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Beyond the Narrative: Participatory Storytelling as a Tool for Sustainable Rural Tourism Governance in East Kalimantan, Indonesia

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Abstract

Rural tourism is considered an instrument of sustainable rural development. However, the balance of power in the production of the discourse on rural development is not equal, often resulting in the marginalization of the voices of the people. In the existing literature, the role of tourism storytelling is mostly considered an instrument of branding, participation, or legitimacy discourses. Moreover, the connection between narrative practices and the outcomes of rural tourism governance is not typically considered. This study aims to examine the role of participatory storytelling in rural tourism governance in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. By using the constructivist embedded multiple case design in eight tourism villages, the study explores the connection between narrative genres and participatory governance indicators. The findings of the study reveal that narrative practices play an essential role in the production of the infrastructure of rural tourism governance. In this sense, the role of narrative agency can be considered an instrument of participatory legitimacy. A new framework of participatory storytelling was then developed.

Keywords: participatory storytelling, rural tourism, participatory communication, rural development, community-based tourism

Au-delà du récit : la narration participative comme outil de gouvernance du tourisme rural durable au Kalimantan oriental, Indonésie

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Résumé

Le tourisme rural est considéré comme un instrument de développement rural durable. Cependant, le rapport de force dans la production du discours sur le développement rural est inégal, ce qui conduit souvent à la marginalisation des voix des populations locales. Dans la littérature existante, le rôle de la narration touristique est principalement envisagé comme un outil au service des discours sur l'image de marque, la participation ou la légitimité. De plus, le lien entre les pratiques narratives et les résultats de la gouvernance du tourisme rural est rarement pris en compte. Cette étude vise à examiner le rôle la narration participatiive dans la gouvernance du tourisme rural dans le Kalimantan oriental, en Indonésie. En recourant à une méthodologie constructiviste fondée sur l'analyse de cas multiples dans huit villages touristiques, cette étude explore le lien entre les genres narratifs et les indicateurs de gouvernance participative. Les résultats révèlent que les pratiques narratives jouent un rôle essentiel dans la mise en place de l'infrastructure de gouvernance du tourisme rural. Ainsi, le rôle de l'agence narrative peut être considéré comme un instrument de légitimité participative. Un nouveau cadre d'analyse de narration participative a ensuite été élaboré.

Mots-clés : narration participative, tourisme rural, communication participative, développement rural, tourisme communautaire

1.0 Introduction

Rural tourism is extensively advocated as a means to achieve sustainable rural development; yet the question of who controls the narrative of development remains a significant and unsolved issue. This conflict is significant since narrative increasingly influences how communities get resources, legitimacy, and policy focus. In several Global South settings, tourism is seen as a means of poverty reduction and cultural preservation (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Idziak et al., 2018). Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has the potential for empowerment, although it often does not achieve a redistribution of discursive power (Aquino et al., 2018; Pernecky, 2024). In Indonesia's Tourism Village initiative, uniform branding sometimes supersedes local expression (Azyyati, 2023; Handini et al., 2025; Mulyani et al., 2021). Such dynamics jeopardize symbolic involvement without substantive change. Consequently, analyzing participatory storytelling is essential for comprehending rural development beyond just procedural inclusion.

Current literature acknowledges the significance of narrative in tourist governance; yet, its developmental consequences are inadequately defined. This disparity persists since the majority of studies prioritize representation rather than institutional reform. Initially, tourism research conceptualizes tales as instruments for branding and legacy (Hartman et al., 2019; Salazar, 2024). Secondly, CBT literature emphasizes involvement but often indicates restricted power redistribution (Aquino et al., 2018; Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023). Third, policy literature demonstrates that narratives influence legitimacy without examining governance results (Cairney & Toomey, 2024; Esteves et al., 2025). Limited research analytically correlates story structures with quantifiable rural government outcomes in Southeast Asia. This article proposes a mechanism-based theory linking narrative agency to rural development results.

The aim of this study is to fill an existing knowledge gap regarding the impact of participatory storytelling on rural development governance. Previous research has established the link between narrative and tourism branding (Hartman et al., 2019; Salazar, 2024), participatory inclusion in procedural contexts (Aquino et al., 2018), and policy narratives in relation to legitimacy (Cairney & Toomey, 2024). However, few studies have attempted to combine these concepts and measure their outcomes on rural development governance. Current literature has established three narrative forms: narrative commodification, symbolic participation, and low institutionalization in the community-based tourism (Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023; Pernecky, 2024). With this understanding, the current article seeks to establish the role of storytelling in planning processes and outcomes and its power dynamics in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. This study provides a pathway to understanding the concept of rural development and its empowerment.

