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Comparative Analysis of Tourism Sector Development Based on Local Systems and Culture (Case Study of North Toraja Regency and Polewali Mandar Regency)

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Abstract

The tourism sector is one of the strategic pillars of regional development in South Sulawesi and West Sulawesi. This situation-analysis-based community service and research aim to map and compare tourism development achievements between Toraja Utara Regency and Polewali Mandar Regency using a Systems Approach (Input–Process–Output–Outcome–Feedback). The implementation method involved field observations, secondary BPS data analysis, and regional comparative matrices. The results indicate that Toraja Utara Regency is in an advanced stage of tourism development characterized by international cultural branding and stable regional revenue (PAD) contribution. Conversely, Polewali Mandar Regency is in an emerging stage driven by marine potential and tourism villages. The systems approach demonstrates that Toraja Utara 's advantage lies in the maturity of its indigenous community organization process, while Polewali Mandar requires optimization in destination management processes and infrastructure integration.

Introduction

Tourism has become an increasingly important component of regional development in Indonesia, particularly in areas that possess distinctive cultural traditions, natural resources, and community-based economic activities. Beyond its contribution to local revenue, tourism can stimulate employment, strengthen small and medium-sized enterprises, encourage infrastructure development, and promote the preservation of local cultural heritage. However, the development of tourism destinations requires more than the availability of attractive natural and cultural resources. Effective governance, community participation, human-resource capacity, destination management, marketing, and the ability to respond to changing tourist preferences are equally important in determining whether regional tourism potential can be transformed into sustainable economic and social benefits. In this context, comparative learning between regions with different tourism characteristics can provide an important basis for identifying transferable practices and developing locally appropriate strategies (de Lurdes et al., 2023; Zhang & Jensen, 2025; Petrović et al., 2025).

North Toraja Regency (Kabupaten Toraja Utara), located in South Sulawesi Province, represents a region in which tourism development is strongly associated with cultural heritage, mountainous landscapes, agriculture, and community traditions. The regency is characterized by highland topography consisting of hills and mountainous areas, resulting in a relatively cool climate and distinctive natural scenery. Rantepao, the capital of North Toraja, serves as a center of government, economic activity, and public services. The region's tourism identity is strongly shaped by the Torajan cultural landscape, including *Tongkonan* traditional houses, *Rambu Solo'* ceremonies, traditional values, and culturally significant natural and religious attractions. These resources provide a strong

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foundation for cultural and nature-based tourism while simultaneously creating opportunities for local communities to participate in tourism-related economic activities.

The socioeconomic characteristics of North Toraja further reinforce the importance of community-based tourism development. Agriculture and plantation activities, including coffee and cocoa production, remain important components of the local economy, while tourism contributes to the growth of trade and service activities. The population is distributed across mountainous and rural areas, with communities maintaining strong social relationships and cultural institutions. The increasing accessibility of education also provides opportunities to strengthen local human resources and improve community participation in tourism management. Nevertheless, the existence of substantial tourism assets does not automatically guarantee optimal tourism performance. Destination management must be supported by professional hospitality, effective institutional coordination, digital promotion, conflict management, and mechanisms that enable local communities to benefit directly from tourism development.

A comparable but distinct context can be observed in Polewali Mandar Regency (Kabupaten Polewali Mandar) in West Sulawesi Province. Located along the western coast of Sulawesi, Polewali Mandar functions as an important gateway to West Sulawesi and possesses a diverse geographical landscape extending from coastal areas and lowlands to hills and strategic river basins supporting agricultural activities. Its tourism potential includes marine and coastal destinations, cultural attractions associated with the Mandar community, rural tourism, and emerging forms of *sport tourism*. This diversity provides opportunities for the development of an integrated tourism economy based on natural resources, cultural heritage, and community participation. Tourism development in Polewali Mandar is therefore closely connected to broader regional objectives, including increasing locally generated revenue, creating employment opportunities, strengthening local entrepreneurship, and promoting community-based economic development.

