Interpreting Hope: A Critical Hermeneutic Study of Tourism Development Visibility, Justice, and Sustainability in North Sinjai District, Indonesia

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Abstract.This study analyzes the May 2024 Indonesian Public Image Survey Report–LSI Denny JA in North Sinjai District, South Sulawesi, using a hermeneutic-critical approach based on Ricoeur and Habermas. The results show a complete absence of tourism (0.0%) from the narrative of community expectations, the lowest satisfaction with tourism management (63%), and the highest dissatisfaction with fishermen (44.8%). This phenomenon reflects chronic undertourism and the structural invisibility of tourism in the lifeworld of local communities. The paradox of high satisfaction (71.3%) amidst economic hardship (62.3%) provides a golden time window of 2025–2027. The study recommends a "Community First, Tourism Later" strategy with the empowerment of 1,000 fishing families, dual infrastructure, and a local-level INSTO-UNWTO pilot. North Sinjai has the potential to become a national model for transitioning from extreme undertourism to sustainable, inclusive and equitable micro-tourism.

Keywords:undertourism, critical hermeneutics, distributive justice, sustainable tourism, North Sinjai

1. Introduction

Tourism has become a key sector for global economic development post-COVID-19. According to the UNWTO (1), international tourism recovery in 2023–2024 is projected to reach 88–96% of pre-pandemic levels, with developing countries in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, showing the fastest growth. At the national level, the Indonesian government, through the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) and the "10 New Priority Tourism Destinations" program, continues to promote tourism development as a driver of inclusive economic growth and job creation (2,3).

However, behind this narrative of success, a number of critical studies have shown an imbalance in the perception and distribution of tourism benefits between the official government narrative and the experiences of local communities (4). The concepts of "overtourism" on the one hand and "undertourism" or the low visibility of potential destinations on the other reflect the paradox of contemporary tourism development (5). Particularly in Eastern Indonesia, including South Sulawesi, many destinations with great potential are marginalized in the discourse and allocation of development resources (6,7).

Sinjai Regency, geographically and administratively close to national priority destinations such as Toraja and Bulukumba, has potential for coastal tourism, Bugis-Makassar culture, and significant historical sites. However, as of 2024, Sinjai is still not included in the 50 priority regencies/cities for national tourism development (2). North Sinjai District, as the

center of government and economic activity of the regency, instead shows a paradoxical phenomenon: it has diverse tourist attractions (Gusung Beach, Pammantauan Island, Balangnipa Fort, etc.), but low visibility in development discourse at both the local and national levels (8,9).

Recent empirical studies in South Sulawesi show that local communities tend to prioritize basic economic and infrastructure issues over tourism development (10,11). The gap between the official development narrative, which often emphasizes tourism as the "hope for the future," and the reality of community expectations, which are more focused on road improvements, access to clean water, and price stability for basic necessities, is becoming increasingly apparent (12).

Therefore, this research is crucial for critically interpreting how "hopes" for tourism development are constructed, visualized, and experienced by the community in North Sinjai District through a critical hermeneutic approach. This research aims to uncover the tension between the hegemonic narrative of development and the lived experiences of local communities, as well as its implications for distributive justice and tourism sustainability.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Approach

This study uses a critical hermeneutic qualitative approach that integrates Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic circle to interpret the hidden meanings behind survey numbers and texts (15) with Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and system-lifeworld distortion to reveal power relations in tourism development discourse (16). The May 2024 Sinjai Regency Survey Report (13) is treated as a social text, not merely statistical data, in accordance with contemporary qualitative document research practices (18,19,20).

