formulation, organisational implementation, and operational practice.

In the context of tourism ecosystem management, this multi-level perspective is essential. Ecosystems are inherently complex and adaptive, requiring governance arrangements that can respond to uncertainty, ecological feedback, and social change. Ostrom (2010) argues that sustainable management of common-pool resources depends on polycentric governance systems, where multiple centres of decision-making operate autonomously, yet are coordinated through shared rules and norms. Applied to tourism, this implies that effective ecosystem restoration requires alignment between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up community initiatives, mediated through organisational networks and learning processes.

To operationalise this complexity, this study adopts Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a complementary analytical framework. Developed by Checkland (1999) and further elaborated by Checkland & Poulter (2006), SSM is designed to address “messy” problem situations characterised by multiple actors, divergent worldviews (Weltanschauung), and ambiguous objectives. Rather than seeking optimal solutions, SSM facilitates learning by modelling human activity systems and comparing conceptual models with real-world practices.

Within this study, SSM serves not merely as a data collection method, but as a model-building approach that enables the integration of collaborative governance and multi-level governance perspectives. By combining collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and SSM, this research conceptualises tourism ecosystem management as a multi-level collaborative system. At the policy level, collaboration shapes strategic direction, legitimacy, and regulatory coherence. At the organisational level, it structures coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and resource mobilisation. At the operational level, collaboration is enacted through community participation, local knowledge, and day-to-day management practices. These levels are interconnected through continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation.

This conceptual framework provides the analytical foundation for examining the governance dynamics of Tanjung Lesung and for developing a transferable model of multi-level collaborative governance applicable to other tourism destinations facing similar ecological and institutional challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method approach combining qualitative analysis with Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to examine collaborative governance dynamics and develop a multilevel model for Tanjung Lesung tourism ecosystem management. Primary data were collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with government officials (n=15), private sector representatives from PT Banten West Java (n=5), and community actors including *Pokdarwis* leaders (a community-based tourism awareness organization established to support local tourism development), and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) operators (n=10), supplemented by direct observation and informal discussions from August to November 2025. Secondary data comprised policy documents (RIPARNAS, RPJMN, RPJMD), institutional records, and Special Economic Zone (SEZ) operational reports. Data processing followed qualitative triangulation—transcription, filtering, SSM analysis, and validation through theoretical cross-checking—yielding the Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) model through SSM's seven iterative stages. Data analysis followed the seven-stage SSM process, including problem structuring, CATWOE formulation, conceptual modelling, and real-world comparison. Thematic coding was guided by collaborative governance constructs (trust, coordination, shared motivation) and multi-level governance dimensions (vertical and horizontal integration). Triangulation and member checking enhanced credibility (Miles et al., 2014; Newman, 2021).

Soft Systems Methodology systematically derived the MLCG model through seven iterative stages applied to primary data: (1) unstructured problem situation (SEZ/PSN fragmentation); (2) rich picture (investment vs. resilience

tensions); (3) root definitions (socio-ecological transformation); (4) conceptual modeling (co-planning/implementation/evaluation); (5) comparison with reality (administrative gaps); (6) feasible/desirable changes; and (7) action recommendations yielding the three-tier MLCG structure [Checkland, 1999].

The stages of the research especially data processing as follow the figure below.



Figure 1. Stages Of Data Processing

RESULTS

The multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung demonstrates a vertically and horizontally integrated configuration spanning policy, organizational, and operational levels. At the policy level, central government agencies initiate SEZ development through regulatory frameworks and strategic infrastructure support, which provincial and district governments translate into local planning documents and derivative programs. The organizational level features institutional structures involving district government, SEZ operator PT BWJ, local agencies, BUMDes (Village-Owned Enterprise), academic partners, and NGOs that coordinate planning, role division, and program oversight. Operationally, Pokdarwis, MSMeS groups, fisher collectives, youth organizations, and women's economic groups serve as frontline actors implementing economic recovery, ecotourism, environmental conservation, and disaster education initiatives.

Key Actors Across Governance Levels

Multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung operates across policy, organizational, and operational domains, with vertical coordination from central SEZ/PSN mandates to local implementation.

Table 1. Multi-level actor configuration in Tanjung Lesung's collaborative governance model

Governance Level	Key Actors	Primary Roles	Key Contributions
Policy (National)	Kemenparekraf (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy), PUPR (Ministry of Public Works and Housing), BKPM (Indonesia Investment Coordinating Board)	Policy framework, infrastructure investment	RIPARNAS (National Tourism Development Master Plan), RPJMN (National Medium-Term Development Plan), toll road, coastal protection
Policy (Provincial)	Banten Province (Bappeda, Tourism Office)	Policy mediation, program alignment	KEK (SEZ) prioritization in provincial tourism strategy
Policy (District)	Pandeglang Regency (Dispar, DPMPTSP, Bappeda)	Local policy translation, capacity building	RPJMD (Regional Medium-Term Development Plan) integration, homestay training, MSMeS support
Organizational	PT BWJ, OPD (Regional Government Agencies), BUMDes	KEK management, investment facilitation	Events, hotels, marine, Islamic Center development

Operational (Community)	Pokdarwis, MSMeS, fishers, youth groups	Implementation, local innovation	Homestays, mangrove ecotourism, tuna fishing festival, turtle conservation Bab-
Strategic Partners	UGM, UPI, President University, NGOs	Capacity enhancement, technical support	Digital marketing training, conservation education, disaster mitigation

Source : Author Analysis, 2025

At policy level, central-provincial-district alignment faces synchronization gaps: *"National policies change rapidly... we often work with policy interpretations"* [Provincial Official, I-P2, 2025]. Organizationally, PT BWJ, OPDs, and BUMDes synergize planning despite sectoral egos: *"Sectoral egos still emerge over authority"* [Bappeda Officer, I-O5, 2025]. Operationally, Pokdarwis and UMKM demonstrate co-production evolution: *"From government programs to self-management... we feel ownership"* [Pokdarwis Leader, I-C10, 2025].

These verbatim insights reveal MCG stages: preconception (cross-sector awareness: *"We realized we can't do it alone"* [Dispar Officer, I-P8, 2025], initiation (trust-building: *"Initial suspicion gave way to understanding"* [Community Rep, I-C3, 2025], formalization (MoUs/forums); operation (quick wins like digital promotion); and transformation (adaptive learning). Policy command-and-adjest patterns dominate higher levels, while operational joint capacity strengthens local resilience, confirming nested governance where lower-level innovations pressure upper-level reforms. Collaborative governance dynamics reveal interdependent yet unbalanced relationships between state, corporate SEZ operators, and local communities. Positive dynamics include intensified interactions through SEZ coordination forums, cross-institutional MoUs, CSR's tourism programs, joint training, and operational activities like homestay management, cultural festivals, and coastal conservation. These processes drive a shift from top-down approaches toward more participatory partnerships, evidenced by strengthened collective capacity, growing community ownership, and emerging inter-organizational routines. However, challenges persist in vertical coordination due to rapidly changing national policies outpacing local adaptation capacity, sectoral egos among organizations, and the absence of fully integrative decision-making platforms.