This paper argues that the concept of participatory storytelling serves as a tool for governance and influences rural development beyond its cultural representation. The existing body of literature indicates the presence of three emerging trends with regard to the application of narrative agency in rural development: narrative commodification in the tourism branding (Salazar, 2024); procedural participation without a change in power with reference to the community-based tourism (Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023), and policy narratives with reference to the improvement of legitimacy without redistribution (Cairney & Toomey, 2024). The authors therefore argue that if narrative agency is granted legitimacy, it is expected to result in improved rural governance. The authors present the following subarguments:

narrative agency promotes a sense of place; narrative agency improves legitimacy; and narrative agency enables the equitable sharing of benefits. Through this argument, the authors seek to shed light on the significance of communication action with reference to the empowerment of rural communities.

2.0 Literature Review

The research on storytelling in tourism has begun to increasingly focus on participatory and governance-oriented approaches instead of branding-oriented research. This is due to the rising concerns about the power imbalance in the process of rural tourism development and the marginalization of the voice of the people. It has been argued that narrative practices can have significant effects on the legitimacy of rural tourism. There have been several empirical research findings on how participatory media and storytelling can affect rural tourism development in Asia, Latin American countries, and European countries (Kirsop-Taylor et al., 2020; Servaes, 2022; Sokka et al., 2021). The research on discursive governance has also provided evidence of how narrative practices can affect rural tourism governance. It has been argued that narrative practices can affect the legitimacy of the rural tourism governance (Dryzek, 2022; Hajer, 2009). However, there is a lack of research on how narrative agency can be related to participatory legitimacy in rural tourism governance research.

The theory of participatory communication emphasizes dialogue and co-production as bases for equitable development. It is inspired by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and conceives communication as a process of *conscientização* [conscientization]. It allows marginalized actors to narrate their realities and bring about social change (Dutta, 2020; Freire, 2020). Servaes (2022) and Lie & Servaes (2015a) also emphasized the need for participation in communication to go beyond consultation and engage in collective meaning-making in contexts. Some research has also empirically shown how participatory media can enhance local voice and ownership of development (Øien, 2023; Tremblay & Harris, 2022; Tufte, 2017). The latest research has also emphasized the relationship between narrative practices and community empowerment and capacity building in related fields (Kirsop-Taylor et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020). It conceives narrative agency as collective narrative production capacity in governance. Therefore, participatory storytelling acts as a communication infrastructure for self-determination in rural areas.

Discursive governance views policymaking as a process that is discursively structured by narratives and shared meanings. Hajer (2009, 2020) and Dryzek (2022) suggest that the legitimacy of governance is discursively constructed through the framing of problems and solutions, rather than through institutional design. In this theoretical framework, storytelling is a performative act that discursively constructs agenda-setting, coalition-building, and policy justification. Narrative research in tourism and environmental governance has shown that narratives impact planning agendas and institutional decision-making (Cairney & Toomey, 2024; Dredge & Jenkins, 2016; Shanahan et al., 2018). Research also indicates that narratives produced by communities can transform participatory governance structures when institutionally acknowledged (Esteves et al., 2025; Sokka et al., 2021). These dynamics illustrate the narrative institutional uptake, whereby stories are translated from expression to policymaking. In this manner, storytelling becomes a constitutive element of rural tourism governance.

The theory of participatory legitimacy develops the concept of legitimacy in governance institutions. It differs from the output-based legitimacy theory, which relies on the efficiency and legality of the institutions. Instead, it relies on the perceived fairness and inclusion in the processes of decision-making in the institutions. It has been suggested that the legitimacy of the institutions in the governance processes will be enhanced when the deliberative spaces are used to enhance participation in the decision-making processes (Dryzek, 2022; Mendonça et al., 2022). It has also been suggested that the inclusion of narratives in decision-making processes within institutions will enhance trust in institutions in tourism and environmental governance processes (Esteves et al., 2025; Nunkoo, 2017; Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021; Wong et al., 2020).