2.2. Location and Time of Research

North Sinjai District is a coastal area in the eastern part of Sinjai Regency, directly bordering Boni Bay, making it a strategic area within the regency's spatial system. Geographically, North Sinjai lies along a coastal corridor connecting densely populated residential areas in the east with coastal villages and traditional fishing villages in the west.
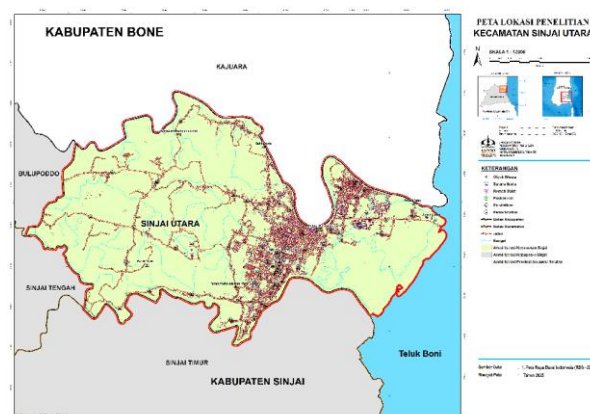

Figure 1. Map of Research Locations in North Sinjai District

Source: Processed from the Indonesian Topographic Map (Rupa Bumi Indonesia), Geospatial Information Agency (BIG).

The administrative map in Figure 1 shows the distribution of settlements concentrated in the eastern region—near the center of government and public facilities—and rural areas and productive land in the central and western parts.

2.3. Data Sources
Primary data sources
- Indonesian Public Image–LSI Denny JA. (2024). Sinjai Regency Survey Report May 2024 (94 pages).

Secondary data sources
- Sinjai Regency RPJMD 2021–2026 (Sinjai Regency Bappeda, 2021)
- Basic tourism data of Sinjai Regency (Sinjai Regency Tourism Office, 2023)
- Current academic literature 2020–2025 (see bibliography).

Source: Processed data from the Indonesian Topographic Map, Geospatial Information Agency

This image shows the distribution of settlements concentrated in the eastern region near the center of government and public facilities as well as rural areas and productive land in the central and western parts.

This sub-district serves as the center of government, trade, and public services for Sinjai Regency, as well as the area with the largest population of 36,354 people (13.14). The main road network connecting North Sinjai with the sub-districts of Bulupoddo, East Sinjai, and Central Sinjai serves as the main axis of mobility for residents and access to coastal areas and marine tourism spots such as Gusung, Tongke-Tongke, and Sembilan Island. The existence of fishing settlements, coastal access, and basic infrastructure shown on the administrative map emphasizes the character of this region as a socio-economic space that is highly dependent on the fisheries sector and public services.

North Sinjai's location at the intersection of land and sea makes it a relevant research location to understand the relationship between the socioeconomic conditions of coastal communities, infrastructure quality, and low tourism visibility. Spatially, this region contrasts the relatively developed sub-district center with coastal areas that still face limited accessibility, a crucial context for assessing the dynamics of undertourism.

Data collection for this study was conducted from May 27–31, 2024, through the Indonesian Public Image Survey–LSI Denny JA. This data was selected because it provides a representative picture of North Sinjai residents' perceptions of public services, economic conditions, and the relevance of the tourism sector to their daily lives.

2.4. Data Collection Techniques
The technique used is documentary research with intensive critical reading of all tables, graphs, and narratives (18,21). This approach allows for the identification of what is "visible" and what is "invisible" in public discourse (22-24).

2.5. Data Interpretation and Analysis Techniques
The analysis was conducted through three iterative stages:
1. **Hermeneutic circle**(hermeneutic circle): repeated reading between the part (individual answer) and the whole (collective structure of expectations) (15,12).

2. **Critical discourse analysis**(critical discourse analysis): revealing who is speaking and who is hidden (22,5,24).
3. **Thematic coding**with four main themes: community expectations, tourism visibility/invisibility, distributive justice, and socio-ecological sustainability (25,26,28,29).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Narrative of Community Expectations: Tourism 0.0%