Polewali Mandar also demonstrates considerable potential for village-based tourism and community participation. Among its tourism assets is Lapeo Tourism Village, which has gained national recognition through its inclusion among the 50 Best Villages in the 2024 Anugerah Desa Wisata Indonesia (ADWI). In addition, the development of *sport tourism*, including destinations in the Kanang area, illustrates the possibility of diversifying tourism products beyond conventional sightseeing. The regional tourism development framework, including the Regional Tourism Development Master Plan (RIPPDA), provides an institutional basis for coordinating these potentials. Domestic tourist arrivals have also contributed to the development of the tourism sector, although international tourism remains at an early stage. These conditions indicate the need to strengthen destination branding, digital marketing, hospitality services, tourism entrepreneurship, and human-resource competencies.

Despite these opportunities, North Toraja and Polewali Mandar face different geographical, cultural, institutional, and developmental contexts. Consequently, tourism practices that have emerged in one region cannot simply be replicated in another without considering local characteristics. A comparative approach is therefore necessary to identify relevant lessons, distinguish context-specific practices from transferable strategies, and formulate recommendations that are realistic for the receiving region. In particular, North Toraja's experience in managing culturally based tourism and community participation can provide valuable learning opportunities for Polewali

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Mandar, while the latter's experience in developing coastal, village, and sport tourism can broaden the comparative understanding of regional tourism diversification.

Accordingly, this activity focuses on a comparative examination of tourism development in North Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi, and Polewali Mandar Regency, West Sulawesi. The comparison is intended not merely to describe differences in tourism resources and achievements but also to facilitate knowledge transfer, strengthen the capacity of tourism stakeholders, and develop practical strategies for sustainable destination development. Particular attention is given to tourism governance, community participation, human-resource development, hospitality, conflict management, digital marketing, and destination branding. Through this comparative framework, the activity seeks to generate practical recommendations for improving the competitiveness and sustainability of Polewali Mandar's tourism sector while recognizing the importance of preserving local cultural identity and ensuring meaningful community involvement. Ultimately, cross-regional learning can serve as a strategic mechanism for strengthening local tourism governance and translating regional tourism potential into inclusive and sustainable socioeconomic development.

Methods

Community Engagement Approach

This community service activity was implemented using a participatory mentoring and comparative study approach**.** The approach was designed to facilitate knowledge exchange between lecturers and final-year students of STISIP Bina Generasi Polewali and tourism stakeholders in North Toraja Regency. Rather than treating the comparative visit as a one-way transfer of information, the activity positioned participants as active observers and discussants who were encouraged to identify relevant tourism governance practices, assess their applicability to the Polewali Mandar context, and formulate practical follow-up strategies.

The implementation consisted of three sequential stages: (1) pre-comparative study preparation and briefing, (2) field implementation and observation, and (3) post-comparative study mentoring and evaluation**.** The three stages were designed as an integrated process in which the results of each stage informed the activities in the subsequent stage. This structure enabled participants to move from initial identification of local needs, through direct observation and knowledge exchange, toward the formulation of an action plan for potential implementation in Polewali Mandar.

Pre-Comparative Study: Preparation and Briefing

The first stage focused on preparing participants to undertake systematic field observation. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted involving lecturers and students of STISIP Bina Generasi Polewali to identify the major needs and challenges associated with tourism development in Polewali Mandar. The discussion focused on tourism governance, community participation, destination management, human-resource capacity, hospitality, conflict management, and tourism promotion.

Following the FGD, participants received theoretical and methodological briefing concerning relevant indicators of successful tourism development. The briefing was intended to establish a common analytical framework so that participants could observe tourism practices in North Toraja systematically rather than merely documenting the physical characteristics of tourist destinations. Particular attention was directed toward community-based tourism, destination governance, stakeholder participation, service

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management, local economic benefits, cultural preservation, and digital tourism promotion. The preparation stage therefore served as a foundation for connecting academic concepts with empirical observations during the field activities.