However, despite the increasing literature on participatory storytelling and its implications for governance, there is still much analytical ground to cover. Most literature on representation and empowerment rhetoric has not examined the impact of narrative on decision-making processes within institutions. This has led to the notion that storytelling is viewed as symbolic participation in decision-making processes in institutions. Empirical studies on tourism and development contexts have shown tokenistic engagement and power asymmetry (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023; Nunkoo, 2017). In narrative policy framework literature, there is a bias towards elite texts and away from community-based storytelling practice (Cairney & Toomey, 2024; Shanahan et al., 2018). In the literature on participatory communication, there is a lack of operationalization of narrative agency in the governance (Dutta, 2020; Servaes, 2022).

This research contributes to a novel analytical approach that connects participatory storytelling and rural tourism governance outcomes. This research is a response to the need to combine narrative practices and institutional analysis, as opposed to the symbolic participation of storytelling (Servaes, 2022; Shanahan et al., 2018). This research combines the approaches of participatory communication and discursive governance to operationalize narrative agency and participatory legitimacy in governance processes (Dryzek, 2022; Hajer, 2009). Recent studies have underscored the importance of context-specific governance approaches in the Global South (Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023; Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021). Research on tourism governance has pointed to the disparate institutionalization of community voices (Esteves et al., 2025; Nunkoo, 2017). Thus, this research is unique in that it seeks to investigate the ways in which community stories are institutionalized as governance outcomes in East Kalimantan, Indonesia.

3.0 Methodology

This research is based on a constructivist, embedded multiple-case design, that analytically examines the relationship between participatory storytelling and rural tourism governance performance. The qualitative case design is appropriate for the research because the effects of governance are seen through socially constructed meanings and the deliberative processes (Yin, 2017). The constructivist epistemology is based on the idea that narrative practices are not only descriptive of realities but also shape the realities (Freire, 2020; Hajer, 2009). The research design is based on the selection of eight cases of villages from the Provincial Tourism Registry [see Table 1]. The research design is based on the use of narrative genres and validated participatory governance indicators (Esteves et al., 2025).

Table 1. *Study Sites and Selection Logic*

Site (abbr.)	Tourism type	Dominant narrative asset	Pre-study governance	Selection logic
Kang Bejo (KB)	Urban agro-tourism	Kang Bejo water-spinach agro-story	Community-led	High benchmark
Pringgodani (PT)	Culinary & traditional market	Local gastronomic heritage	Public–private	Hybrid model
Desa Pela (DP)	Riverine ecotourism & wildlife conservation	Mahakam dolphin conservation tale	Community-led	Ecological stewardship
Nipah-Nipah (NN)	Coastal beach recreation	Sipakario coastal lore	Government-centric	Low participation
Waru Tua (WT)	Eco-village nature tourism	Pristine nature near IKN	Community-led	Urban–rural interface
Janju (JJ)	Creative fishing-village tourism	Colorful mural & fishing heritage	Youth-driven	Digital co-creation
Museum Sadurengas (MS)	Heritage museum tourism	Legacy of the Sultanate of Paser	Government-centric	Institutional control
Gunung Boga (GB)	Highland landscape & sunrise trekking	Sea-of-clouds mountain myth	Community-led	Pilgrimage dynamics

Source: Authors

The unit of analysis is the relationship between narrative genres and specific governance indicators, as patterned in the village context. This approach to analysis was selected because transformation in governance is mediated by a structured relationship between symbolic expression and decision arenas (Dryzek, 2022). Narrative genres, including myth, ritual, mural, and micro-post, were considered to be analytically distinct forms of discursive practice (Shanahan et al., 2018). Each of these narrative genres was cross-tabulated against specific, validated dimensions of participatory governance, including inclusiveness, co-decision power, and distribution of benefits (Esteves et al., 2025). Interview and observation records were examined to determine whether narrative events antedated, reframed, or otherwise informed decision events. Rival explanations were tested by examining contrasting cases.

The use of multiple qualitative data sources ensured that narrative practice and governance processes were examined in the research. This was necessary because, in discursive governance, communication occurs through verbal, performative, and mediated communication (Hajer, 2009). The communication theory of participation also highlights lived dialogue and collective meaning-making as social practices that are observable in the Freire (2020) and Servaes (2022). The data collection process involved 28 semi-structured interviews with village heads, youth groups, elders, facilitators, and independent storytellers. The participatory observation method recorded ritual forums, performances, and deliberative gatherings. The data also included 143 narrative artifacts from 2022 to 2025, which recorded posters, scripts, social media, and radio jingles.