The results of the open-ended questions in the LSI CPI survey in May 2024 showed that none of the 440 respondents mentioned tourism as a problem or as a development hope (0.0%, 13). This absence was not due to rounding, but due to the total absence of the tourism category in the overall responses given by the community. In Ricouer's hermeneutics (15), this absence serves as an indicator that tourism is not within the horizon of citizens' needs, and is not perceived as part of the answer to the challenges of everyday life.
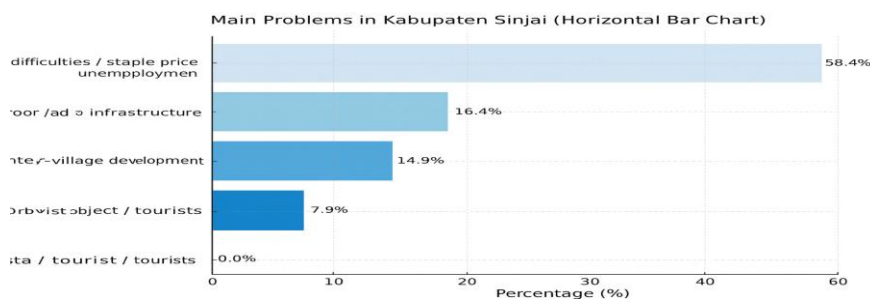

Figure 2. The most important problems in Sinjai Regency today
Source: CPI–LSI Denny JA Survey Report May 2024, p. 88

Chart 2 shows this priority structure. The top issue in public perception is economic hardship (58.8%), followed by damaged road infrastructure (18.4%) and uneven development among villages (14.9%). The absence of tourism (0.0%) in this chart indicates that this sector does not have significant importance in residents' perceptions of needs.

The absence of tourism coincides with the voice of public expectations and as the official structural economic conditions of the region from the BPS of Sinjai Regency (14). As presented in table 1, tourism-related sectors such as accommodation, food and beverages, and recreation services, are all classified into the 'Other Services' group which has a contribution of less than 1% to GDP. In contrast, Sinjai's economic structure is dominated by the Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries sector with 45.69%, and the Trade and Construction sectors, which each have a contribution of more than 12%.

Table 1. Contribution of the Business Sector to the GRDP of Sinjai Regency in 2023–2024

Business Field Sector	2023 GRDP (%)	GRDP 2024 (Estimate/Trend)	Information
Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries	45.69%	~45–46%	The main sector, did not change significantly.
Wholesale & Retail; Vehicle Repair	13.30%	13.30%	Stable, slight increase in trading activity.

Business Field Sector	2023 GRDP (%)	GRDP 2024 (Estimate/Trend)	Information
Construction	**12.78**%	12.74%	Stable, driven by infrastructure development.
Processing industry	~10–12%	Not mentioned in detail	Moderate contribution.
Other Services (including tourism components)*	<1% (0.1–0.5%)	<1% (~0.1%)	Contribution is very low; tourism is a small part.
Total	**100%**	**100%**	—

Source: Central Statistics Agency (BPS) Sinjai Regency, 2024; processed by the author, 2025.

The integration of the 0.0% LSI finding (13) and the BPS GRDP structure (14) confirms that the invisibility of tourism in North Sinjai is structural. The community does not mention tourism not because of a lack of information, but because the sector does not provide direct economic benefits to local households. This situation illustrates that tourism remains outside the realm of local life and is not considered relevant to be a development priority (15).

3.2. Visibility and Invisibility of Tourism Development

The findings in the previous section indicate that tourism did not appear at all in public expectations (0.0%). To better understand the sector's position in public perception, this section examines levels of satisfaction with government services, particularly tourism management.
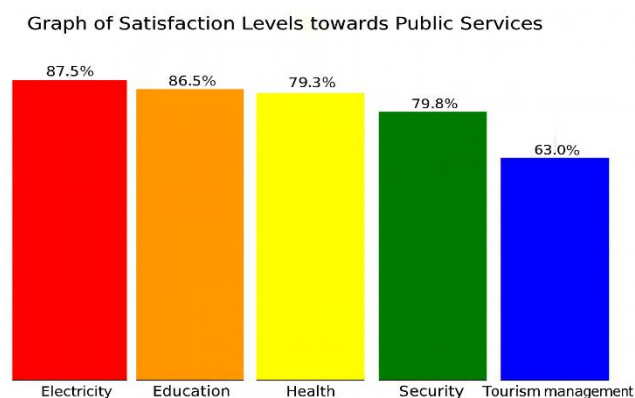

