

Inequality and potential: A sociological analysis of the role of local communities in the tourism economy around Lake Lut Tawar

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Received 7 July 2025

Revised 7 August 2025

Accepted 27 August 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines the unequal distribution of economic benefits and potential for local community development in the Lut Tawar Lake tourist area, Central Aceh Regency, using Anthony Giddens' structuration theory as a single analytical framework. A qualitative approach was used through literature review, field observations, and semi-structured interviews. The results indicate that the cultural and natural potential of the local community has not been optimally utilized due to the dominance of external capital, policies that are not yet in favor, and limited community capacity. Structure-agency analysis reveals that the imbalance between policies, regulations, and structural support with the initiatives and capabilities of local actors is the main source of inequality. The proposed strategies include strengthening agencies through training, affirmative regulation, and strengthening market networks to create a balance between structure and agency.

Keywords: Inequality, local potential, Lake Lut Tawar, structure.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Lake Lut Tawar, with an area of approximately 5,472 hectares and located at an altitude of approximately 1,200 meters above sea level, is a source of ecological and socio-economic life for the Gayo community in Central Aceh Regency. In addition to being a source of clean water and habitat for the endemic depik fish (*Rasbora tawarensis*), this lake is also the epicenter of cultural interaction, local trade, and the expression of community identity. This area not only reflects natural wealth but also a cultural heritage that is deeply embedded in the daily lives of the Gayo community, such as in the practice of coffee farming and openwork weaving (BPS Central Aceh, 2024; Agustinawati, 2023). Lake Lut Tawar's tourism potential is immense. The combination of beautiful natural panoramas like Pantan Terong and Bur Telege, along with rich local cultures like the Guel Dance and ethnic crafts, demonstrates its multidimensional appeal. However, the high number of tourist visits, reaching over 309,000 domestic tourists in 2022, is not directly proportional to the equitable distribution of local community welfare. This indicates that the economic potential has not been fully equitably distributed.

This inequality is reflected in the dominance of strategic tourism sectors, which are dominated by investors from outside the region. Local communities are more involved in informal sectors such as food sales, boat rentals, and handicrafts. These types of jobs have low profit margins and are highly dependent on the tourist season (Aini, 2024; Open Journal Unimal, 2023). To understand the root causes of this unequal power dynamic between external capital and local communities, we must move beyond surface-level economic observations to examine the underlying social structures that shape these relationships. This empirical reality requires a robust theoretical lens to unpack its mechanisms. Sociologically, such inequalities cannot be fully understood merely through economic indicators; they require an analysis of how social structures and human agency interact to produce these outcomes. Within this context, Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory offers particular explanatory power as it explicitly examines the reciprocal relationship between structural systems and human action.

This theoretical perspective aligns with broader analyses of tourism development patterns. Bianchi and Stephenson (2014) observed that tourism often develops within a capitalist framework that places large capitalists as the primary controllers of the distribution of economic benefits, whereas local actors are merely complementary in the supply chain. Their analysis highlights that when policy structures favor macroeconomic growth over an equitable distribution of benefits, inequality becomes entrenched and institutionalized within the tourism system. Building on this foundation, Giddens' structuration theory provides a concrete framework for analyzing these dynamics. Sociologically, this reality can be explained using Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which views social action (agency) as always framed within the structures of rules and resources. Structures such as tourism policies, access to capital, and market regulations can enable or constrain local community actions. Conversely, local community agencies can reshape structures through innovation, collective participation, and independent resource management. However, when structures are dominated by external actors, local agency capacity is weakened, and inequality is systemically reproduced.

The consequences of this structural imbalance are evident in real-world scenarios. This phenomenon is further reinforced by Winarsih et al. (2023), who found that the dominance of external actors without the structural empowerment of local communities can reduce community control over their own resources. In the context of Lake Lut Tawar, if there is no serious effort to establish a balance between structure and agency, then tourism potential will simply become a means of economic exploitation without a significant impact on the well-being of the indigenous community. Beyond economic concerns, this imbalance threatens cultural integrity. Uncontrolled cultural commodification can threaten local values. Wood (2020) warned that when culture is appropriated solely to meet the needs of the tourism market, its symbolic and spiritual meaning can be eroded. This is particularly relevant to the Gayo community, whose culture is steeper in sacred values. If cultural attractions merely become visual consumption for tourists without community involvement, tourism poses a threat to cultural sustainability.