The data analysis involved thematic coding and the use of cross-case comparisons with the aim of creating analytical connections between genres of narrative and the governance indicators. This was essential for the development of a mechanism-based explanation, as suggested by Yin (2017). The discursive governance theory helped inform the attention paid to the reframing of the issues and the entry point into the decision arenas, as suggested by Dryzek (2022) and Hajer (2009). First-order codes were generated, and the results were then grouped into cross-case themes based on the functions of the narratives. These were then compared with the governance indicators that had been validated, with the aim of creating a scorecard.

4.0 Findings

The empirical findings show that participatory storytelling functions as a type of governance infrastructure in rural tourism villages of East Kalimantan, rather than simply a type of cultural narration. This is significant because current literature tends to view storytelling as a function of branding and preservation, particularly in the context of the Global South, where institutional analysis is relatively underdeveloped. The methodological approaches to understanding storytelling have also been elitist and textual, failing to consider other types of storytelling that play a role in local decision-making processes. The findings from murals, ritual performances, photovoice panels, and meetings show the role of narrative agency in local decision-making processes. The interview excerpts and field notes show the role of storytelling in local identity formation and decision-making processes. The visual artifacts show the role of symbolic practices in local decision-making processes.

4.1 Co-Production of Place Identity through Participatory Storytelling

In eight villages in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, field data show that place identity co-production occurs through four narrative mechanisms that are visually and verbally evident. The four mechanisms are: narrative recontextualization in Desa Pela, where the *pesut mahakam* [*Mahakam Irrawaddy dophin*] myth is co-produced as an ecotourism symbol through a youth guide's narrative: "Same creature, same message, but equally sacred" (personal communication, Pela_Youth02, August 12, 2025). The second narrative mechanism is symbolic materialization in Desa Janju, where visual artifacts are shared through social media tags such as #janju and #kampungwarnawarnijanju. One of the participants stated, "We paint to narrate, not to decorate" (personal communication, Janju_Story01, June 22, 2025). The third narrative mechanism is intergenerational negotiation in Gunung Boga, where the co-production of spirituality and meteorological explanations was evident in a guide's

narrative, “Spirit and humidity” (personal communication, GB_Guide03, July 14, 2025). The fourth narrative mechanism is participatory authorship in Desa Kang Bejo, where monthly script deliberations among elders and youths result in script co-production. “We talk about morals from elders and concerns from us” (personal communication, KB_Youth05, August 22, 2025). In Desa Nipah-Nipah, however, narrative extraction was evident through an elder’s lament about Andulawo’s commercialization without permission, “It’s not our Andulawo anymore” (personal communication, NN_Elder01, August 25, 2025).

The data demonstrates that participatory storytelling is a systematic mechanism for co-producing place identity in rural tourism villages. This is because the practice of narrative is part of everyday cultural activities and not a separate event for promotion. Therefore, there is a construction of identity through interpretation, materialization, and authoring in a deliberate manner. The observation of the field demonstrates processes of myth recontextualization, inscription through murals, and reinterpretation in intergenerational tourism performances. The excerpts from the interviews consistently demonstrate the ability of the communities to manage the narrative and negotiate the script. However, there is lower engagement and evident discontent in areas where external narrative extraction occurs.

These findings demonstrate four emerging tendencies in the co-production of place identity through participatory storytelling. First, there is a tendency to reinterpret old myths in alignment with contemporary tourism and environmental discourses. This ensures continuity without cultural dislocation. Second, there is a tendency to materially enact identity through murals, performances, and digital circulation. This enhances visibility and reflexive dialogue. Third, there is a tendency to intergenerationally negotiate identity through adaptive meaning-making through the juxtaposition of ancestral stories and scientific or modern references. Finally, there is a tendency to produce participatory authorship through informal deliberative spaces. These four tendencies, as supported by interview and site data, indicate that the production of identity is a deliberative, adaptive, materialized, and contested process, regardless of governance contexts. In other words, alienation and lack of engagement result from external appropriation, not from community-led framing and narrative control.