Field Implementation and Observation

The second stage involved direct field visits to three selected tourism destinations in North Toraja Regency: Buntu Burake, Kete Kesu, and Londa. The field activities were conducted from 12 to 15 February 2026**.** These destinations were selected as comparative learning sites because they provide different examples of tourism development based on cultural heritage, natural resources, religious significance, and community involvement.

Field observation was undertaken to examine how tourism destinations were managed and how local stakeholders participated in tourism activities. Participants observed destination management practices, visitor services, supporting facilities, community involvement, cultural resource management, and mechanisms for addressing challenges encountered in tourism development. Observations were complemented by interactive sharing sessions and discussions between lecturers and students from STISIP Bina Generasi Polewali and tourism managers or local stakeholders in North Toraja.

The discussion sessions focused on the practical dimensions of tourism governance, including institutional arrangements, community participation, problem mitigation, stakeholder coordination, and mechanisms for distributing tourism-related benefits within local communities. Through direct interaction with destination managers and stakeholders, participants were able to compare theoretical concepts discussed during the preparation stage with practices observed in the field. The comparative process also encouraged participants to identify practices that could potentially be adapted to the social, cultural, institutional, and geographical characteristics of Polewali Mandar.

Post-Comparative Study: Mentoring and Action Planning

The third stage consisted of post-visit mentoring and evaluation. Following the field activities, participants reflected on their observations and identified practices that were considered relevant to the tourism development needs of Polewali Mandar. The evaluation process emphasized the distinction between practices that could potentially be transferred directly and those that required adaptation to local conditions.

The main output of this stage was the preparation of a Tourism Development Action Plan for Polewali Mandar. The action-planning workshop translated the lessons obtained from North Toraja into potential interventions related to tourism governance, community participation, human-resource development, hospitality, destination management, and digital marketing and branding. Participants were encouraged to formulate realistic and context-sensitive recommendations rather than simply replicate tourism practices observed in North Toraja. Thus, the action plan functioned as a mechanism for translating comparative learning into potential practical interventions.

Participants and Target Group

The target group consisted of lecturers and final-year students of STISIP Bina Generasi Polewali, particularly students from the Department of State Administration and the Department of Government Studies. The involvement of final-year students was intended to provide direct exposure to contemporary public-sector and tourism-governance practices while strengthening their ability to connect theoretical knowledge with

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empirical conditions. Lecturers acted as facilitators throughout the preparation, field observation, discussion, and action-planning stages.

Implementation Context and Institutional Relevance

The activity was conducted in North Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi, as a comparative learning site for tourism development in Polewali Mandar, West Sulawesi. From an institutional perspective, the program was designed to support the implementation of higher education's Tri Dharma, particularly community service, while strengthening the connection between academic knowledge and practical regional development.

The activity also supported institutional performance through several mechanisms. First, it contributed to the implementation of the Key Performance Indicators (IKU) related to lecturers' engagement beyond the campus and the utilization of lecturers' work by communities and external stakeholders. Second, field experiences from North Toraja and Polewali Mandar can be incorporated into case-based learning within relevant courses, allowing students to examine actual problems of tourism governance. Third, the activity facilitated the downstream application of academic knowledge concerning Community-Based Tourism, tourism governance, and digital branding into practical recommendations. Finally, the comparative study provided a basis for strengthening institutional networks and developing potential future collaboration between the higher education institution, local communities, tourism managers, and regional governments.