Recognizing these challenges, the global tourism community is shifting toward more inclusive approaches. The current global trend in tourism is moving toward *inclusive and community-based tourism*. This

approach prioritizes not only economic growth, but also environmental preservation and community empowerment. [Scheyvens and Biddulph \(2018\)](#) emphasized the importance of actively involving local communities in decision-making and benefit distribution, as tourism development can be truly inclusive and sustainable through this approach. Therefore, a comprehensive analytical framework is required to address these complex issues. To create equitable tourism development in Lake Lut Tawar, it is necessary to critically examine the relationship between structure and agency. Using Giddens' structuration theory, this analysis not only highlights the existing inequalities, but also creates space for formulating policy strategies that position local communities as key actors in development.

2. THEORY

Structuration theory, proposed by Anthony Giddens (1984), offers an analytical framework that positions humans not only as products of social structures, but also as actors with the capacity to reproduce and transform those structures. Social structures consist of *rules* and *resources* that form the framework for social action. These structures are dualistic, as they both constrain *and* enable *actions*. By contrast, agency is the capacity of social actors to act reflectively, make decisions, and modify or maintain structures through repeated social practices ([Giddens, 1984](#)). In the context of tourism, structure can be defined as the entire system of policies, regulations, and infrastructure that governs the flow of tourism activities. This includes local government policies regarding destination promotion, business regulations, access to capital, the provision of public facilities, marketing networks, and cross-sectoral collaboration ([Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014](#)). The structure determines who has access to tourism's economic resources, what the rules are, and who benefits or loses. Meanwhile, agency in tourism is the capacity of local communities to capitalize on the opportunities created by structures. This agency can take the form of product development based on local wisdom, community-led destination management, formation of business networks, marketing innovation through social media, or collaboration between tourism villages. Agency is strengthened when local actors possess adequate skills, capital, and network access to compete in the tourism market ([Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018](#)).

Inequality in the tourism sector occurs when existing structures do not provide sufficient space for agencies to develop, or when agencies fail to optimize available opportunities. In the case of Lake Lut Tawar, the current tourism policy structure and infrastructure tend to favor well-capitalized businesses, most of which originate from outside the region, while local players are hampered by a lack of capital support, training, and market protection. As a result, despite high tourist arrivals, external parties primarily enjoy economic benefits, while local communities remain marginalized ([Aini, 2024](#); [Open Journal Unimal, 2023](#)). As Giddens explains, sustainable social change can occur only if there is a positive reciprocal relationship between structure and agency. This means that tourism policies and systems must be designed to open opportunities for local community participation while strengthening their capacity to utilize them. If structures are exclusive or top-down, agency will be weakened and inequality will be reproduced. Conversely, if agency is strong but not supported by adequate structures, community initiatives will be hampered and unsustainable ([Giddens, 1984](#); [BPS Aceh Tengah, 2024](#)). Thus, structuration theory serves as a relevant conceptual framework for analyzing the role of local communities in Lake Lut Tawar. Through this framework, we can identify the structural factors that hinder or enable community agencies and formulate strategies to ensure that their interaction results in inclusive, equitable, and sustainable tourism development.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the dynamics of the relationship between social structure and individual agency in the context of tourism management in Lake Lut Tawar. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the subjective meanings, social interactions, and power relations that shape local tourism practices.

3.1 Data Collection

Data were obtained using three main techniques: literature review, field observations, and semi-structured interviews.