The emergent model constitutes an evolutionary Multilevel Collaborative Governance (MCG) framework operating through sequential stages—preconception, initiation, formalization, operation, and termination-transformation—interlinked across governance levels. The preconception stage reflects actors' recognition that post-tsunami recovery cannot be addressed sectorally, prioritizing collaboration in policy and institutional initiatives. Initiation involves negotiation and commitment-building, with district government mediating between PT BWJ and communities while cross-agency forums align visions. Formalization produces clearer governance structures through derivative regulations, SEZ coordination teams, and community institutions like tourism cooperatives. The operation stage manifests co-production practices where government, SEZ operators, and communities jointly implement infrastructure, economic empowerment, conservation, and digital promotion programs. Termination represents reflective transformation rather than cessation, yielding policy adjustments, partnership restructuring, and adaptive capacity strengthening for subsequent governance cycles.

This MCG configuration demonstrates that post-disaster collaborative governance constitutes an ongoing learning process that continuously renegotiates power relations, actor roles, and coordination mechanisms across governance levels.

DISCUSSION

1. Governance Fragmentation as a Systemic Problem

The empirical findings indicate that tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung is characterised by systemic fragmentation across governance levels. Rather than functioning as an integrated system, collaboration among actors tends to occur in silos, shaped by sectoral mandates and administrative boundaries. At the policy level, national, provincial, and regency authorities operate under overlapping regulatory frameworks that lack clear mechanisms for vertical coordination. While strategic documents consistently emphasise sustainable tourism and ecosystem preservation, these commitments are often diluted during implementation due to institutional discontinuity and shifting political priorities.

This condition reflects what Young (2009) describes as a governance gap, where policy aspirations are not matched by institutional capacity and coherence. Fragmentation is further reinforced by decentralisation dynamics, which distribute authority without necessarily strengthening coordination. In Tanjung Lesung, provincial government agencies focus on macro-level development and investment facilitation, while local governments bear responsibility for environmental management and community engagement. The absence of a clearly mandated coordinating authority results in blurred accountability, particularly in ecosystem restoration initiatives that require sustained cross-sectoral collaboration (Bryson et al., 2015). Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies of tourism governance in Indonesia, where overlapping mandates and weak intergovernmental alignment undermine sustainability outcomes (Pujiyono et al., 2019; Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020).

From a systems perspective, this fragmentation represents a misalignment between governance structures and the ecological complexity of tourism ecosystems. Ecosystem restoration requires long-term commitment, adaptive management, and continuous feedback across governance levels. However, the findings reveal that policy instruments are often designed as static interventions, insufficiently responsive to local ecological dynamics and social realities. This condition reinforces the argument that conventional, hierarchical governance approaches are ill-suited for managing complex socio-ecological systems such as tourism destinations.

2. Multi-Level Collaborative Governance in Practice

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies emerging forms of collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels that collectively shape tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These interactions illustrate how collaborative governance operates as a multi-level process rather than a single institutional arrangement.

In practice, Tanjung Lesung demonstrates how multilevel collaboration evolves through partially synchronised yet asymmetrical processes. Policy-level engagement remains largely procedural, with KEK/PSN regulations providing formal mandates but limited mechanisms for incorporating local feedback or ecosystem-specific adaptations. Organisationally, coordination forums and MoUs between PT BWJ, district agencies, and BUMDes facilitate resource pooling and joint planning, though sectoral silos persist. Operational collaboration proves most dynamic, where Pokdarwis groups and MSMeS networks actively co-produce ecotourism innovations, homestay standards, and disaster resilience practices that gradually influence higher-level priorities (Sumarmi et al., 2026).

Findings confirm Ansell & Gash (2008) preconditions operate unevenly across levels, with operational collaboration strongest per Emerson et al., (2012). Policy proceduralism limits transformative potential (Hooghe & Marks, 2003)

3. A Proposed Model of Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Synthesising the findings across governance levels, this study proposes a Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Multilevel Collaborative Governance in the Management of the Tanjung Lesung Tourism Ecosystem

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model to explain how tourism ecosystem management is shaped through interactions across governance levels. The model conceptualises governance as a vertically interconnected system consisting of three analytical levels—policy, organisational, and operational—linked through core collaborative mechanisms that enable coordination, learning, and adaptive management.

At the policy level, national and regional governments provide strategic direction through regulations, development visions, and policy frameworks for tourism and ecosystem management. This level defines macro-level objectives and institutional mandates that guide tourism development within special economic zones. However, policy effectiveness depends on how these strategic directions are translated and operationalised at lower levels. The organisational level functions as a bridging arena between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation. Key

actors at this level include the special economic zone authority, sectoral agencies, and coordinating institutions responsible for aligning policy objectives with organisational capacities and resources. This level plays a critical role in facilitating cross-sector coordination, managing inter-institutional relationships, and translating policy goals into operational programmes.

At the operational level, collaboration occurs through direct engagement among local communities, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions. This level is responsible for implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives, sustainable tourism practices, and community-based programmes (Sumarmi et. al., 2026). Operational actors also generate context-specific knowledge and practical insights that are essential for adaptive governance but are often weakly integrated into higher-level decision-making (Folke et.al.,2005)

Across all governance levels, the model identifies four core collaborative mechanisms—communication, trust, coordination, and learning—that function as cross-cutting enablers of effective governance. Communication facilitates information exchange and mutual understanding, trust strengthens commitment and legitimacy, coordination aligns roles and resources, and learning enables feedback loops between practice and policy. The interaction of these mechanisms allows governance processes to evolve adaptively in response to ecological and institutional complexity.

The model suggests that effective tourism ecosystem management emerges not from isolated collaborative arrangements but from sustained interaction and feedback across governance levels. By emphasising vertical integration and institutional learning, the proposed model contributes to collaborative governance theory and offers practical insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study advances collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that tourism ecosystem management effectiveness hinges on cross-level integration rather than isolated partnerships. The SSM-derived Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) model integrates policy direction, organizational coordination, and operational co-production through communication, trust, coordination, and learning mechanisms, addressing KEK governance fragmentation empirically validated in Tanjung Lesung.

Policymakers should prioritize statutory collaboration forums and KEK broker repositioning. Future research should test MLCG scalability across Indonesia's disaster-vulnerable tourism SEZs using longitudinal and comparative designs.

LIMITATION

This study presents three primary limitations. First, reliance on document analysis and cross-sectional interviews (n=30) limits longitudinal tracking of MLCG implementation dynamics. Second, single-case focus on Tanjung Lesung constrains generalizability despite contextual richness. Third, SSM's interpretive nature introduces researcher subjectivity despite triangulation. Future research should employ Social Network Analysis to quantify actor interactions, longitudinal designs to assess MLCG evolution, and comparative studies across Indonesian SEZs (Mandalika, Labuan Bajo) to test model transferability. Action research with SEZ practitioners would validate practical applicability.

