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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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1 INTRODUCTION

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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) 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. (Krutwaisong, & 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 governance²³ 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.

7 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Multi-Level Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance has been widely conceptualised as a response to complex⁴ 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 facilitative²⁴ leadership, as determinants of collaborative success. Emerson et al., (2012) further develop this framework¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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, interdependence⁵, 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-level²⁰ 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.

11

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 Actor ¹³	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 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

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 train¹⁴, 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 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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1

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