1. Literature Review – This review incorporated statistical data from the Central Aceh Statistics Agency (BPS) and prior research on tourism development in the Lake Lut Tawar area (Aini, 2024; BPS Central Aceh, 2024). This step provides a baseline understanding of demographic profiles, economic indicators, and tourism trends.
2. Field Observations: Observations were conducted in the main tourist zones around Lake Lut Tawar to record patterns of community economic activities, interactions between residents and tourists, and the use of local resources. The observations were both non-participant and descriptive, allowing the researcher to capture contextual nuances in daily practice (Sugiyono, 2022).
3. Semi-Structured Interviews – The interviews were conducted with purposively selected informants, including local business owners, artisans, homestay managers, and long-term residents. Purposive sampling ensured that participants had direct involvement in, or knowledge of, tourism-related activities. The interviews explored participants' perceptions, experiences, and strategies in managing tourism, as well as their views on the opportunities and constraints imposed by local governance structures, regulations, and market conditions.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the stages outlined by Miles et al. (2014): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Transcripts from the interviews and field notes from observations were coded thematically using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. In line with Giddens' structuration theory, the two core categories of structure and agency were operationalized as analytical lenses. "Structure" referred to rules, norms, economic systems, and institutional arrangements that shape tourism practices, while "agency" referred to the capacity of individuals and groups to act independently, negotiate constraints, and innovate within the tourism sector. During coding, statements or observations were tagged according to whether they reflected structural conditions, individual/collective agency, or interplay between the two. The coding process was iterative and the initial codes were refined through repeated reading and comparison across data sources. Patterns emerging from structure–agency coding were then mapped into a conceptual framework that illustrated the dynamic relationships influencing tourism management in Lake Lut Tawar. This approach ensured that the theoretical framework was not only a background concept but also an active tool guiding data interpretation and result validation.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Local Economic Potential as a Basis for Inclusive Tourism Development in the Lut Tawar Lake Area

The Lut Tawar Lake area boasts a rich local economy that can serve as a crucial foundation for inclusive and sustainable tourism development. Superior products such as Gayo coffee, depik fish, Gayo woven lace, and distinctive Gayo cultural attractions not only possess economic value, but also contain symbolic dimensions that strengthen the local community's cultural identity. This potential aligns with the *sustainable cultural tourism approach*, which emphasizes not only economic profit, but also the preservation of cultural values and social empowerment (Novelli, 2015). Gayo coffee has long been recognized as an export commodity with high economic value and international recognition through its Geographical Indication (GI) certification. However, the use of coffee as an educational and agro-tourism destination remains limited. However, agriculture-based tourism, such as *agrotourism*, has proven to have a multiplier economic impact when packaged in a participatory manner and involving producer communities (Gunawan & Nurhadi, 2022). This potential will be maximized if local communities are involved in the

tourism narrative, from cultivation and post-harvest processing to storytelling about the Gayo coffee culture. Similarly, the depik fish, an endemic species of Lake Lut Tawar, offers a unique appeal for development as a part of conservation-based ecotourism. Rini et al. (2023) concluded that local conservation-based tourism will be successful if managed by communities with *knowledge ownership* of tourist attractions. This underscores the importance of community agencies in managing their own ecological resources, not only as economic assets but also as social heritage.

Gayo openwork woven products possess profound symbolic value, as their motifs are steeped in philosophical and spiritual meanings. However, in the context of tourism, these products are often reduced to consumer souvenirs. As Wood (2020) notes, local cultural risks are devalued if viewed solely as an aesthetic commodity without community involvement in conveying its narrative. In the natural attraction sector, destinations such as Pantan Terong and Bur Telege are popular among domestic tourists, especially the younger generation. This phenomenon aligns with the growing trend of *nature-based tourism* following the COVID-19 pandemic, which places greater value on open spaces, silence, and connections with nature. The UNWTO (2023) has noted that nature tourism now occupies a strategic position in the global tourism recovery agenda. However, this potential does not automatically drive inclusive, local economic growth. According to a 2023 study by the Open Journal Unimal, the obstacles faced by local communities include weak managerial capacity, limited digital literacy, and a lack of sustainable marketing networks. Marketing strategies and packaging of cultural products tend to be sporadic, emerging only during festivals or major tourism events.