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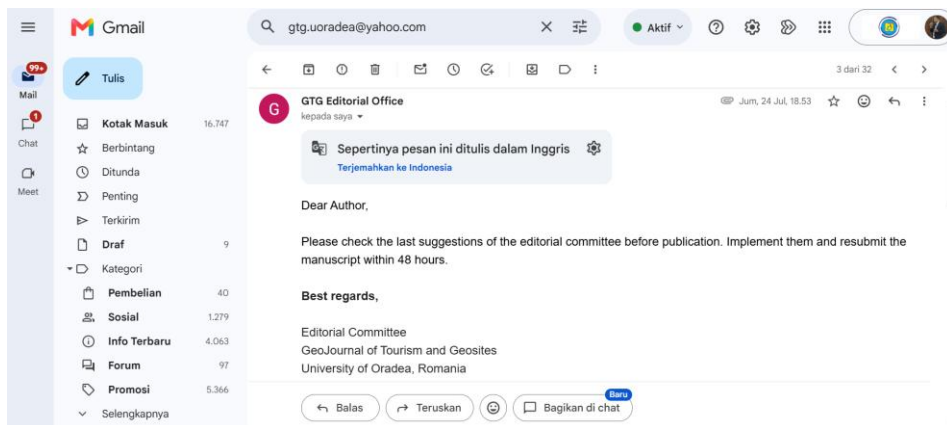
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A MULTI-LEVEL COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE MODEL FOR TOURISM ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT: EVIDENCE FROM A SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE IN INDONESIA

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Abstract : Tourism ecosystem management increasingly faces governance challenges arising from institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-actor complexity, particularly in developing country contexts. This study examines how multi-level collaborative governance operates in managing and restoring the tourism ecosystem of Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone in Indonesia. The research aims to develop a conceptual model that explains how collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels shapes ecosystem restoration outcomes. Using a qualitative approach grounded in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study draws on in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation involving government agencies, private sector actors, community groups, and academic institutions. The findings reveal that collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung functions as an interconnected but uneven system. While collaboration exists at each governance level, weak vertical coordination, overlapping authority, and limited institutional learning constrain integration across levels. Community participation and knowledge co-production emerge as critical strengths at the operational level, yet their influence on higher-level decision-making remains limited. This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model that integrates policy direction, organisational coordination, and operational practice through communication, trust, coordination, and learning. The model contributes to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that governance effectiveness depends on cross-level

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interaction rather than isolated partnerships. Practically, the findings offer insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor settings.

Keywords: collaborative governance, multi-level governance, tourism ecosystem management, Soft Systems Methodology, ecosystem restoration, sustainable tourism

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INTRODUCTION ALL CHANGES SHOULD BE MARKED IN RED

Tourism governance increasingly operates within complex socio-ecological systems characterised by institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-level authority dispersion. Such conditions resemble what public policy scholars define as wicked problems—issues that resist linear solutions due to interdependence, uncertainty, and contested values (Head & Alford, 2015). In tourism destinations, especially in developing countries, governance arrangements are frequently shaped by overlapping mandates, decentralised authority, and sectoral silos that weaken policy coherence and sustainability outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge, 2016).

Collaborative governance (CG) has emerged as a prominent response to these governance deficits. Defined as institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state actors in consensus-oriented decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008), CG is widely promoted as a mechanism for managing cross-sectoral complexity (Bryson et al., 2015). Subsequent scholarship conceptualises collaborative governance regimes as dynamic systems shaped by principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action (Emerson et al., 2012). More recent work emphasises the political and power-laden dimensions of collaboration, arguing that governance effectiveness depends on institutional design, power distribution, and meta-governance capacity (Ansell et al., 2025; Torfing et al., 2012).

Despite its normative appeal, collaborative governance frequently operates within fragmented multi-level governance systems where authority is distributed across national, regional, and local tiers (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Such institutional fragmentation often creates coordination challenges, overlapping policy responsibilities, and blurred accountability, making it more difficult to sustain effective collaboration across governance levels (Peters, 2015; Trein et al., 2019).

Previous studies have shown that tourism policy implementation is frequently constrained by weak vertical coordination between national policy formulation and local implementation, resulting in fragmented governance and inconsistent policy outcomes. (Krutwaisyo, & Bramwell, 2010; Wang & Ap, 2013). In tourism contexts, limited vertical integration between policy formulation and local implementation remains a persistent challenge (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Hall, 2011).

This study argues that collaborative governance cannot be adequately understood without accounting for its embeddedness in multi-level policy structures. Using Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Indonesia as an empirical case, this research examines how collaboration operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels in tourism ecosystem management (Sukran, et. al., 2025). By integrating collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study develops a multi-level collaborative governance model that explains how cross-level interactions shape ecosystem restoration outcomes.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex public problems that cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical control or market mechanisms alone. Ansell & Gash (2008) define collaborative governance as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented decision-making process that is formal, deliberative, and collective. This perspective highlights key enabling conditions, such as trust, shared understanding, and facilitative leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al., (2012) further develop this framework by introducing the concept of collaborative governance regimes, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action.

Recent tourism governance studies have emphasised that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance structures and power relations rather than technical management failures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Moreover, collaborative arrangements often struggle to deliver transformative outcomes when they are not supported by effective governance networks and cross-level coordination (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

While these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding collaboration, they often treat governance contexts as relatively flat institutional spaces. In practice, especially in decentralised or multi-tiered systems, collaboration unfolds across multiple levels of authority with distinct roles, resources, and power relations.

Multi-level governance theory addresses this complexity by focusing on the dispersion of authority across national, regional, and local levels, as well as the interactions between them (Allmendinger, 2017). Its shift from top-down regulation to networked decision-making requires conservation practitioners to adapt by engaging with diverse actors, integrating social equity into planning, and applying flexible, adaptive strategies across different scales to effectively manage ecological resilience (Armitage et al., 2012).

In tourism governance, this dispersion is particularly pronounced, as policy formulation, investment regulation, environmental management, and community engagement are frequently handled by different institutions operating at different scales. Integrating collaborative governance with a multi-level governance perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of how coordination occurs simultaneously across vertical and horizontal institutional arrangements. Rather than functioning solely as a managerial mechanism, collaborative governance operates as a relational process in which trust, mutual understanding, interdependence, and shared motivation enable actors to coordinate collective action across institutional boundaries (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). This relational perspective is especially important in multi-level governance settings, where policy coherence depends on continuous interaction and feedback among actors operating at national, regional, and local levels. The effectiveness of collaborative governance therefore depends not only on stakeholder engagement at a single level, but also on the coherence and adaptive feedback mechanisms that connect policy formulation, organisational implementation, and operational practice.

In the context of tourism ecosystem management, this multi-level perspective is essential. Ecosystems are inherently complex and adaptive, requiring governance arrangements that can respond to uncertainty, ecological feedback, and social change. Ostrom (2010) argues that sustainable management of common-pool resources depends on polycentric governance systems, where multiple centres of decision-making operate autonomously, yet are coordinated through shared rules and norms. Applied to tourism, this implies that effective ecosystem restoration requires alignment between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up community initiatives, mediated through organisational networks and learning processes.

To operationalise this complexity, this study adopts Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a complementary analytical framework. Developed by Checkland (1999) and further elaborated by Checkland & Poulter (2006), SSM is designed to address “messy” problem situations characterised by multiple actors, divergent worldviews (Weltanschauung), and ambiguous objectives. Rather than seeking optimal solutions, SSM facilitates learning by modelling human activity systems and comparing conceptual models with real-world practices.

Within this study, SSM serves not merely as a data collection method, but as a model-building approach that enables the integration of collaborative governance and multi-level governance perspectives. By combining collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and SSM, this research conceptualises tourism ecosystem management as a multi-level collaborative system. At the policy level, collaboration shapes strategic direction, legitimacy, and regulatory coherence. At the organisational level, it structures coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and resource mobilisation. At the operational level, collaboration is enacted through community participation, local knowledge, and day-to-day management practices. These levels are interconnected through continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation.