Results and Discussion

Tourism Development in North Toraja Regency

The comparative field study identified North Toraja Regency as a tourism destination in which cultural heritage, natural landscapes, religious values, and community traditions are closely integrated into destination development. The mountainous geographical characteristics of the region provide a distinctive landscape that supports nature-based and cultural tourism. Tourism development in North Toraja demonstrates an effort to maintain the authenticity of local traditions while gradually improving tourism infrastructure and visitor facilities. The field observations focused on three prominent destinations Londa, Kete Kesu, and Buntu Burake which illustrate different forms of tourism development and provide practical references for comparison with the tourism potential of Polewali Mandar.

Londa is a distinctive cultural tourism destination characterized by a natural cave complex located on a limestone cliff and used as a traditional burial site. The site contains *erong* (traditional coffins) and *tau-tau* wooden statues representing the cultural values and ancestral traditions of the Torajan community. The development of Londa demonstrates how cultural heritage can become a tourism asset while retaining its connection to local beliefs and traditions. From the perspective of tourism management, the destination provides an example of how cultural authenticity can be integrated into visitor experiences without separating tourism activities from the historical and social meanings of the site.

Kete Kesu represents a traditional village in which Torajan architectural heritage and cultural landscapes remain important elements of the tourism experience. The destination is characterized by traditional *Tongkonan* houses and *alang* rice barns that have been preserved over generations. The combination of traditional architecture, cultural practices, and community life provides a strong foundation for cultural and heritage tourism. The observation of Kete Kesu indicates that the preservation of tangible

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cultural heritage can simultaneously contribute to destination attractiveness and create opportunities for local communities to participate in tourism-related economic activities.



Figure 1. Group photo of PKM activity participants at the Kete Kesu tourist destination

Buntu Burake represents a religious and landscape-based tourism destination located on a hill and associated with the large statue of Jesus Christ the Redeemer. Its elevated location provides visitors with panoramic views of the surrounding urban and mountainous landscape. The destination demonstrates the potential for integrating religious tourism, natural scenery, and recreational experiences into a single tourism product. The development of Buntu Burake also illustrates the importance of supporting infrastructure and accessibility in transforming a religious and cultural attraction into a destination capable of accommodating visitors and generating economic activity.

Tourism Development Potential in Polewali Mandar Regency

The comparative assessment indicates that Polewali Mandar Regency possesses substantial tourism resources that can be developed through an integrated and community-oriented approach. Its tourism potential encompasses marine and coastal attractions, village tourism, cultural resources, events, and *sport tourism*. The diversity of these resources provides opportunities for tourism diversification and the development of tourism products that respond to different visitor interests. In particular, community participation is an important foundation for ensuring that tourism development generates local economic benefits while maintaining the environmental and cultural characteristics of each destination.

Coastal and marine tourism constitutes one of the major tourism potentials of Polewali Mandar. Destinations such as Palippis Beach and Bahari Polewali Beach provide opportunities for the development of recreational tourism supported by public facilities, gazebos, open spaces, and other visitor amenities. Other natural destinations, including Gusung Toraja Island and Indo Rannuang Waterfall, offer opportunities for nature-based tourism and community-oriented destination promotion. These destinations indicate that Polewali Mandar has a diverse natural tourism base; however, the development of these resources requires coordinated management, consistent promotion, improved accessibility, and adequate supporting infrastructure.

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Village tourism also provides an important pathway for strengthening community participation. Lapeo Tourism Village, for example, has received national recognition through its inclusion among the 50 best villages in the 2024 *Anugerah Desa Wisata Indonesia* (ADWI). This recognition reflects the potential of village-level initiatives to integrate natural and cultural resources with local community participation. Village tourism can also support the development of local entrepreneurship through accommodation, culinary businesses, handicrafts, guiding services, and other tourism-related activities. Similarly, the development of *sport tourism*, including activities in the Kanang area, demonstrates the possibility of diversifying Polewali Mandar's tourism products beyond conventional sightseeing.