In the context of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, local economic potential can only develop if there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between *structure* (policy, infrastructure, and market systems) and *agency* (the capabilities, initiatives, and innovations of local communities). If the structure is biased and agencies lack capacity, then inequality is reproduced. Local products will remain in the shadow of large capitalists, and local communities will become mere workers in a system that they do not control. Therefore, tourism development based on local potential must position the community as a primary subject, not merely an accessory.

4.1 Inequality in Access to Resources and Distribution of Economic Benefits of Tourism between Local Actors and Large-Capitalized Actors

Despite the significant economic potential of Lut Tawar Lake, the distribution of tourism benefits remains unequal. Data and field findings indicate that strategic businesses, such as star-rated hotels, large restaurants, and tourist transportation services, are largely owned by investors from outside the region. Local businesses are more involved in informal sectors such as street food sales, boat rentals, or souvenir sales, which have low profit margins and depend on the visiting season (Aini, 2024; Open Journal Unimal, 2023). From a structural perspective, several factors reinforce the dominance of large-capital players. First, access to capital is limited for the local players. A 2024 report by the Central Aceh Statistics Agency (BPS) shows that the majority of tourism MSMEs lack access to bank credit due to collateral constraints and lack of financial literacy. Second, regulations and procurement policies in the tourism sector do not explicitly mandate the use of local products; therefore, hotels and restaurants tend to source goods from suppliers outside the region that are more integrated into large distribution networks. Third, government-managed promotional infrastructure focuses more on increasing the number of visits than empowering local value chains. As noted by Mulyana and Wibowo (2023), tourism development, which only targets visit numbers, has the potential to widen the economic gap between actors, because local actors are not positioned as primary beneficiaries.

From an agency perspective, the limited capacity of local actors is a barrier. Many small businesses lack digital marketing skills, efficient business management, and access to broad markets. The lack of capacity in business management, digital marketing, and product certification makes it difficult for them to penetrate high-value markets. As Ardhan et al. (2022) noted, "gaps in access to technology and knowledge are a major factor in the marginalization of local actors in the digital tourism market." In many cases, local actors are only the initial producers, while intermediaries with broader market access capture

the added value of their products. This inequality is both structural and recurrent. As a result, despite the demand for specialty products such as gayo coffee, depik fish, or woven crafts, local actors often sell their products to intermediaries at low prices. These intermediaries then repackage the products and sell them at significantly higher prices in the tourism market, thus losing much of their added value at the producer level (Open Journal Unimal, 2023).

Within the framework of Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, this situation indicates the dominance of structures that limit agency capacity. Non-inclusive policies and market structures restrict local communities' ability to participate in high-value segments of the tourism industry. Conversely, limited community agencies have made it difficult for them to change their existing structures. Consequently, inequality is reproduced, with outsiders continuing to dominate the most profitable market segments, whereas local communities receive only marginal benefits. A similar phenomenon was also found in research by Bianchi and Stephenson (2014), who emphasized that when tourism policies focus more on increasing visitor numbers than on the equitable distribution of benefits, inequality becomes entrenched. In the context of Lake Lut Tawar, without structural interventions that provide access to capital, market protection, and capacity building for local actors, this inequality tends to persist and widen as the tourism sector develops.

4.3 The Imbalance of the Role of Structure and Agency in the Dynamics of Tourism Economic Management in Lake Lut Tawar

Tourism management in the Lut Tawar area demonstrates an imbalance between the structural strength and agency capacity of local communities. The local government has demonstrated its commitment to developing the tourism sector through the construction of physical infrastructure, supporting tourism facilities, and social media-based promotional campaigns (BPS Aceh Tengah, 2024). However, this development remains heavily oriented toward the number of tourist visits, rather than transforming the local economic structure to be more inclusive of local actors. The absence of affirmative policies mandating the use of local products in the tourism sector has opened space for large capital players to dominate the tourism supply chain. This demonstrates how structures operate exclusively, not only in terms of capital management and market access, but also in their disregard for the principles of a people-centered economy. Bianchi and Stephenson (2014) emphasize that without explicit structural support, local communities will remain "passive beneficiaries" or secondary beneficiaries in the tourism economy.