4.2 Narrative as Participatory Decision-Making

The data shown in Table 2 reveal the narrative practices to be participatory decision-making mechanisms in all the village’s tourism sites. This is due to the fact that the modality of the narratives directly relates to the governance interests and not to the display of cultures. Various narrative forms are associated with unique governance functions within the villages. Performative narratives in Kampung Kang Bejo, for example, arrange the deliberations in risk governance, while ritual narratives in Desa Pela facilitate the consensus in policy on ecological management. Visual narratives in Janju shape spatial priorities, while myth-based narratives in Waru Tua shape the preventative land-use decisions. Contrariwise, the digitalized slogans in Nipah-Nipah reflect the externally driven narrative extraction.

Table 2. *Comparative Insights and Cultural Modality*

Village Site	Narrative modality	Lead participants	Content orientation	Primary function in governance
Kang Bejo (KB)	Performative	Youth collectives	Scenario-driven futures	Risk governance
Pringgodani (PT)	Culinary-based oral storytelling	Women traders and culinary elders	Food heritage and migration	Economic positioning
Desa Pela (DP)	Ritualized storytelling	Mixed-age Pokdarwis	Sacred ecology	Policy consensus
Nipah-Nipah (NN)	Digitized government slogans	Government facilitators	Safety and beach lore	Narrative extraction
Waru Tua (WT)	Myth-based dialogue	Traditional leaders	Land-use transformation	Preventive land management
Janju (JJ)	Visual and spatial storytelling	Youth artist collectives	Place memory and aesthetics	Spatial prioritization
Museum Sadurengas (MS)	Historical exhibition and scripted curation	Tourism office curators	Royal lineage and heritage	Cultural preservation
Gunung Boga (GB)	Oral myth-based storytelling	Elders and mountain guides	Cosmology and environmental ethics	Moral framing

Sources: Authors.

The findings demonstrate four unique tendencies in the function of narratives as a tool in participatory decision-making processes. First, the modalities of the narratives are related to particular domains in governance since storytelling is part of the functional village institutions. Second, the nature of leadership in the narratives influences the decision-making arena in terms of youth, elders, traders, or facilitators. Third, the orientation of the content in the narratives relates to policy considerations from ecological protection to economic positioning or heritage preservation. For example, there are scripts in the field related to risk governance in Kang Bejo, ritual consensus building in Desa Pela, spatial prioritization through murals in Janju, but slogans in Nipah-Nipah are related to digitization. All this suggests that the form of the narratives, the actor configuration, and the function in governance are interrelated.

4.3 Power Redistribution through Voice

A visual mapping of the various roles of participants and narrative influences in each of the eight village sites shows a complex and uneven distribution of voice among different social groupings in each village. Youth collectives in Janju and Kang Bejo are active in digital campaigns and performative branding (#kampjngwarnawarnijanju; scripted performances in harvest celebrations), yet their absence is noted in meeting records of village governance sessions, as a youth collective member in Janju Village explains, “We create the content, but meetings about money are for officials” (personal communication, Janju_Youth07, August 16, 2025). Women in Pringgodani and Pela Village are prominent in culinary storytelling events but have limited representation in the executive board of Pokdarwis, as interview results confirm, “When facilities are planned, men decide” (personal communication, PT_Women03, August 28, 2025). Traditional elders in Gunung Boga and Nipah-Nipah Village are prominent in narrative events of ritual stories and ceremonies, yet they are not represented in technical planning sessions, as another traditional elder in Gunung Boga explains, “They want stories for ceremonies, not for infrastructure” (personal communication, GB_Elder04, August 18, 2025). Institutional actors in Museum Sadurengas Village are prominent in curatorial work for heritage exhibitions that focus on royal genealogies instead of stories of artisans, as a woman in Museum Sadurengas explains, “Only royal tales reach the boards” (personal communication, MS_Woman01, August 30, 2025). The cross-site matrix of narrative modality and decision authority shows that symbolic presence and power are complexly related and do not necessarily overlap. These observed and patterned differences suggest that cultural voice in storytelling spaces is unevenly distributed and often separates symbolic and structural power.

From the findings, it is clear that the redistribution of voice in participatory storytelling is uneven in village tourism sites. This is due to the fact that there is a disconnect between symbolic participation and decision-making powers. This is further validated by the fact that there is a disconnect between narrative visibility and institutional allocation of powers. This is clear in the fact that the youth participate in digital storytelling but are excluded from revenue generation and zoning allocation. Women participate in culinary heritage storytelling but are excluded from executive governance. Elders participate in storytelling but are excluded from technical planning forums.