This conceptual framework provides the analytical foundation for examining the governance dynamics of Tanjung Lesung and for developing a transferable model of multi-level collaborative governance applicable to other tourism destinations facing similar ecological and institutional challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method approach combining qualitative analysis with Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to examine collaborative governance dynamics and develop a multilevel model for Tanjung Lesung tourism ecosystem management. Primary data were collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with government officials (n=15), private sector representatives from PT Banten West Java (n=5), and community actors including *Pokdarwis* leaders (a community-based tourism awareness organization established to support local tourism development), and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) operators (n=10), supplemented by direct observation and informal discussions from August to November 2025. Secondary data comprised policy documents (RIPARNAS (National Tourism Development Master Plan), RPJMN (National Medium-Term Development Plan), Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD), institutional records, and Special Economic Zone (SEZ) operational reports. Data processing followed qualitative triangulation—transcription, filtering, SSM analysis, and validation through theoretical cross-checking—yielding the Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) model through SSM's seven iterative stages. Data analysis followed the seven-stage SSM process, including problem structuring, CATWOE formulation, conceptual modelling, and real-world comparison. Thematic coding was guided by collaborative governance constructs (trust, coordination, shared motivation) and multi-level governance

dimensions (vertical and horizontal integration). Triangulation and member checking enhanced credibility (Miles et al., 2014; Newman, 2021).

Soft Systems Methodology systematically derived the MLCG model through seven iterative stages applied to primary data: (1) unstructured problem situation (SEZ/PSN fragmentation); (2) rich picture (investment vs. resilience tensions); (3) root definitions (socio-ecological transformation); (4) conceptual modeling (co-planning/implementation/evaluation); (5) comparison with reality (administrative gaps); (6) feasible/desirable changes; and (7) action recommendations yielding the three-tier MLCG structure [Checkland, 1999].

The stages of the research especially data processing as follow the figure below.



Figure 1. Stages of Data Processing

RESULTS

The multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung demonstrates a vertically and horizontally integrated configuration spanning policy, organizational, and operational levels. At the policy level, central government agencies initiate SEZ development through regulatory frameworks and strategic infrastructure support, which provincial and district governments translate into local planning documents and derivative programs. The organizational level features institutional structures involving district government, SEZ operator, PT. Banten West Java (PT. BWJ), local agencies, BUMDes (Village-Owned Enterprise), academic partners, and NGOs that coordinate planning, role division, and program oversight. Operationally, Pokdarwis, MSMeS groups, fisher collectives, youth organizations, and women's economic groups serve as frontline actors implementing economic recovery, ecotourism, environmental conservation, and disaster education initiatives.

Key Actors Across Governance Levels

Multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung operates across policy, organizational, and operational domains, with vertical coordination from central SEZ/PSN mandates to local implementation.

Table 1. Multi-level actor configuration in Tanjung Lesung's collaborative governance model

Governance Level	Key Actors	Primary Roles	Key Contributions
Policy (National)	Kemenparekraf (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy), PUPR (Ministry of Public Works and Housing), BKPM (Indonesia Investment Coordinating Board)	Policy framework, infrastructure investment	RIPARNAS (National Tourism Development Master Plan), RPJMN (National Medium-Term Development Plan), toll road, coastal protection
Policy (Provincial)	Banten Province (Regional Development Planning	Policy mediation, program alignment	KEK (SEZ) prioritization in provincial tourism strategy

	Agency (Bappeda), Tourism Office)		
Policy (District)	Pandeglang Regency (Dispar, Investment and One-Stop Integrated Service Agency (DPMPTSP), Bappeda)	Local policy translation, capacity building	RPJMD (Regional Medium-Term Development Plan) integration, homestay training, MSMeS support
Organizational	PT BWJ, OPD (Regional Government Agencies), BUMDes	KEK management, investment facilitation	Events, hotels, marine, Islamic Center development
Operational (Community)	Pokdarwis, MSMeS, fishers, Karang Taruna (Village youth groups)	Implementation, local innovation	Homestays, mangrove ecotourism, tuna fishing festival, turtle conservation
Strategic Partners	UGM, UPI, President University, NGOs	Capacity enhancement, technical support	Digital marketing training, conservation education, disaster mitigation

Source : Author Analysis, 2025

At policy level, central-provincial-district alignment faces synchronization gaps : *"National policies change rapidly... we often work with policy interpretations"* [Provincial Official, I-P2, 2025]. Organizationally, PT BWJ, OPDs, and BUMDes synergize planning despite sectoral ego : *"Sectoral egos still emerge over authority"* [Bappeda Officer, I-O5, 2025]. Operationally, Pokdarwis and UMKM demonstrate co-production evolution : *"From government programs to self-management... we feel ownership"* [Pokdarwis Leader, I-C10, 2025].

These verbatim insights reveal MCG stages : preconception (cross-sector awareness: *"We realized we can't do it alone"* [Dispar Officer, I-P8, 2025], initiation (trust-building: *"Initial suspicion gave way to understanding"* [Community Rep, I-C3, 2025], formalization (MoUs/forums); operation (quick wins like digital promotion); and transformation (adaptive learning). Policy command-and-adjust patterns dominate higher levels, while operational joint capacity strengthens local resilience, confirming nested governance where lower-level innovations pressure upper-level reforms. Collaborative governance dynamics reveal interdependent yet unbalanced relationships between state, corporate SEZ operators, and local communities. Positive dynamics include intensified interactions through SEZ coordination forums, cross-institutional MoUs, CSR's tourism programs, joint training, and operational activities like homestay management, cultural festivals, and coastal conservation. These processes drive a shift from top-down approaches toward more participatory partnerships, evidenced by strengthened collective capacity, growing community ownership, and emerging inter-organizational routines. However, challenges persist in vertical coordination due to rapidly changing national policies outpacing local adaptation capacity, sectoral egos among organizations, and the absence of fully integrative decision-making platforms.

The emergent model constitutes an evolutionary Multilevel Collaborative Governance (MCG) framework operating through sequential stages—preconception, initiation, formalization, operation, and termination—interlinked across governance levels. The preconception stage reflects actors' recognition that post-tsunami recovery cannot be addressed sectorally, prioritizing collaboration in policy and institutional initiatives. Initiation involves negotiation and commitment-building, with district government mediating between PT BWJ and communities while cross-agency forums align visions. Formalization produces clearer governance structures through derivative regulations, SEZ coordination teams, and community institutions like tourism cooperatives. The operation stage manifests co-production practices where government, SEZ operators, and communities jointly implement infrastructure, economic empowerment, conservation, and digital promotion programs. Termination represents reflective transformation rather than cessation, yielding policy adjustments, partnership restructuring, and adaptive capacity strengthening for subsequent governance cycles.

This MCG configuration demonstrates that post-disaster collaborative governance constitutes an ongoing learning process that continuously renegotiates power relations, actor roles, and coordination mechanisms across governance levels.