Furthermore, the neglect of *local empowerment-based policies* in tourism planning contributes to the marginalization of local actors. As noted by Widodo et al. (2023), many tourist destinations in Indonesia have failed to foster local economic independence, because policies are more promotional than transformative. Thus, the focus on destination promotion is not accompanied by systemic efforts to strengthen the bargaining position of communities as primary producers in the tourism ecosystem. However, local communities have demonstrated the seeds of strong agencies. Initiatives such as establishing tourist villages, managing homestays, and using social media by young people to market cultural attractions demonstrate the potential for community-based tourism development. However, the capacities of these agencies remain fragmented and poorly consolidated. Barriers such as low digital literacy, limited access to promotional funding, and weak collaboration among local businesses prevent these agencies from challenging established structures (Open Journal Unimal, 2023). Within the framework of Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, this situation illustrates an imbalance in the relationship between structure and agency. The dominant structure fails to provide adequate space for strengthening community capacity, and even implicitly creates barriers to participation. Meanwhile, weak agencies fail to reproduce or modify the structure, resulting in the recurrence of the dominance of large capitalists and marginalization of local communities. This phenomenon reflects a dysfunctional *duality of structure*, where the structure actually weakens the actors it should empower.

This inequality is not only economic, but also impacts culture. Cultural attractions such as Guel Dance and openwork weaving are at risk of *commodification* when overly adapted to the tastes of the tourist market. Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) warned that when local culture is commodified without

community involvement and narrative control, its sacred value and authenticity can be lost. This meaningless commodification shifts culture from a mere object of identity to an object of consumption. In this context, it is crucial to design policy strategies that align the structural power with local agencies. Affirmative action policies, training support, the establishment of tourism cooperatives, and a digital ecosystem that encourages local actors to directly access markets are needed. Furthermore, regulatory structures must be geared toward accommodating local narratives as part of the added value of tourism. If the relationship between structures and agencies is reciprocally strengthened, tourism will become not only an economic driver, but also an instrument for cultural preservation and social empowerment.

4.4 Strategy for Creating Balance between Structure and Agency to Strengthen the Role of Local Communities in the Tourism Economy

Creating a balance between structure and agency is a key requirement for realizing equitable, inclusive, and sustainable tourism in the Lut Tawar area. Within Giddens' (1984) structuration framework, structures are not static and absolutely oppressive but have the potential to be modified through the reflective actions of social actors. Therefore, empowerment strategies must be directed not only to institutionalize more inclusive structures but also to build local community agencies to enable them to navigate and reshape these structures. From a structural perspective, policy intervention is crucial. Affirmative action policies requiring hotels, restaurants, and event organizers to use at least 50% of products and services from local producers are not utopian but rather an approach that has been implemented with positive results in several community-based tourism areas in Indonesia (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, 2023). Nuryanti and Fauziah (2022) confirmed that locally based *procurement policies* have been shown to increase the contribution of MSMEs to the tourism sector's GDP and strengthen local economic chains. Furthermore, the structure must provide equitable access to the financial resources. Microfinance schemes with low interest rates and flexible terms are concrete solutions for unbankable local actors. As noted by Wulandari and Meilani (2023), the success of MSMEs in the tourism sector depends heavily on easy access to alternative financing such as ultra-micro credit and community-based cooperatives. In the context of Lake Lut Tawar, the establishment of a *tourism credit cooperative* could be a financial institutional option that strengthens local agencies.

Promotional infrastructure must also be designed based on the principles of partisanship. Establishing local product promotion and distribution centers at airports, train stations, terminals, and city centers is not only a marketing strategy, but also a recognition of the role of local economic actors as key players. In the digital era, *e-commerce platforms* dedicated to cultural products and community-based local tourism packages have become highly strategic. This has been demonstrated in the *smart tourism village model* implemented in Bali and Yogyakarta, where local actors are directly connected to the digital tourist market (Rahmatullah & Saptari, 2023). From an agency perspective, strengthening community capacity is a key foundation. Ongoing training in digital marketing, homestay management, product packaging, and quality certification must be provided systematically, not only on a temporary project basis. Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) emphasized that community participation will only be meaningful if accompanied by sustainable and contextual *capacity building*.