Figure 3. Level of satisfaction with the performance of the Sinjai Regional Government (scale % satisfied + very satisfied)
Source: CPI–LSI Denny JA Survey Report May 2024, p. 55

The data in Figure 3 shows that basic services such as electricity, health, education, and security received high satisfaction rates (79.8%–87.5%). Conversely, tourism management recorded the lowest satisfaction rate, at 63.0%, making it the sector with the weakest public performance. This pattern indicates that although the public has experience with tourism facilities, they do not prioritize them for development, consistent with the 0.0% finding in section 3.1.

This condition is consistent with the regional economic structure. As shown in Table 2, tourism, which is included in the "Other Services" group, only contributes less than 1% to Sinjai's GRDP (14). With this very small contribution, low satisfaction with the tourism sector does not create urgency for the community to make it a strategic issue (13).

Hermeneutically, this situation reflects structural invisibility: tourism is present as a service, but is not present as an important part of the community's lifeworld (15,16). Thus, North Sinjai shows symptoms of chronic undertourism, where tourism has a physical existence but does not have sufficient social and economic relevance to shape public aspirations (26).

The findings regarding low satisfaction with tourist attraction management in the previous section are inextricably linked to the condition of the basic infrastructure that supports tourism activities. Therefore, this section examines how road quality and public lighting contribute to the visibility and accessibility of tourist destinations in North Sinjai.
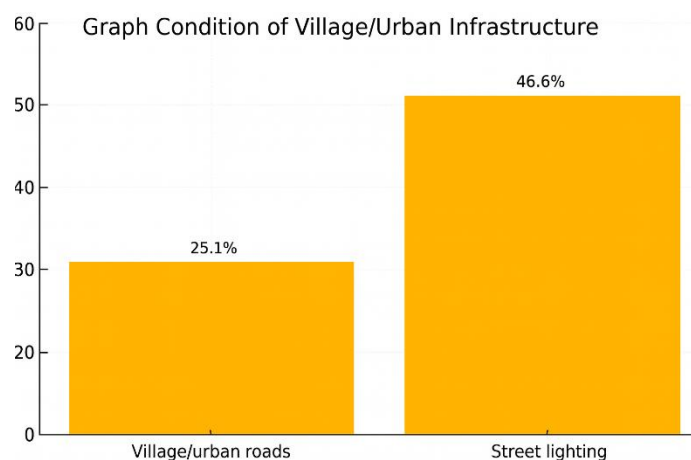

Figure 4. Tourism support infrastructure (p. 57)
Source: CPI–LSI Denny JA Survey Report May 2024, p. 55

Figure 4 shows that the quality of basic infrastructure in North Sinjai remains low. Only 25.1% of respondents rated village/sub-district roads as being in good condition, and 46.6% rated public street lighting as adequate. Both indicators fall below other public service standards.

This condition reinforces the findings in 2 and 3 that tourism does not emerge as a community priority because accessibility and supporting infrastructure are inadequate (13). Weak infrastructure makes destinations difficult to reach and limits residents' economic involvement, so that tourism remains irrelevant in public perception. This finding is consistent with GRDP data showing that the tourism sector only contributes <1%, confirming that the main challenges are structural, not cultural (14).

