FROM SPRING TO SUCCESS: HOW UMBUL PONGGOK TRANSFORMED INTO A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MODEL THROUGH COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Bambang Arif Rahman Bin Slamet
Academic Degree: Doctoral Candidate
Position: Headmaster of Junior High School TQS Tepus, Gunungkidul, Indonesia
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Abstract. *Umbul Ponggok, a village located in Klaten, Central Java, Indonesia, serves as a compelling case study in the development of sustainable rural tourism through community empowerment, ecological stewardship, and strategic digital engagement. Historically, Umbul Ponggok was a relatively obscure freshwater spring primarily utilized by local residents for daily household needs. Its transformation into a prominent ecotourism destination encapsulates the multifaceted processes required to revitalize rural economies while maintaining environmental integrity. This paper offers a comprehensive examination of the village's trajectory, emphasizing the critical role of BUMDes (Village- Owned Enterprises) Tirta Mandiri in initiating and sustaining tourism development through participatory governance, infrastructure innovation, and dynamic digital marketing.*

The evolution of Umbul Ponggok exemplifies a model where tourism serves as a catalyst for broad-based socio-economic advancement. By applying community-based approaches to tourism planning and management, the village has achieved notable outcomes in areas such as employment generation, entrepreneurial activity, poverty alleviation, and environmental conservation. Central to this success is the integration of local actors in key decision-making processes, ensuring equitable benefit distribution and fostering a strong sense of ownership over tourism assets and operations. BUMDes Tirta Mandiri, as the institutional backbone of this initiative, orchestrated the development and operationalization of tourism infrastructure that includes underwater-themed swimming zones, culinary stalls, recreational amenities, and eco-friendly services—all designed to create immersive and sustainable visitor experiences.

From a financial standpoint, Umbul Ponggok has demonstrated measurable success. With estimated annual revenues reaching approximately IDR 4 billion (around USD 270,000), the village's tourism sector has become a primary economic engine. This revenue has supported the development of public infrastructure, strengthened local social services, and provided financial stability to many residents, resulting in improved household incomes and enhanced quality of life. Such tangible socio-economic benefits illustrate the potential of rural tourism when grounded in inclusive governance and long- term planning.

A defining feature of the Umbul Ponggok initiative is its proactive engagement with digital platforms to expand visibility and attract a diverse visitor base. Leveraging social media channels such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, the village has curated a compelling digital identity that emphasizes the uniqueness of its underwater attractions and the authentic character of local life. High-quality visual content—including underwater photography, video tours, and user-generated media—has proven effective in establishing the village's online presence and increasing tourist inflow. This digital engagement strategy not only functions as a promotional tool but also

empowers local vendors and entrepreneurs by giving them access to broader markets through online platforms.

This research employs a multi-method approach grounded in secondary data analysis. Sources include regional tourism statistics, financial reports from BUMDes Tirta Mandiri, digital engagement metrics, and documentation from local governance institutions. The analysis identifies a series of strategic pillars that underpin the success of Umbul Ponggok's transformation: community-driven governance, integrated tourism infrastructure, sustainable environmental practices, and innovative digital marketing. These pillars are examined through the lens of sustainable development, addressing the interconnections between economic growth, environmental conservation, and social inclusion in rural contexts.

The paper further explores the socio-cultural impacts of tourism on Umbul Ponggok's local community. Tourism has not only generated income but also contributed to the strengthening of community identity, cultural pride, and cooperative social behavior. The participatory nature of the BUMDes governance structure has helped to build institutional resilience and foster transparent decision-making, while also reducing dependency on external funding and top-down policy interventions. The capacity-building initiatives associated with tourism—such as vocational training in hospitality, digital literacy programs, and entrepreneurship workshops—have expanded local skills and employment prospects, especially among youth and women.