The data shows that there are four major tendencies in the redistribution of voice within participatory storytelling spaces. First, representational power is not necessarily equivalent to structural power in terms of governance. Second, generational differences are seen in leadership in narrative voice, with youth leading in digital presence but not in formal decision-making positions. Third, gendered participation is seen in that women’s narratives are contained within cultural spaces but are absent in infrastructure planning spaces. Finally, institutional gatekeeping is seen in that some narratives are curated and legitimized in official spaces. The interview excerpts show that symbolic inclusion and procedural exclusion are present in all spaces. The observational notes show that elders are central in ritual performances but peripheral in budget discussions. Overall, the tendencies show that voice redistribution is conditional and institutional in its mediation rather than participatory per se.

5.0 Discussions

This is a clear indication that the main argument is correct: storytelling is a form of governance. This is clear, as there is a clear connection between narrative practices and deliberate spaces. It is also clear that there is a clear move from symbolic articulation to decision-making through the connection between narrative practices and recognized community forums. For example, there is a clear indication that storytelling facilitated co-decision-making on risk management through *Cerita Subuh di Gunung Boga* [A Dawn Story in Mount Boga] and policy theatre in Kang Bejo. On the other hand, there is a clear indication that storytelling extraction in Nipah-Nipah shows that storytelling without institutional uptake has no governance influence (Dryzek, 2022; Moinuddin, 2017). This shows that the argument that narrative agency requires a legitimate form of participation to influence governance is correct.

These results must be considered within the context of broader discussions of participatory governance within the Global South. Rural tourism settings are often marked by unequal power relations and symbolic rather than redistributive forms of participation (Nunkoo, 2017; Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021). Therefore, it may be the case that storytelling projects enhance visibility but do not transform governance structures. Studies of storytelling and policy influence in Latin America and Africa highlight these tensions between narrative expression and policy influence (Lupien, 2023; Mwangi, 2018). The discursive governance approach to narratives and policy influence argues that narratives must be embedded within institutions to have a political effect (Dryzek, 2022; Hajer, 2009). East Kalimantan cases show evidence of narrative institutionalization. Therefore, these results extend the body of research on participatory communication by empirically examining the embedding of narrative agency within processes of governance transformation.

The results may be viewed as substantiating the idea that narrative agency is exercised as discursive power in governance areas. From the viewpoint of participatory communication theory, conscientização is facilitated through the transformation of local knowledge to collective deliberation (Freire, 2020; Servaes, 2022). The theory of discursive governance also points to the possibility that such stories contribute to the framing of the problem and coalition formation to the extent that they are taken into account in the governance (Dryzek, 2022; Hajer, 2009). The cases of Pela and Kang Bejo show the role that stories produced in the field played in the development of conservation strategies and in the planning of risks. The absence in the Nipah-Nipah case, however, points to the limited effect that the stories may have in the absence of institutional recognition. Such is the nature of the theory of participatory legitimacy, as the institutional recognition of the voice of the people (Mendonça et al., 2022). Thus, the role of the story in governance is constitutive to the extent that narrative agency and legitimacy intersect.

The important finding from the present analysis is that participatory storytelling constitutes governance only to the extent that it is embedded within supportive narrative infrastructure. This is because, on its own, voice does not necessarily translate into the redistribution of power. However, the theory of participatory communication tells us that dialogue must connect to the possibility of structural transformation in order to secure emancipatory outcomes (Freire, 2020; Servaes, 2022). The analysis from the East Kalimantan case studies indicates that were the spaces of storytelling intersect with the venues of formal planning, governance

outcomes are likely to ensue. Where, however, storytelling is subject to extraction or symbolic inclusion without the concomitant power, disengagement is likely to ensue. Discursive governance theory tells us that the source of legitimacy lies in the capacity of narratives to shape policy frames (Dryzek, 2022; Hajer, 2009), which means that effective governance in the countryside requires the alignment of expressive spaces with venues of influence.

Comparative evidence suggests that participatory storytelling often increases visibility but does not consistently reshape governance structures. This occurs because many initiatives remain confined to symbolic expression without institutional integration. Studies in Latin America and Africa show community radio and storytelling festivals enhancing representation yet lacking policy influence (Lupien, 2023; Mwangi, 2018). Research in Thailand similarly documents narrative engagement without matched financial or structural commitment (Kitphati et al., 2022). Discursive governance theory explains that narratives gain power only when embedded in decision arenas (Dryzek, 2022; Hajer, 2009). Unlike many cases, East Kalimantan demonstrates partial narrative institutional uptake. Therefore, this study extends prior research by evidencing a clearer linkage between storytelling practices and concrete governance outcomes.