Tourist Visits and Supporting Infrastructure

The field assessment further indicates that domestic tourists constitute an important component of tourism activity in Polewali Mandar. Available regional data indicate substantial domestic tourist arrivals in certain years, while international tourist arrivals remain considerably smaller. This pattern suggests that the domestic tourism market represents an important foundation for the continued development of local destinations. At the same time, increasing the attractiveness of destinations to broader markets requires more consistent destination branding, digital promotion, quality visitor services, and the development of distinctive tourism products based on local characteristics.



Figure 2. Photo with participants in PKM activities at the Londa tourist destination

Infrastructure and accessibility remain important factors influencing the development of tourism in Polewali Mandar. Access to many destinations continues to depend primarily on land transportation, making road quality and connectivity important determinants of visitor mobility. Some destinations can also be accessed through marine transportation, although supporting transport infrastructure remains less developed than that found in some established tourism regions. In addition to transportation, the availability and quality of accommodation, parking areas, sanitation facilities, food services, and other basic amenities influence the overall visitor experience. Several tourism villages have begun to develop supporting facilities such as homestays, camping grounds, culinary

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stalls, and electronic payment facilities, including QRIS, indicating gradual improvement in destination readiness and tourism service delivery.

Challenges and Opportunities for Tourism Development

The comparative study identified several challenges that need to be addressed to strengthen tourism development in Polewali Mandar. The first is the uneven distribution and integration of tourism infrastructure across destinations. Although the regency possesses numerous attractive tourism resources, differences in accessibility, amenities, visitor facilities, and management capacity may limit the ability of some destinations to realize their full tourism potential. The second challenge concerns destination management and promotion. Several tourism assets require stronger institutional coordination, more systematic marketing, and greater investment in facilities and services. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration among local government, communities, tourism managers, private-sector actors, and educational institutions.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate significant opportunities for Polewali Mandar to strengthen its tourism sector. The combination of marine tourism, cultural attractions, village tourism, natural destinations, events, and *sport tourism* provides a basis for developing a diversified regional tourism portfolio. Greater community participation can strengthen local economic benefits through the development of homestays, culinary enterprises, handicrafts, guiding services, and other small businesses. Furthermore, participation in national tourism programs such as ADWI can provide opportunities for broader promotion and networking. The comparative experience of North Toraja suggests that the sustainable development of Polewali Mandar's tourism sector can be strengthened by connecting local resources with effective governance, community participation, cultural and environmental preservation, professional tourism services, and targeted destination branding.

Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Tourism Sector Development in North Toraja and Polewali Mandar Regencies

Comparison Aspect	**North Toraja Regency**	**Polewali Mandar Regency**	**Regional Comparative Analysis**
Tourism Characteristics	Cultural, religious, and mountainous tourism (*Tongkonan*, carved stones).	Marine, beach, and natural coastal tourism.	Toraja has an advantage in global cultural differentiation; Polewali Mandar has an advantage in regional marine tourism potential.
Featured Destinations	Kete Kesu, Londa, Buntu Burake.	Palippis Beach, Bahari Beach, Gusung Toraja Island.	Toraja destinations have international historical value; Polewali Mandar is oriented toward public recreation.
Comparison Aspect	**North Toraja Regency**	**Polewali Mandar Regency**	**Regional Comparative Analysis**