In environmental terms, Umbul Ponggok's model underscores the importance of aligning tourism development with ecological sustainability. Efforts have been made to maintain water quality, minimize pollution, and regulate visitor behavior to avoid environmental degradation. The physical layout of tourism infrastructure was designed to preserve the spring's natural characteristics, and initiatives such as waste management systems and eco-education campaigns have been implemented to raise awareness among both tourists and residents. These strategies demonstrate that environmental sustainability need not be sacrificed in pursuit of economic gains, especially when local communities are actively involved in stewardship.Digital innovation has also played a transformative role beyond marketing. It has facilitated data collection on tourist behavior, preferences, and demographics, which has informed evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation. The use of real-time feedback systems and engagement analytics allows the village management to adapt quickly to changing trends and enhance visitor experiences. Local businesses have

increasingly adopted digital payment systems, online reservations, and e-commerce platforms, marking a significant shift toward digital economic integration in the village.

Umbul Ponggok's transformation presents a replicable model for other rural regions seeking to develop sustainable tourism. The case reinforces the notion that local governance mechanisms—particularly those involving community-led enterprises like BUMDes—can effectively mobilize resources, foster innovation, and sustain economic development without compromising ecological values. The strategic interplay between local empowerment, infrastructure investment, and digital engagement highlights a hybrid development pathway that is context-sensitive and adaptable to diverse rural environments.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and tourism planners. Key recommendations include enhancing institutional support for community enterprises, integrating digital infrastructure into rural development programs, and promoting participatory governance frameworks in tourism policy. Furthermore, scaling such models requires capacity- building at the grassroots level, tailored financial instruments, and a strong emphasis on environmental education and conservation practices.

In conclusion, Umbul Ponggok's journey from a functional water spring to a nationally recognized ecotourism destination exemplifies the potential of sustainable rural tourism when spearheaded by empowered communities and guided by strategic, multi- dimensional planning. This research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism by providing empirical evidence of how rural areas can achieve economic vitality, social equity, and environmental stewardship through integrated approaches. As global interest in ecotourism and responsible travel continues to grow, the Umbul Ponggok model offers an instructive blueprint for inclusive and resilient tourism development in emerging economies and beyond.

***Keywords**: Sustainable tourism, community-based tourism, digital marketing, economic development, rural tourism, eco-tourism, Indonesia.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a multifaceted global industry that serves as a powerful engine for economic development and cultural exchange. Yet, its rapid growth can lead to environmental degradation and cultural erosion, especially when local resources are overexploited or poorly managed. To mitigate such risks, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) promotes sustainable tourism—a framework that integrates economic, social, and environmental concerns to ensure long-term benefits for visitors, communities, and ecosystems (UNWTO, 2005). In Indonesia, the sustainable tourism paradigm has found resonance in rural settings where the *Desa Wisata* (tourism village) concept is gaining traction. Villages leverage their natural and cultural assets not only to stimulate economic growth but also to promote conservation and community empowerment.

One exemplary case is Umbul Ponggok, located in Ponggok Village, Klaten Regency, Central Java. Formerly categorized as a disadvantaged village, Ponggok faced infrastructural limitations and low income, with annual village revenue around IDR 80 million. However, a strategic shift toward tourism transformed its trajectory. By 2017, village income soared to approximately IDR 14 billion, positioning Ponggok among Indonesia's top-earning rural communities. This transformation was led by BUMDes Tirta Mandiri, a Village-Owned Enterprise established in 2009, which spearheaded comprehensive planning and investment in infrastructure and tourism facilities.

The village's natural spring—once a utilitarian communal space—was repurposed into a recreational hub offering snorkeling, underwater photography, and ecological experiences. Umbul Ponggok's unique appeal and crystal-clear waters soon captured attention on social media, attracting a wide range of domestic and international tourists. Importantly, the initiative incorporated environmental preservation and inclusive community participation into its development strategy. This paper examines Umbul Ponggok's sustainable tourism model by analyzing the community-led management, digital marketing innovations, and conservation efforts that contributed to its success.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