3.3. The Paradox of Public Satisfaction: National vs. Local Replication

Comparative analysis between North Sinjai and national data is necessary to assess whether public perception patterns are locally specific or reflect broader national trends. This comparison helps understand tourism's position within the structure of public aspirations and assess its consistency with socio-economic dynamics at the national level.
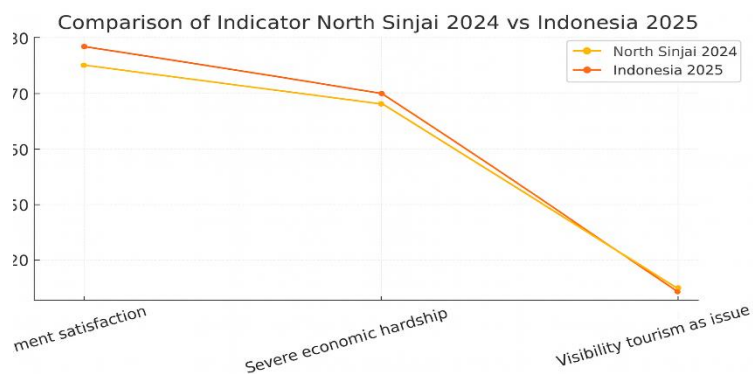
Figure 5. Comparison of Public Perception Indicators for North Sinjai 2024 and Indonesia 2025

Source: Indonesian Public Image Survey (CPI–LSI) North Sinjai, May 2024; National CPI–LSI, May 2025; processed by the Author (2025).

Figure 5 shows that the level of general satisfaction with the government in North Sinjai (71.3%) is relatively in line with the national level (81.2%) (13). Despite facing high economic pressures, both regions recorded nearly identical figures for severe economic hardship: 62.3% in North Sinjai and 62.0% nationally (13). This pattern reflects what is known as the paradox of satisfaction, namely high public satisfaction amidst difficult economic conditions.

The most significant difference is seen in the indicator of tourism visibility as a public issue. North Sinjai recorded 0.0%, indicating the complete absence of tourism in the perception of residents (13). Nationally, tourism is not a major issue, but it still has a higher level of visibility than the extreme conditions in Sinjai. This finding aligns with the tourism sector's position in the regional GRDP, which only contributes <1%, making it unpresent as a need or expectation in the community's lives (14).

Thus, North Sinjai demonstrates the clearest form of chronic undertourism: the public remains satisfied with the government and recognizes economic pressures as the main problem, while tourism does not emerge as a relevant issue or solution. This confirms that the tourism sector does not yet have strategic significance in the structure of public aspirations (26).

3.4. Synthesis and Sustainability Strategy Specific to North Sinjai
The findings in the previous section show a consistent pattern, namely:
1. Tourism does not appear in people's expectations (0.0%)
2. tourist attraction management obtained the lowest level of satisfaction (63%)
3. Basic infrastructure such as village roads is still weak (25.1%).

The tourism sector's contribution to Sinjai's GRDP, which is around <1%, confirms that tourism has not provided significant economic benefits for most households (14). This condition places North Sinjai in the chronic undertourism category, where tourism is present as a facility, but not as a necessity or as a source of livelihood (26).

A tourism development approach relevant to this context must adhere to the principle of "Community First, Tourism Later," namely, prioritizing the fulfillment of basic community needs before expanding tourism activities. The following strategy was formulated based on

the findings of the LSI survey, BPS structural data, and the socio-economic context of coastal communities (13,14).

Table 2. Pillars of the North Sinjai Sustainability Strategy Based on Pillars (2025–2030)

Pillar	Main Strategy (2025–2030)	2030 Success Indicators	Survey Based Reasoning
1. Socio-Economic	"1,000 Fishermen Families Become Hosts" Program (homestays, marine tours, fresh fish cuisine)	1,000 families receive additional income of ≥ Rp. 4 million/month from tourism	Address 44.8% of fishermen's dissatisfaction
2. Dual Infrastructure	Repair roads & lighting to Gusung-Pulau IX which is also used by fishermen to distribute fish	Infrastructure satisfaction rose from 25.1% → ≥ 70%	Immediate response to 19.5% of road complaints
3. Environment	Mangrove ecotourism + flood education tourism (Tongke-Tongke & surrounding areas)	Educational visits 50,000/year + planting 20,000 mangroves/year	Mitigating 8.4% of flood concerns
4. Gradual Digital Promotion	Phase 1 (2025–2027): TikTok content by local residents themselves (not external influencers)	500,000 organic reach/year	Avoid the "New Bali" narrative that makes residents feel commodified.
5. Governance	Transparency of village funds for tourism (public dashboard) + maximum visitor quota of 300 people/day on Sembilan Island	Citizen participation rate ≥ 60%	Prevent early overtourism & build a sense of ownership

Source: CPI–LSI Denny JA (2024) and BPS Sinjai Regency (2024); processed by the Author (2025).