DISCUSSION

1. Governance Fragmentation as a Systemic Problem

The empirical findings indicate that tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung is characterised by systemic fragmentation across governance levels. Rather than functioning as an integrated system, collaboration among actors tends to occur in silos, shaped by sectoral mandates and administrative boundaries. At the policy level, national, provincial, and regency authorities operate under overlapping regulatory frameworks that lack clear mechanisms for vertical coordination. While strategic documents consistently emphasise sustainable tourism and

ecosystem preservation, these commitments are often diluted during implementation due to institutional discontinuity and shifting political priorities.

This condition reflects what Young (2009) describes as a governance gap, where policy aspirations are not matched by institutional capacity and coherence. Fragmentation is further reinforced by decentralisation dynamics, which distribute authority without necessarily strengthening coordination. In Tanjung Lesung, provincial government agencies focus on macro-level development and investment facilitation, while local governments bear responsibility for environmental management and community engagement. The absence of a clearly mandated coordinating authority results in blurred accountability, particularly in ecosystem restoration initiatives that require sustained cross-sectoral collaboration (Bryson et al., 2015). Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies of tourism governance in Indonesia, where overlapping mandates and weak intergovernmental alignment undermine sustainability outcomes (Pujiyono et al., 2019; Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020).

From a systems perspective, this fragmentation represents a misalignment between governance structures and the ecological complexity of tourism ecosystems. Ecosystem restoration requires long-term commitment, adaptive management, and continuous feedback across governance levels. However, the findings reveal that policy instruments are often designed as static interventions, insufficiently responsive to local ecological dynamics and social realities. This condition reinforces the argument that conventional, hierarchical governance approaches are ill-suited for managing complex socio-ecological systems such as tourism destinations.

2. Multi-Level Collaborative Governance in Practice

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies emerging forms of collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels that collectively shape tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These interactions illustrate how collaborative governance operates as a multi-level process rather than a single institutional arrangement.

In practice, Tanjung Lesung demonstrates how multilevel collaboration evolves through partially synchronised yet asymmetrical processes. Policy-level engagement remains largely procedural, with SEZ/PSN regulations providing formal mandates but limited mechanisms for incorporating local feedback or ecosystem-specific adaptations. Organisationally, coordination forums and MoUs between PT BWJ, district agencies, and BUMDes facilitate resource pooling and joint planning, though sectoral silos persist. Operational collaboration proves most dynamic, where Pokdarwis groups and MSMeS networks actively co-produce ecotourism innovations, homestay standards, and disaster resilience practices that gradually influence higher-level priorities (Sumarmi et al., 2026).

Findings confirm Ansell & Gash (2008) preconditions operate unevenly across levels, with operational collaboration strongest per Emerson et al., (2012). Policy proceduralism limits transformative potential (Hooghe & Marks, 2003)

3. A Proposed Model of Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Synthesising the findings across governance levels, this study proposes a Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Multilevel Collaborative Governance in the Management of the Tanjung Lesung Tourism Ecosystem

This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model to explain how tourism ecosystem management is shaped through interactions across governance levels. The model conceptualises governance as a vertically interconnected system consisting of three analytical levels—policy, organisational, and operational—linked through core collaborative mechanisms that enable coordination, learning, and adaptive management.

At the policy level, national and regional governments provide strategic direction through regulations, development visions, and policy frameworks for tourism and ecosystem management. This level defines macro-level objectives and institutional mandates that guide tourism development within special economic zones. However, policy effectiveness depends on how these strategic directions are translated and operationalised at lower levels. The organisational level functions as a bridging arena between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation. Key actors at this level include the special economic zone authority, sectoral agencies, and coordinating institutions responsible for aligning policy objectives with organisational capacities and resources. This level plays a critical role in facilitating cross-sector coordination, managing inter-institutional relationships, and translating policy goals into operational programmes.

At the operational level, collaboration occurs through direct engagement among local communities, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions. This level is responsible for implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives, sustainable tourism practices, and community-based programmes (Sumarmi et. al., 2026). Operational actors also generate context-specific knowledge and practical insights that are essential for adaptive governance but are often weakly integrated into higher-level decision-making (Folke et.al.,2005)

Across all governance levels, the model identifies four core collaborative mechanisms—communication, trust, coordination, and learning—that function as cross-cutting enablers of effective governance. Communication facilitates information exchange and mutual understanding, trust strengthens commitment and legitimacy, coordination aligns roles and resources, and learning enables feedback loops between practice and policy. The interaction of these mechanisms allows governance processes to evolve adaptively in response to ecological and institutional complexity.

The model suggests that effective tourism ecosystem management emerges not from isolated collaborative arrangements but from sustained interaction and feedback across governance levels. By emphasising vertical integration and institutional learning, the proposed model contributes to collaborative governance theory and offers practical insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that tourism ecosystem management within Special Economic Zones should be understood not merely as an environmental or tourism governance issue, but as a broader challenge of development governance requiring sustained collaboration across multiple institutional levels. Using the Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone as an empirical case and employing Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), this research reveals that development outcomes are shaped by the quality of interactions among policy, organizational, and operational actors rather than by individual institutional performance. Although collaborative arrangements have emerged across these governance levels, fragmented authority, weak vertical coordination, overlapping mandates, and limited integration of local knowledge continue to constrain ecosystem restoration and sustainable regional development. Conversely, strong collaboration at the community level has fostered collective ownership, adaptive learning, local innovation, and resilience, demonstrating that participatory governance is an essential driver of long-term development.

The study contributes theoretically by proposing the Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) Model as an integrated framework for development administration. Unlike conventional collaborative governance models that primarily emphasize inter-organizational partnerships, the MLCG model conceptualizes development governance as a dynamic process linking strategic policy direction, institutional coordination, and community-based implementation through continuous communication, trust, coordination, and institutional learning. The model therefore extends collaborative governance theory by positioning cross-level interaction as the principal mechanism through which complex socio-ecological development challenges can be addressed in decentralized governance systems.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening sustainable tourism development requires institutional reforms that enhance policy coherence, establish permanent cross-sector coordination mechanisms, empower local communities as co-producers of development, and integrate ecosystem restoration into regional development strategies. Beyond tourism, the proposed model provides a transferable governance framework for managing complex development programs in Special Economic Zones and other place-based development initiatives characterized by multiple stakeholders, ecological vulnerability, and institutional complexity. Future research should

validate the model across different regional development settings using comparative and longitudinal approaches to further examine its applicability and policy impact.

LIMITATION

This study presents three primary limitations. First, reliance on document analysis and cross-sectional interviews (n=30) limits longitudinal tracking of MLCG implementation dynamics. Second, single-case focus on Tanjung Lesung constrains generalizability despite contextual richness. Third, SSM's interpretive nature introduces researcher subjectivity despite triangulation. Future research should employ Social Network Analysis to quantify actor interactions, longitudinal designs to assess MLCG evolution, and comparative studies across Indonesian SEZs (Mandalika, Labuan Bajo) to test model transferability. Action research with SEZ practitioners would validate practical applicability.