The development of Umbul Ponggok is intricately tied to the theoretical and practical foundations of **sustainable tourism**, which emphasizes harmonizing economic advancement with environmental stewardship and social equity. Sustainable tourism is widely defined as tourism that "meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This framework encourages initiatives that deliver economic value to local communities while fostering cultural

preservation and minimizing ecological harm. In Ponggok's case, significant revenue generation was coupled with active environmental conservation, notably through the protection of its spring and watershed area. Branded as "Bunaken van Klaten," the village leverages its clear waters for nature-based attractions and environmental education—hallmarks of eco-tourism. Its sustainable orientation is supported by ecological measures such as upstream reforestation around Mt. Merapi-Merbabu and stringent environmental risk controls.

A second conceptual lens is **Community-Based Tourism (CBT)**, which positions local communities as owners, managers, and beneficiaries of tourism. CBT prioritizes participatory governance and equitable profit distribution, fostering empowerment and local agency. Ponggok's adoption of the BUMDes model (*Badan Usaha Milik Desa* or Village-Owned Enterprise) is emblematic of CBT practice. Roughly 40% of BUMDes Tirta Mandiri's shares are held by resident families—over 650 households each invested IDR 5 million—while the remaining shares are held by the village government. This financial and managerial inclusion cultivated local accountability and collective motivation. Research by Goodwin and Santilli (2009) underscores that such ownership models enhance social cohesion and destination sustainability. In Ponggok, visionary leadership and grassroots entrepreneurialism emerged as catalysts for success (Manyara & Jones, 2007).The institutional backbone of this transformation was the **BUMDes Tirta Mandiri**, established in 2009. Functioning as a hybrid between a cooperative and public enterprise, BUMDes channels profits from local businesses into development funds and community dividends. This aligns with decentralization and rural economic theories, allowing villages to manage their own assets and reduce reliance on external aid. Ponggok's financial independence—achieved even before receiving national village funds—illustrates the model's efficacy in sustaining community projects transparently and inclusively.

Another key dimension is **digital marketing and destination branding**, particularly through social media. This reflects the rise of e-tourism, where platforms such as Instagram play pivotal roles in shaping travel behavior. Ponggok's unique underwater photo opportunities were leveraged in a visually compelling, "Instagram-centric" campaign. A study by Oktaviani & Fatchiya (2019) confirmed that engaging content and active digital presence significantly boosted domestic tourism interest. These efforts mirror the AIDA model (Attention–Interest–Desire–Action), demonstrating how aesthetic appeal and virality translated into visitor mobilization.

Lastly, **environmental and community stewardship** are embedded in Ponggok's strategy. Tourism profits fund social programs such as scholarships, health insurance, and women's economic empowerment, reflecting investments in human capital. Simultaneously, environmental integrity is safeguarded through water quality maintenance and catchment conservation, aligning with Scheyvens' (1999) vision of tourism supporting both nature and people.

In sum, Umbul Ponggok's development is informed by interconnected themes of sustainable tourism, CBT, local enterprise, digital engagement, and socio-environmental responsibility—forming a robust framework for analysis in subsequent sections.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate Umbul Ponggok's transformation into a sustainable tourism destination. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration and nuanced understanding of complex socio-economic phenomena, generating rich, descriptive data from existing narratives and documented experiences (Creswell, 2014). The core

of the research is a comprehensive case study of Umbul Ponggok, enabling a detailed analysis of its unique development, management, and impact.

Data Collection

The analysis draws upon a wide array of established and reputable information sources, ensuring a robust and contextually grounded understanding of Umbul Ponggok's tourism development. Materials included peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and conference proceedings that shed light on sustainable and community-based tourism, as well as the strategic role of BUMDes.

Additionally, insights were synthesized from official publications issued by governmental bodies, NGOs, and research institutions, particularly those focusing on regional economic empowerment and governance in Klaten. Supplementary perspectives were obtained from reputable news outlets documenting key milestones in Umbul Ponggok's transformation, alongside relevant documents accessed through academic databases and institutional archives.