This pillar-based strategy ensures that tourism development is based on the socio-economic relevance of the community, not solely on visitor targets (22). Once basic needs are met and direct benefits begin to be felt, tourism can develop gradually through a community-based approach (1). In the long term, this approach will enable North Sinjai to move towards a sustainable micro-tourism model, namely the development of small-scale tourism that is inclusive, adaptive, and in harmony with local character (26).

3.5. International Practices and Evidence-Based Policy Framework for Sustainable Tourism Development in North Sinjai District

This section expands the hermeneutic-critical interpretation of the Indonesian Public Image Survey Report – LSI Denny JA May 2024 (n = 440, MoE ±4.8%) by integrating international best practices and an evidence-based policy framework (13, 1, 22). The goal is to

provide concrete recommendations that can be directly submitted to the Sinjai Regency Tourism Office, Bappeda, or the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy.

Table 3. Comparison of International Practices and Their Adaptation to the North Sinjai Context

International Practice	Institution & Year	Proof of Success	Relevance & Adaptation for North Sinjai
UNESCO World Heritage & Sustainable Tourism Programme	UNESCO (2011–present)	1,200+ world heritage sites; 20–30% reduction in environmental degradation, 15–25% increase in community income through carrying capacity assessment	Implement a capacity assessment on Sembilan & Gusung Islands (max. 200–300 visitors/day) to avoid jumping straight into overtourism.
INSTO – International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories	UNWTO (2017–present)	50+ observatories worldwide; 25% increase in visitor satisfaction, 18% decrease in carbon footprint through real-time dashboard	Create a simple application-based "North Sinjai Tourism Observatory" (in collaboration with UNM) to monitor fishermen's satisfaction and visitor numbers.
Caribbean Sustainable Tourism Policy & Development Framework (CSTPDF)	CTO (2020)	Creation of 40% new jobs in post-disaster ecotourism; 30% of tourism revenue must be returned to the community	Require 30% of tourism fees from Pulau IX & Gusung to go into the fishermen's group's coffers (example: mangrove reforestation funds)
OECS Common Sustainable Tourism Policy 2025–2035	Organization of Eastern Caribbean States	Reducing the risk of overtourism by 35% through zoning and financing for MSMEs; increasing tourism's contribution to GDP by 20%	Implement blue zoning in the waters of North Sinjai: fishing zone vs marine tourism zone so that fishermen are not disturbed.
OECD Tourism Policy Reviews & Green Recovery Toolkit	OECD (2021–2024)	11 European cities have successfully increased economic growth by 10–15% while reducing negative impacts through access to green financing for MSMEs.	Super Micro KUR facilitation specifically for North Sinjai coastal tourism actors (homestays, tourist boats, culinary) in collaboration with Bank Sulselbar

Source: UNESCO (2011–2024); UNWTO INSTO (2017–2024); CTO (2020); OECS (2025); OECD (2021–2024); edited by the author (2025)

These practices are consistent with an evidence-based policy approach, where tourism policies must be based on real-world community conditions and empirical data, not simply

promotional targets. In the context of North Sinjai, LSI and BPS data confirm that socio-economic relevance must be established before tourism can be further developed (13,14).