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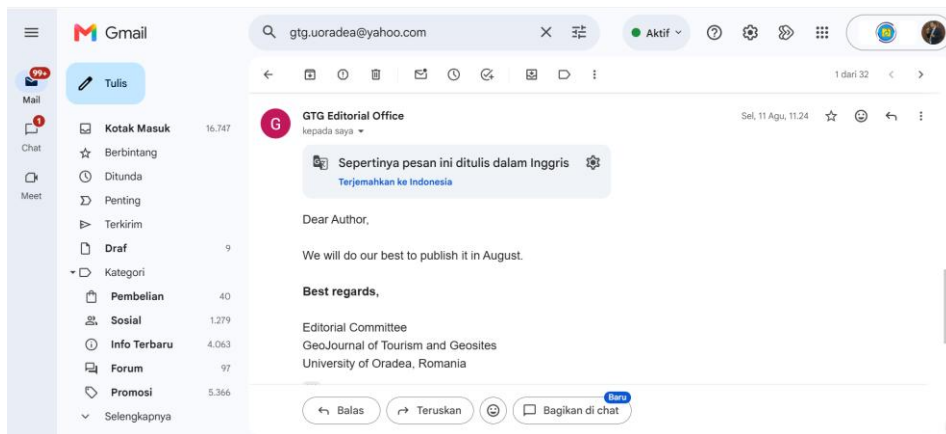
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A MULTI-LEVEL COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE MODEL FOR TOURISM ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT: EVIDENCE FROM A SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE IN INDONESIA

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Abstract: Tourism ecosystem management increasingly faces governance challenges arising from institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-actor complexity, particularly in developing country contexts. This study examines how multi-level collaborative governance operates in managing and restoring the tourism ecosystem of Tanjung Lesung, a tourism-based Special Economic Zone in Indonesia. The research aims to develop a conceptual model that explains how collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels shapes ecosystem restoration outcomes. Using a qualitative approach grounded in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study draws on in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation involving government agencies, private sector actors, community groups, and academic institutions. The findings reveal that collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung functions as an interconnected but uneven system. While collaboration exists at each governance level, weak vertical coordination, overlapping authority, and limited institutional learning constrain integration across levels. Community participation and knowledge co-production emerge as critical strengths at the operational level, yet their influence on higher-level decision-making remains limited. This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model that integrates policy direction, organisational coordination, and operational practice through communication, trust, coordination, and learning. The model contributes to collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that governance effectiveness depends on cross-level interaction rather than isolated partnerships. Practically, the findings offer insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor settings.

Keywords: collaborative governance, multi-level governance, tourism ecosystem management, Soft Systems Methodology, ecosystem restoration, sustainable tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism governance increasingly operates within complex socio-ecological systems characterised by institutional fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and multi-level authority dispersion. Such conditions resemble what public policy scholars define as wicked problems - issues that resist linear solutions due to interdependence, uncertainty, and contested values (Head & Alford, 2015). In tourism destinations, especially in developing countries, governance arrangements are frequently shaped by overlapping mandates, decentralised authority, and sectoral silos that weaken policy coherence and sustainability outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge, 2016).

Collaborative governance (CG) has emerged as a prominent response to these governance deficits. Defined as institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state actors in consensus-oriented decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008), CG is widely promoted as a mechanism for managing cross-sectoral complexity (Bryson et al., 2015). Subsequent scholarship conceptualises collaborative governance regimes as dynamic systems shaped by principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action (Emerson et al., 2012). More recent work emphasises the political and power-laden dimensions of collaboration, arguing that governance effectiveness depends on institutional design, power distribution, and meta-governance capacity (Ansell et al., 2025; Torfing et al., 2012).

Despite its normative appeal, collaborative governance frequently operates within fragmented multi-level governance systems where authority is distributed across national, regional, and local tiers (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Such institutional

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fragmentation often creates coordination challenges, overlapping policy responsibilities, and blurred accountability, making it more difficult to sustain effective collaboration across governance levels (Peters, 2015; Trein et al., 2019).

Previous studies have shown that tourism policy implementation is frequently constrained by weak vertical coordination between national policy formulation and local implementation, resulting in fragmented governance and inconsistent policy outcomes (Krutwaisyo, & Bramwell, 2010; Wang & Ap, 2013). In tourism contexts, limited vertical integration between policy formulation and local implementation remains a persistent challenge (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Hall, 2011).

This study argues that collaborative governance cannot be adequately understood without accounting for its embeddedness in multi-level policy structures. Using Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Indonesia as an empirical case, this research examines how collaboration operates across policy, organisational, and operational levels in tourism ecosystem management (Sukran et al., 2025). By integrating collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), the study develops a multi-level collaborative governance model that explains how cross-level interactions shape ecosystem restoration outcomes.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex public problems that cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical control or market mechanisms alone. Ansell & Gash (2008) define collaborative governance as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented decision-making process that is formal, deliberative, and collective. This perspective highlights key enabling conditions, such as trust, shared understanding, and facilitative leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al. (2012) further develop this framework by introducing the concept of collaborative governance regimes, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action.

Recent tourism governance studies have emphasised that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance structures and power relations rather than technical management failures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Moreover, collaborative arrangements often struggle to deliver transformative outcomes when they are not supported by effective governance networks and cross-level coordination (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

While these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding collaboration, they often treat governance contexts as relatively flat institutional spaces. In practice, especially in decentralised or multi-tiered systems, collaboration unfolds across multiple levels of authority with distinct roles, resources, and power relations.

Multi-level governance theory addresses this complexity by focusing on the dispersion of authority across national, regional, and local levels, as well as the interactions between them (Allmendinger, 2017). Its shift from top-down regulation to networked decision-making requires conservation practitioners to adapt by engaging with diverse actors, integrating social equity into planning, and applying flexible, adaptive strategies across different scales to effectively manage ecological resilience (Armitage et al., 2012).

In tourism governance, this dispersion is particularly pronounced, as policy formulation, investment regulation, environmental management, and community engagement are frequently handled by different institutions operating at different scales. Integrating collaborative governance with a multi-level governance perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of how coordination occurs simultaneously across vertical and horizontal institutional arrangements. Rather than functioning solely as a managerial mechanism, collaborative governance operates as a relational process in which trust, mutual understanding, interdependence, and shared motivation enable actors to coordinate collective action across institutional boundaries (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). This relational perspective is especially important in multi-level governance settings, where policy coherence depends on continuous interaction and feedback among actors operating at national, regional, and local levels. The effectiveness of collaborative governance therefore depends not only on stakeholder engagement at a single level, but also on the coherence and adaptive feedback mechanisms that connect policy formulation, organisational implementation, and operational practice.

In the context of tourism ecosystem management, this multi-level perspective is essential. Ecosystems are inherently complex and adaptive, requiring governance arrangements that can respond to uncertainty, ecological feedback, and social change. Ostrom (2010) argues that sustainable management of common-pool resources depends on polycentric governance systems, where multiple centres of decision-making operate autonomously, yet are coordinated through shared rules and norms. Applied to tourism, this implies that effective ecosystem restoration requires alignment between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up community initiatives, mediated through organisational networks and learning processes.

To operationalise this complexity, this study adopts Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a complementary analytical framework. Developed by Checkland (1999) and further elaborated by Checkland & Poulter (2006), SSM is designed to address “messy” problem situations characterised by multiple actors, divergent worldviews (*Weltanschauung*), and ambiguous objectives. Rather than seeking optimal solutions, SSM facilitates learning by modelling human activity systems and comparing conceptual models with real-world practices.