Special attention was paid to records detailing the historical evolution of Umbul Ponggok, the operational strategies of BUMDes Tirta Mandiri, its socioeconomic contributions, and digital marketing initiatives. This multi-layered documentation provided a comprehensive foundation for analysis, enabling a nuanced exploration of the case.

Data Analysis

The secondary data collected for this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method aimed at identifying and reporting patterns within textual material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved six systematic phases. First, the documents were read thoroughly to understand their content, context, and recurring ideas. During this familiarization phase, initial impressions and themes were noted. Next, relevant text segments were coded with descriptive labels, allowing patterns to emerge inductively. These codes were then grouped into potential themes based on commonalities and relationships, with the help of mind maps and diagrams. Each theme was reviewed for consistency and coherence, with similar themes merged and irrelevant ones discarded. Once refined, the themes were clearly defined, supported by examples from the source documents. Finally, the themes were integrated into a cohesive narrative for the findings and discussion sections, providing a comprehensive analysis of Umbul Ponggok's transformation into a sustainable tourism destination.

Case Study Description

Umbul Ponggok: Transformation from Traditional Spring to Sustainable Tourism Icon

Umbul Ponggok, located in Polanharjo, Klaten, Central Java, Indonesia, represents a remarkable example of rural revitalization through sustainable tourism. Originally a natural spring used primarily for daily needs, such as a water reservoir for a sugar factory and a communal bathing spot, Umbul Ponggok has undergone a profound transformation

into a thriving tourist destination, offering both economic prosperity and social cohesion to the village.

The transformation process began in the early 2010s, when the village leadership and community members recognized the untapped potential of the spring's clear waters and captivating underwater environment. Umbul Ponggok was initially an underutilized resource, with a polluted pond offering little economic value to the struggling village. In 2009, a new village head, Junaedi Mulyono, took office and, guided by the 2007-2013 Village Medium-Term Development Plan

(RPJMDes), identified tourism as a sector capable of driving growth. To manage this transition, the village established BUMDes Tirta Mandiri in 2009, a Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes), to oversee economic development, with Umbul Ponggok as the flagship project.

The first steps of development involved cleaning up the spring, improving water quality, and adding basic facilities such as bathing rooms, toilets, and a ticket gate to manage entry. Collaborations with local diving clubs from Yogyakarta were instrumental in introducing snorkeling and diving activities, attracting initial visitors. By 2015, Ponggok secured funding from the national Village Fund program (*Dana Desa*), which enabled further infrastructure improvements, such as paving roads, installing parking areas, and enhancing drainage systems. The village also introduced unique underwater props, such as an old motorcycle, television set, and bicycles, to create an innovative underwater photography experience. This concept became a signature of Umbul Ponggok and has been pivotal to its success.

Management and Community Empowerment through BUMDes Tirta Mandiri

Management of Umbul Ponggok is facilitated by BUMDes Tirta Mandiri, which oversees the site's operations, marketing, and financial management. The BUMDes model ensures local ownership and reinvestment of profits into the village for sustainable growth. This model has allowed for an inclusive, community-driven approach to tourism development. The active participation of villagers, particularly the younger generation, has been critical in maintaining the site's dynamism and relevance. This collaborative approach has expanded beyond tourism services to include local entrepreneurship, with villagers opening businesses such as equipment rentals, food stalls, and souvenir shops, which further enrich the visitor experience and stimulate the local economy (Hermansyah, 2017).

Role of Digital Promotion and Content Creation

A distinctive aspect of Umbul Ponggok's success has been its effective use of digital technology for promotion and outreach. Recognizing the power of social media to amplify visibility, BUMDes Tirta Mandiri embraced a digital-first marketing strategy. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube were leveraged to showcase the site's visually stunning underwater attractions. The use of social media, especially Instagram, enabled the creation of “Instagrammable” experiences, encouraging visitors to share their photos and experiences, which helped generate viral content and attract a broader audience. The

site’s underwater props, paired with clear waters, became a popular motif for photo opportunities, attracting tourists both domestically and internationally.