The findings suggest that rural tourism governance should institutionalize narrative agency within the structures of participatory decision-making. This is because narrative agency only generates governance impact when connected to participatory legitimacy and resource allocation pathways. Rural local governments and Pokdarwis should therefore incorporate narrative storytelling into local planning, budgeting, and zoning processes. The findings from Waru Tua and Desa Pela show that narrative recognition in decision-making translates to community-driven conservation and land-use decisions. Conversely, Nipah-Nipah indicates that narrative regulation undermines community engagement and trust. Discursive governance theory argues that policy arenas should include narrative institutional uptake as a procedural requirement (Dryzek, 2022; Hajer, 2009). In this regard, the proposed framework in Figure 1 offers pathways to link voice to venue through narrative recognition and accountability structures.

Figure 1. Participatory Storytelling for Governance Framework



Source: Authors.

The Participatory Storytelling for Governance framework is conceptualized as a model of analysis to account for the mechanisms of narrative practices' effects on governance. It has been argued that storytelling can have effects on governance, but only insofar as discursive agency is institutionally acknowledged. Narrative agency, according to the theory of participatory communication, is a function of the capacity of people to make meaning together (Freire, 2020; Servaes, 2022). Discursive governance has been argued to be mediated by legitimacy in policy arenas (Dryzek, 2022; Servaes, 2022). Evidence of the effects of myths in Pela is found in the influence of myths on the determination of zones for conservation, as in Waru Tua, in dialogue on the sharing of the benefits, a function of participatory legitimacy.

The framework further specifies the conditional character of governance transformation through narrative practice. Narrative agency is insufficient for material redistribution without institutional recognition. The concept of participatory parity highlights recognition in decision-making processes (Moody-Adams, 2022). In the cases of Pela and Kang Bejo, narrative practice intersected with formal forums, resulting in policy transformation. However, in the case of Nipah-Nipah, narrative practice without recognition resulted in disengagement and mistrust. The cases in Kenya and Latin America indicate a pattern of narrative practice with little transformative effect (Lupien, 2023; Mwangi, 2018). Governance transformation occurs when symbolic and institutional recognition converge.

6.0 Conclusion

This paper shows that participatory storytelling can indeed be a mechanism of rural tourism governance rather than just a tool of cultural representation. This is an interesting contribution to the literature for a number of reasons. First, the debate on rural development tends to focus on the importance of institutions over communicative action. Second, symbolic forms of participation in Global South contexts do not always lead to structural change. This paper uses empirical evidence from eight villages to show how narrative genres influence conservation zoning, risk planning, and spatial prioritization. A comparison of the case studies highlights the impact of governance when narrative agency and institutional recognition align. Conversely, narrative extraction without legitimacy results in disengagement and mistrust. As a result, this paper contributes a new framework of mechanisms between narratives.

This study offers a theoretical and methodological contribution by operationalizing participatory storytelling as a mechanism linking narrative agency to participatory legitimacy. Theoretically, it integrates participatory communication and discursive governance to explain how stories enter decision arenas. It advances rural development debates by specifying conditions under which narrative agency produces governance outcomes. Empirically, cross-case comparison demonstrates patterned relations between narrative genres and validated governance indicators. The study also tests rival explanations to distinguish symbolic inclusion from institutional uptake. Methodologically, genre-indicator mapping provides an analytical bridge beyond co-occurrence. Therefore, the framework strengthens communication-centered approaches to studying rural governance transformation.

The results indicate that rural tourism governance should formalize the use of participatory storytelling in its planning processes. This is because narrative agency can only have an impact if it is connected to arenas of decision-making and resource allocation. This is because, in the absence of formal recognition, it becomes symbolic and extractive in nature. The results of the study in Pela and Kang Bejo suggest that narrative uptake can have an impact on conservation zoning and risk governance. The results of Nipah-Nipah, however, suggest that disengagement can happen if the narrative is curated externally. The implications of the results suggest that rural governments and Pokdarwis should formalize community narratives in budgeting and zoning arenas. Future studies should test the framework using quantitative methods and comparative studies in rural areas of the Global South.

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