Within this study, SSM serves not merely as a data collection method, but as a model-building approach that enables the integration of collaborative governance and multi-level governance perspectives. By combining collaborative governance theory, multi-level governance, and SSM, this research conceptualises tourism ecosystem management as a multi-level collaborative system. At the policy level, collaboration shapes strategic direction, legitimacy, and regulatory coherence. At the organisational level, it structures coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and resource mobilisation. At the operational level, collaboration is enacted through community participation, local knowledge, and day-to-day management practices. These levels are interconnected through continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation.

This conceptual framework provides the analytical foundation for examining the governance dynamics of Tanjung Lesung and for developing a transferable model of multi-level collaborative governance applicable to other tourism destinations facing similar ecological and institutional challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method approach combining qualitative analysis with Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to examine collaborative governance dynamics and develop a multilevel model for Tanjung Lesung tourism ecosystem management. Primary data were collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with government officials ($n=15$), private sector representatives from PT Banten West Java ($n=5$), and community actors including *Pokdarwis* leaders (a community-based tourism awareness organization established to support local tourism development), and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) operators ($n=10$), supplemented by direct observation and informal discussions from August to November 2025. Secondary data comprised policy documents (RIPARNAS (National Tourism Development Master Plan), RPJMN (National Medium-Term Development Plan), Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD), institutional records, and Special Economic Zone (SEZ) operational reports.

Data processing followed qualitative triangulation—transcription, filtering, SSM analysis, and validation through theoretical cross-checking—yielding the Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) model through SSM's seven iterative stages. Data analysis followed the seven-stage SSM process, including problem structuring, CATWOE formulation, conceptual modelling, and real-world comparison. Thematic coding was guided by collaborative governance constructs (trust, coordination, shared motivation) and multi-level governance dimensions (vertical and horizontal integration). Triangulation and member checking enhanced credibility (Miles et al., 2014; Newman, 2021).

Soft Systems Methodology systematically derived the MLCG model through seven iterative stages applied to primary data: (1) unstructured problem situation (SEZ/PSN fragmentation); (2) rich picture (investment vs. resilience tensions); (3) root definitions (socio-ecological transformation); (4) conceptual modeling (co-planning / implementation / evaluation); (5) comparison with reality (administrative gaps); (6) feasible/desirable changes; and (7) action recommendations yielding the three-tier MLCG structure [Checkland, 1999].

The stages of the research especially data processing as follow the Figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Stages of Data Processing

RESULTS

The multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung demonstrates a vertically and horizontally integrated configuration spanning policy, organizational, and operational levels. At the policy level, central government agencies initiate SEZ development through regulatory frameworks and strategic infrastructure support, which provincial and district governments translate into local planning documents and derivative programs.

The organizational level features institutional structures involving district government, SEZ operator, PT. Banten West Java (PT. BWJ), local agencies, BUMDes (Village-Owned Enterprise), academic partners, and NGOs that coordinate planning, role division, and program oversight. Operationally, *Pokdarwis*, MSMeS groups, fisher collectives, youth organizations, and women's economic groups serve as frontline actors implementing economic recovery, ecotourism, environmental conservation, and disaster education initiatives.

Key Actors Across Governance Levels

Multi-level collaborative governance in Tanjung Lesung operates across policy, organizational, and operational domains, with vertical coordination from central SEZ/PSN mandates to local implementation.

Table 1. Multi-level actor configuration in Tanjung Lesung's collaborative governance model (Source : Author Analysis, 2025)

Governance Level	Key Actors	Primary Roles	Key Contributions
Policy (National)	Kemendikbud (Ministry of Education and Culture), Kemenparekraf (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy), PUPR (Ministry of Public Works and Housing), BKPM (Indonesia Investment Coordinating Board)	Policy framework, infrastructure investment	RIPARNAS (National Tourism Development Master Plan), RPJMN (National Medium-Term Development Plan), toll road, coastal protection
Policy (Provincial)	Banten Province (Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda), Tourism Office)	Policy mediation, program alignment	KEK (SEZ) prioritization in provincial tourism strategy
Policy (District)	Pandeglang Regency (Dispar, Investment and One-Stop Integrated Service Agency (DPMPTSP), Bappeda)	Local policy translation, capacity building	RPJMD (Regional Medium-Term Development Plan) integration, homestay training, MSMeS support
Organizational	PT BWJ, OPD (Regional Government Agencies), BUMDes	KEK management, investment facilitation	Events, hotels, marine, Islamic Center development
Operational (Community)	Pokdarwis, MSMeS, fishers, Karang Taruna (Village youth groups)	Implementation, local innovation	Homestays, mangrove ecotourism, tuna fishing festival, turtle conservation Bab-
Strategic Partners	UGM, UPI, President University, NGOs	Capacity enhancement, technical support	Digital marketing training, conservation education, disaster mitigation

At policy level, central-provincial-district alignment faces synchronization gaps : "National policies change rapidly... we often work with policy interpretations" [Provincial Official, I-P2, 2025]. Organizationally, PT BWJ, OPDs, and BUMDes synergize planning despite sectoral ego : "Sectoral egos still emerge over authority" [Bappeda Officer, I-O5, 2025]. Operationally, Pokdarwis and UMKM demonstrate co-production evolution : "From government programs to self-management... we feel ownership" [Pokdarwis Leader, I-C10, 2025].

These verbatim insights reveal MCG stages : preconception (cross-sector awareness: "We realized we can't do it alone" [Dispar Officer, I-P8, 2025], initiation (trust-building: "Initial suspicion gave way to understanding" [Community Rep, I-C3, 2025], formalization (MoUs/forums); operation (quick wins like digital promotion); and transformation (adaptive learning). Policy command-and-adjust patterns dominate higher levels, while operational joint capacity strengthens local resilience, confirming nested governance where lower-level innovations pressure upper-level reforms. Collaborative governance dynamics reveal interdependent yet unbalanced relationships between state, corporate SEZ operators, and local communities. Positive dynamics include intensified interactions through SEZ coordination forums, cross-institutional MoUs, CSR's tourism programs, joint training, and operational activities like homestay management, cultural festivals, and coastal conservation. These processes drive a shift from top-down approaches toward more participatory partnerships, evidenced by strengthened collective capacity, growing community ownership, and emerging inter-organizational routines. However, challenges persist in vertical coordination due to rapidly changing national policies outpacing local adaptation capacity, sectoral egos among organizations, and the absence of fully integrative decision-making platforms.

The emergent model constitutes an evolutionary Multilevel Collaborative Governance (MCG) framework operating through sequential stages—preconception, initiation, formalization, operation, and termination-transformation—interlinked across governance levels. The preconception stage reflects actors' recognition that post-tsunami recovery cannot be addressed sectorally, prioritizing collaboration in policy and institutional initiatives. Initiation involves negotiation and commitment-building, with district government mediating between PT BWJ and communities while cross-agency forums align visions. Formalization produces clearer governance structures through derivative regulations, SEZ coordination teams, and community institutions like tourism cooperatives. The operation stage manifests co-production practices where government, SEZ operators, and communities jointly implement infrastructure, economic empowerment, conservation, and digital promotion programs. Termination represents reflective transformation rather than cessation, yielding policy adjustments, partnership restructuring, and adaptive capacity strengthening for subsequent governance cycles.

This MCG configuration demonstrates that post-disaster collaborative governance constitutes an ongoing learning process that continuously renegotiates power relations, actor roles, and coordination mechanisms across governance levels.