In addition to social media marketing, BUMDes Tirta Mandiri enhanced the visitor experience by creating dynamic content through both professional photographers and user-generated content. This participatory approach not only sustained public interest but also deepened engagement, turning visitors into brand ambassadors. The integration of digital tools such as online ticketing and detailed information on platforms like TripAdvisor and Google Travel further streamlined the visitor experience, making it easier for tourists to plan their visits.

Profound Economic and Social Impact

The economic impact of Umbul Ponggok’s transformation has been profound. Tourism operations have generated significant revenue for the village, with figures steadily increasing since the site's development. In 2017, tourism revenues reached approximately Rp 10.3 billion (USD 771,478), with annual earnings averaging around Rp 4 billion (USD 270,000) in more recent years.

This financial independence has drastically reduced Ponggok's reliance on external subsidies, enabling the village to fund infrastructure improvements and distribute dividends to its residents. By 2018, Ponggok's Village- Owned Enterprise contributed over IDR 800 million to the village treasury, funding public projects, education, and healthcare services. The success of Umbul Ponggok has even earned the village recognition as one of the highest-earning villages in Indonesia, a testament to the power of sustainable, community-based tourism.

Socially, the tourism boom has had significant positive effects on the community. Unemployment in the village has decreased dramatically, with local businesses providing a range of job opportunities, from managing the site to working in food stalls and souvenir shops. This shift has helped reduce rural-urban migration, as young people who once sought work in cities now find employment opportunities at home. The community's involvement in the tourism project has fostered a strong sense of pride and collective ownership. Nearly every household in the village owns shares in the BUMDes, and regular village meetings ensure transparency in decision-making and profit-sharing. This collective approach has strengthened social bonds and encouraged volunteerism, as villagers take responsibility for maintaining the site's appeal and cleanliness.

Further, the use of tourism revenue for social programs has enhanced the village's welfare. The BUMDes has funded initiatives such as the "One House for One Bachelor" program, which provides scholarships for local students, and has also helped finance health insurance premiums for underprivileged families. Women's empowerment has been promoted through microenterprise initiatives, with a local women's group receiving support to create fish-based snack products for sale. These initiatives illustrate how sustainable tourism can be a vehicle for improving education, health, and gender equity.

In conclusion, the transformation of Umbul Ponggok into a successful tourist destination showcases the potential of community-based tourism to drive rural

development. Through effective management by BUMDes Tirta Mandiri, active community participation, and strategic digital promotion, Umbul Ponggok has not only generated economic prosperity but also strengthened social cohesion and improved the overall well-being of its residents. The case of Umbul Ponggok provides a valuable model for other rural communities seeking to harness the power of sustainable tourism for inclusive growth.

Discussion

Umbul Ponggok's transformation into a prominent sustainable tourism destination provides valuable insights into rural development and community-driven tourism. The case exemplifies how integrating economic, social, digital, and environmental strategies can produce a balanced and long-lasting impact on rural communities.

Integration of Development Goals and Strategic Leadership

At the heart of Umbul Ponggok's success lies an integrated approach to development. The village leveraged tourism not merely as a revenue-generating activity but as a vehicle for broader socio-economic improvements. By transforming Umbul Ponggok from a utilitarian spring into a recreational and economic hub, the village achieved a dual purpose: fostering community well-being and promoting environmental conservation. This integration of development goals aligns with pro-poor tourism theories, where the benefits of tourism extend beyond mere income generation to include improvements in local infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Importantly, the village maintained a balance between economic incentives and environmental stewardship, ensuring that the preservation of the spring's natural beauty became a key factor in attracting visitors. This

relationship between economic growth and environmental preservation is a key feature of sustainable development and serves as a model for other rural communities.