The formation of strong, adaptive collective institutions is equally important. Tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis), tourism cooperatives, and cultural product cooperatives are not only tools for distributing benefits, but also platforms for negotiation between communities, the state, and the market. These institutions can function as tourism managers, liaisons between local actors, providers of access to capital, and guardians of local cultural narratives, to prevent excessive commodification. Research by Fitrani and Wardana (2022) showed that the success of tourism villages in several regions of Indonesia is largely determined by the existence of strong and democratic collective institutions in their management. If these strategies are implemented simultaneously, a *positive feedback loop* occurs between structures and agencies. Supportive structures enable agencies to thrive, and strong agencies demand and create more equitable structures. In the context of Lake Lut Tawar, this will not only reduce economic inequality, but also strengthen social sustainability and preserve the culture of the Gayo people.

5 CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Lake Lut Tawar area possesses significant local economic potential, supported by key commodities such as Gayo coffee, depik fish, Gayo woven cloth, and distinctive natural and cultural attractions. These assets have the potential to serve as a foundation for developing inclusive and sustainable tourism that prioritizes the welfare of local communities. However, this potential remains underutilized because of unequal access to resources and the uneven distribution of economic benefits. The current tourism structure tends to favor large capital actors, particularly external investors, who dominate strategic sectors, such as large hotels and restaurants. In contrast, local actors generally operate in the informal sector, facing low incomes, limited access to capital, and weak marketing networks. Viewed through the lens of Anthony Giddens's structuration theory, this inequality reflects an unbalanced interaction between structure and agency. Structures, manifested in policies, regulations, access to capital, and infrastructure, do not sufficiently enable the development of local communities. Conversely, local agencies with their limited capacity have been unable to reshape or influence existing structures. This imbalance reproduces inequality, causing tourism benefits to concentrate among external stakeholders. To achieve a more equitable balance between structure and agency, two strategies are required. Structurally, affirmative policies, access to capital, marketing infrastructure, and market protection of local products are necessary. From the agency side, community capacity should be enhanced through training, product innovation, network building, and the establishment of collective institutions such as tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis) and cooperatives.

5.1. Contribution Beyond the Case of Lake Lut Tawar

Beyond its local context, this study contributes to the broader tourism literature by operationalizing structuration theory in empirical research, particularly by examining inequality in resource access and benefit distribution. Theoretically, it extends the application of Giddens' framework to rural tourism in developing regions, demonstrating how the interplay of structure and agency can illuminate the hidden mechanisms of inequality reproduction within tourism economies. Methodologically, the research offers a replicable coding strategy that categorizes data according to "structure" and "agency," enabling systematic identification of both systemic constraints and local capacities. This approach can be applied not only in tourism studies but also in other development sectors where structural asymmetries shape community outcomes. Practically, lessons from Lake Lut Tawar offer valuable insights for other developing regions facing the similar challenges of external investor dominance and local marginalization. The proposed dual-intervention model—structural transformation through inclusive policies and agency strengthening through community empowerment—provides a transferable framework for designing economically viable and socially equitable tourism systems. This approach is particularly relevant for rural and peripheral areas seeking to leverage tourism potential, while safeguarding cultural identity and ensuring fair benefit distribution.

Ethical approval

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was not required as the research involved minimal risk and did not include clinical or biomedical interventions.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, M.H. and S.W.F.; methodology, L.S.P.; validation, L.S.P.; formal analysis, M.H.; resources, M.H.; writing—original draft preparation, M.H., S.W.F., K.A.S., L.S.P.; writing review and editing, S.W.F.; translation support, K.A.S

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the author.

Funding

This research did not receive external funding.

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