DISCUSSION

Governance Fragmentation as a Systemic Problem

The empirical findings indicate that tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung is characterised by systemic fragmentation across governance levels. Rather than functioning as an integrated system, collaboration among actors tends to occur in silos, shaped by sectoral mandates and administrative boundaries. At the policy level, national, provincial, and regency authorities operate under overlapping regulatory frameworks that lack clear mechanisms for vertical coordination. While strategic documents consistently emphasise sustainable tourism and ecosystem preservation, these commitments are often diluted during implementation due to institutional discontinuity and shifting political priorities.

This condition reflects what Young (2009) describes as a governance gap, where policy aspirations are not matched by institutional capacity and coherence. Fragmentation is further reinforced by decentralisation dynamics, which distribute authority without necessarily strengthening coordination. In Tanjung Lesung, provincial government agencies

focus on macro-level development and investment facilitation, while local governments bear responsibility for environmental management and community engagement. The absence of a clearly mandated coordinating authority results in blurred accountability, particularly in ecosystem restoration initiatives that require sustained cross-sectoral collaboration (Bryson et al., 2015). Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies of tourism governance in Indonesia, where overlapping mandates and weak intergovernmental alignment undermine sustainability outcomes (Pujiyono et al., 2019; Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2020). From a systems perspective, this fragmentation represents a misalignment between governance structures and the ecological complexity of tourism ecosystems. Ecosystem restoration requires long-term commitment, adaptive management, and continuous feedback across governance levels. However, the findings reveal that policy instruments are often designed as static interventions, insufficiently responsive to local ecological dynamics and social realities. This condition reinforces the argument that conventional, hierarchical governance approaches are ill-suited for managing complex socio-ecological systems such as tourism destinations.

Multi-Level Collaborative Governance in Practice

Despite these structural limitations, the study identifies emerging forms of collaboration across policy, organisational, and operational levels that collectively shape tourism ecosystem management in Tanjung Lesung. These interactions illustrate how collaborative governance operates as a multi-level process rather than a single institutional arrangement.

In practice, Tanjung Lesung demonstrates how multilevel collaboration evolves through partially synchronised yet asymmetrical processes. Policy-level engagement remains largely procedural, with SEZ/PSN regulations providing formal mandates but limited mechanisms for incorporating local feedback or ecosystem-specific adaptations. Organisationally, coordination forums and MoUs between PT BWJ, district agencies, and BUMDes facilitate resource pooling and joint planning, though sectoral silos persist. Operational collaboration proves most dynamic, where Pokdarwis groups and MSMeS networks actively co-produce ecotourism innovations, homestay standards, and disaster resilience practices that gradually influence higher-level priorities (Sumarmi et al., 2026).

Findings confirm Ansell & Gash (2008) preconditions operate unevenly across levels, with operational collaboration strongest per Emerson et al. (2012). Policy proceduralism limits transformative potential (Hooghe & Marks, 2003)

A Proposed Model of Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Synthesising the findings across governance levels, this study proposes a Multi-Level Collaborative Governance Model for tourism ecosystem management and restoration (Figure 2). This study proposes a multi-level collaborative governance model to explain how tourism ecosystem management is shaped through interactions across governance levels. The model conceptualises governance as a vertically interconnected system consisting of three analytical levels—policy, organisational, and operational—linked through core collaborative mechanisms that enable coordination, learning, and adaptive management.



Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Multilevel Collaborative Governance in the Management of the Tanjung Lesung Tourism Ecosystem

At the policy level, national and regional governments provide strategic direction through regulations, development visions, and policy frameworks for tourism and ecosystem management. This level defines macro-level objectives and institutional mandates that guide tourism development within special economic zones. However, policy effectiveness depends on how these strategic directions are translated and operationalised at lower levels. The organisational level functions as a bridging arena between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation. Key actors at this level include the special economic zone authority, sectoral agencies, and coordinating institutions responsible for aligning policy objectives with organisational capacities and resources. This level plays a critical role in facilitating cross-sector coordination, managing inter-institutional relationships, and translating policy goals into operational programmes.

At the operational level, collaboration occurs through direct engagement among local communities, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions. This level is responsible for implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives, sustainable tourism practices, and community-based programmes (Sumarmi et al., 2026).

Operational actors also generate context-specific knowledge and practical insights that are essential for adaptive governance but are often weakly integrated into higher-level decision-making (Folke et al., 2005).

Across all governance levels, the model identifies four core collaborative mechanisms—communication, trust, coordination, and learning—that function as cross-cutting enablers of effective governance. Communication facilitates information exchange and mutual understanding, trust strengthens commitment and legitimacy, coordination aligns roles and resources, and learning enables feedback loops between practice and policy. The interaction of these mechanisms allows governance processes to evolve adaptively in response to ecological and institutional complexity.

The model suggests that effective tourism ecosystem management emerges not from isolated collaborative arrangements but from sustained interaction and feedback across governance levels. By emphasising vertical integration and institutional learning, the proposed model contributes to collaborative governance theory and offers practical insights for strengthening ecosystem-based tourism governance in special economic zones and similar multi-actor contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that tourism ecosystem management within Special Economic Zones should be understood not merely as an environmental or tourism governance issue, but as a broader challenge of development governance requiring sustained collaboration across multiple institutional levels. Using the Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone as an empirical case and employing Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), this research reveals that development outcomes are shaped by the quality of interactions among policy, organizational, and operational actors rather than by individual institutional performance. Although collaborative arrangements have emerged across these governance levels, fragmented authority, weak vertical coordination, overlapping mandates, and limited integration of local knowledge continue to constrain ecosystem restoration and sustainable regional development. Conversely, strong collaboration at the community level has fostered collective ownership, adaptive learning, local innovation, and resilience, demonstrating that participatory governance is an essential driver of long-term development.

The study contributes theoretically by proposing the Multi-Level Collaborative Governance (MLCG) Model as an integrated framework for development administration. Unlike conventional collaborative governance models that primarily emphasize inter-organizational partnerships, the MLCG model conceptualizes development governance as a dynamic process linking strategic policy direction, institutional coordination, and community-based implementation through continuous communication, trust, coordination, and institutional learning. The model therefore extends collaborative governance theory by positioning cross-level interaction as the principal mechanism through which complex socio-ecological development challenges can be addressed in decentralized governance systems.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening sustainable tourism development requires institutional reforms that enhance policy coherence, establish permanent cross-sector coordination mechanisms, empower local communities as co-producers of development, and integrate ecosystem restoration into regional development strategies. Beyond tourism, the proposed model provides a transferable governance framework for managing complex development programs in Special Economic Zones and other place-based development initiatives characterized by multiple stakeholders, ecological vulnerability, and institutional complexity.

Future research should validate the model across different regional development settings using comparative and longitudinal approaches to further examine its applicability and policy impact.

Limitation

This study presents three primary limitations. First, reliance on document analysis and cross-sectional interviews (n=30) limits longitudinal tracking of MLCG implementation dynamics. Second, single-case focus on Tanjung Lesung constrains generalizability despite contextual richness. Third, SSM's interpretive nature introduces researcher subjectivity despite triangulation. Future research should employ Social Network Analysis to quantify actor interactions, longitudinal designs to assess MLCG evolution, and comparative studies across Indonesian SEZs (Mandalika, Labuan Bajo) to test model transferability. Action research with SEZ practitioners would validate practical applicability.

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