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Featured Destinations	Kete Kesu, Londa, Buntu Burake.	Palippis Beach, Bahari Beach, Gusung Toraja Island.	Toraja destinations have international historical value; Polewali Mandar is oriented toward public recreation.
Tourist Visits	High (Domestic and international tourists).	Moderate–High (Predominantly local and regional tourists).	Toraja has cross-border appeal; Polewali Mandar focuses on nearby domestic markets.
Local Revenue Contribution	Significant through tourism fees and hotel/restaurant taxes.	Still relatively limited but showing a positive trend.	Toraja is at a more mature stage of tourism monetization.
Infrastructure Readiness	Established access, *homestays*, hotels, and tourism amenities.	Basic facilities are available but unevenly distributed.	Toraja has a more established hospitality industry.
Promotion & Branding	*World Cultural Heritage Brand*.	Promotion through social media and local festivals (ADWI).	Polewali Mandar requires broader national marketing channels.
Cultural Attractions	Periodic sacred rituals (*Rambu Solo'*, *Rambu Tuka'*).	Mandar Cultural Festivals and *sport tourism* events.	Toraja attractions are deeply embedded in the social structure of local communities.
Economic Impact	Broad employment absorption in the service sector.	Growth of MSMEs and informal coastal traders.	Both generate a *multiplier effect*, although the scale of impact is greater in Toraja.
Comparison Aspect	**North Toraja Regency**	**Polewali Mandar Regency**	**Regional Comparative Analysis**
Management & Investment	An integrated system involving customary institutions.	In the transition stage of destination management.	Toraja has stronger governance certainty based on customary and local government regulations.
Key Challenges	Waste management and degradation of cultural sites.	Limited promotion, private investment, and accessibility.	Toraja faces sustainability challenges, while Polewali Mandar faces fundamental governance challenges.

Table 2. Achievement Evaluation Matrix Based on Development Indicators

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Development Indicator	North Toraja Achievement	Polewali Mandar Achievement	Evaluative Notes
Tourism Sector Growth	High & Stable	Gradual Growth	Toraja demonstrates a high level of industry resilience.
Product Diversification	Highly Diverse (Culture, Religion, Nature)	Diverse (Marine Tourism, Ecotourism)	Toraja is able to offer a variety of tourism packages.
Community Participation	Very High (*Customary-based*)	High (MSME Participation)	A model of community involvement based on local wisdom.
Tourism Human Resource Capacity	Trained (*Guides*, *Hospitality*)	Requires Further Assistance	Polewali Mandar requires vocational training and certification.
Regional Competitiveness	Strong National–International Position	Competitive within West Sulawesi	Toraja serves as an *anchor destination* in South Sulawesi.

Evaluation of Activity Success

Evaluation of the success of Community Service (PKM) activities in this comparative study is measured based on three main indicators, namely: Increased Understanding and Paradigm Change. Before activities were implemented, tourism managers in Polewali Mandar Regency tended to focus on physical development without paying attention to sustainable community governance. After the comparative study to North Toraja (Londa, Kete Kesu, and Buntu Burake), a significant paradigm transformation occurred. STISIP Bina Generasi Polewali Lecturers and Students now understand that the essence of tourism is not just selling the natural beauty of tourism to be developed further. maintaining cultural authenticity, original local values, and standardized hospitality services. Increasing Technical Capacity and Adoption of Governance, Through interactive discussions and direct observation, STISIP Bina Generasi Polewali Lecturers and Students can adopt tourism governance that has been established in North Toraja. Improved skills in designing interesting tour guiding narratives and using digital media in a more structured manner to expand the reach of destination promotions. Overall, this comparative study program was declared successful in achieving the planned output target, where STISIP Bina Generasi Polewali Lecturers and Students not only gained theoretical insight but also an empirical model that is ready to be implemented to boost tourism competitiveness in Polewali Mandar Regency.

Conclusion

The conclusion that can be summarized from the implementation of this community service activity is that the tourism development maturity of North Toraja Regency is at a more advanced stage of tourism development (mature stage) compared to Polewali Mandar Regency which is at the stage of strengthening its potential (emerging stage). Tourism Product Differentiation, North Toraja's superiority rests on the uniqueness of world-class sacred baya assets, while Polewali Mandar relies on the attractiveness of marine tourism and coastal recreation. Approach Pattern the North Toraja Regency

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tourism development system has strong socio-cultural capital input, a custom-based participatory planning process, as well as PAD output and a high level of foreign visits. Meanwhile, in Polewali Mandar district, it has succeeded in gathering input from rich natural potential, but it needs strengthening on Process (destination management, promotion and investment) to optimize development output.

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