The Role of BUMDes and Community Governance

A critical factor in the success of Umbul Ponggok has been the governance model centered around BUMDes Tirta Mandiri. The BUMDes structure ensures that local residents have ownership and control over the tourism initiative, fostering a sense of collective responsibility. This participatory approach contrasts with more conventional models where profits are often concentrated in the hands of external stakeholders. By reinvesting profits into village infrastructure and social programs, BUMDes created a cycle of positive socio-economic impacts. The transparent dividend distribution further solidified the community's commitment to the project's long-term success. The cooperative model of governance and profit-sharing helped build trust within the community, ensuring widespread support. However, this model's scalability may require capacity-building initiatives to equip other villages with the leadership skills and governance structures necessary for similar success.

Digital Innovation and Marketing Impact

Umbul Ponggok's strategic use of digital tools, particularly social media, has played a pivotal role in its rapid rise as a tourist destination. The village's embrace of platforms like Instagram and YouTube enabled it to reach a global audience with minimal marketing expenses. The visual appeal of the site, combined with creative and user-generated content, led to viral exposure, effectively amplifying the village's brand identity. This digital-first approach highlights the growing importance of digital literacy and infrastructure in rural tourism development. However, this reliance on social media also raises challenges, such as the need for continuous content creation to maintain interest. Moreover, there is a risk that an overemphasis on visual appeal may overshadow deeper cultural and environmental aspects of the destination. Going forward, Ponggok will need to strike a balance between its "Instagrammable" qualities and its cultural heritage to ensure the sustainability of its tourism model.

Environmental Sustainability and Carrying Capacity

With the influx of tourists, managing environmental carrying capacity has become a critical concern. Ponggok has already implemented strategies to mitigate environmental degradation, such as limiting visitor numbers and enforcing sanitation measures like mandatory showers before entering the water. The diversification of nearby attractions, such as the Umbul Besuki and Sigedhang springs, has also helped to reduce pressure on the primary site. This approach, which focuses on clustering attractions, is a smart strategy for promoting sustainable tourism in regions with unique natural resources. However, continuous monitoring and adaptive management are essential to prevent over-tourism and ensure the preservation of the environment. This includes the possibility of limiting access during peak times or adjusting entry fees to control visitor flow, which is crucial for maintaining the ecological balance.

Umbul Ponggok's transformation serves as a valuable case study in sustainable tourism, demonstrating how rural communities can harness their natural assets for long- term economic and social benefits. The success of the village highlights the importance of visionary leadership, community ownership, digital innovation, and environmental stewardship. While challenges remain, particularly in managing tourism's environmental and cultural impact, Umbul Ponggok offers a replicable model for other rural communities seeking to balance economic growth with sustainable development. This case underscores that, with proper planning and community

engagement, tourism can be a powerful tool for rural revitalization.

Conclusion

Umbul Ponggok's transformation from a neglected rural spring into a thriving sustainable tourism destination exemplifies the potential of community-based tourism when guided by strategic vision and innovation. The case highlights the critical role of local governance, the integration of digital marketing, and sustainable practices in achieving

both economic prosperity and social well-being. The village's success, powered by the BUMDes model, demonstrates that empowering local communities to manage and reinvest in their resources can lead to substantial economic growth, improved livelihoods, and poverty alleviation.

Key lessons from Umbul Ponggok include the importance of active community participation and the positive socio-economic impact of reinvesting tourism profits into local development, from infrastructure to education and healthcare. Additionally, the village's innovative use of digital platforms for marketing—particularly social media— amplified its visibility, attracting a diverse visitor base and positioning Ponggok as a global tourism destination. This underscores the necessity of leveraging modern technology to enhance tourism reach, particularly in rural areas.

Furthermore, the case emphasizes that environmental sustainability must be a cornerstone of tourism development. Ponggok's careful management of natural resources and its commitment to ecological preservation ensured the long-term viability of the destination, serving as a model of responsible tourism.

In summary, Umbul Ponggok represents a powerful example of how rural communities can harness their unique resources for sustainable economic growth. With visionary leadership, community involvement, and innovative strategies, Ponggok offers valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners committed to fostering inclusive, environmentally responsible tourism economies.

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