Table 4. Evidence-Based Policy Cycle for North Sinjai Tourism Development (2025–2030)

Stage	Main Activities	Sources of Evidence Used	2030 Success Indicators	Implementation Example 2026–2027
1. Evidence Collection	CPI-LSI annual survey + mini observatory + fishermen focus group	Primary data May 2024 (0% tourism visibility, 44.8% fishermen dissatisfied) + Tourism Office visit data	Documented baseline for 10 major tourist attractions	Pilot observatories in 3 coastal villages (Lamatti Riaja, Samaenre, Biringere)
2. Policy Design	North Sinjai Tourism Council (Local Government + fishermen groups + academics + private sector)	FGD results + UNESCO/OECD best practices	Written policy approved by the Regent (Perbup)	Regent's Regulation "Management of Fishermen-Based Marine Tourism"
3. Implementation	"500 Fishermen Families Become Hosts" Program + dual infrastructure (fisherman's road = tourist road)	APBD budget + village funds + CSR + KUR	500 families can get additional income of ≥ Rp. 4 million/month	Homestay & tour guide training by Dispar & Poltekpar Makassar
4. Monitoring & Evaluation	Public dashboard (website + app) + annual satisfaction survey	INSTO indicators + levy data	150,000 visits/year, tourism management satisfaction increased from 63% → ≥ 85%	The annual report was presented at the Sub-district Musrenbang
5. Adaptation	Adjusting quotas, zoning, or incentives based on data	Feedback loop from fishermen & tourists	No cases of overtourism & environmental degradation < 5%	Revision of the Regent's Regulation every 3 years

Source: CPI–LSI Denny JA Data (May 2024); Sinjai Tourism Office (2024); UNESCO/OECD/UNWTO (2011–2024); processed by the Author (2025)

North Sinjai is currently experiencing the most extreme stage of chronic undertourism in Indonesia, as reflected in the finding that 0% of residents cite tourism as a development hope (13.26). International practice shows that jumping straight to mass promotion tends to fail and risks creating overtourism before residents experience the benefits (5).

The main recommendations that can be submitted directly to the Regent of Sinjai or the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy include:

1. implementation of the Evidence-Based Policy Cycle starting in 2026,
2. the formation of the North Sinjai Fishermen-Based Marine Tourism Acceleration Team before the end of 2025, and

3. North Sinjai's submission as a pilot project for INSTO–UNWTO at district level in Indonesia (1).

By adopting this framework, North Sinjai has the potential to become a national model "from extreme undertourism to inclusive, sustainable micro-tourism" in the next 5–7 years.

Conclusion

This research, which is based on the May 2024 Indonesian Public Image Survey Report–LSI Denny JA in Sinjai Regency, especially North Sinjai District, produces consistent and strong findings (13):

Tourism in North Sinjai is in a chronic pre-tourism phase. Not a single respondent (0.0%) cited tourism as a major problem or expectation, despite the potential of natural and marine tourism attractions. Satisfaction with tourism management was only 63% (the lowest among all public services), and supporting infrastructure, such as village roads, was rated the lowest (25.1%). These findings reflect the structural invisibility of the tourism sector in community life, not simply a lack of promotion (13.15%).

There is a paradox of high satisfaction amidst economic hardship. The public recorded a satisfaction level of 71.3%, even though 62.3% reported experiencing economic pressure. This pattern is identical to national findings from May 2025 (81.2% satisfied vs. 62% experiencing economic hardship), indicating a paradox of satisfaction during the early stages of the administration (13). This situation opens a window of opportunity from 2025–2027 to improve socio-economic foundations before imposing a tourism narrative from above.

There is marginalization of fishermen as potential beneficiaries. Coastal fishermen—who should be the core actors of marine tourism, such as on Sembilan Island, Gusung, and Pammantauan—actually show the highest level of dissatisfaction (44.8% poor or very poor) (13). As long as direct economic benefits are not felt, any tourism promotion efforts have the potential to be perceived as an "elite project."

Policy implications: Community First, Tourism Later. Sustainable tourism development in North Sinjai cannot begin with mass promotion, but must begin with meeting the community's basic needs. The four main steps include: dual infrastructure development (fisherman's road = tourist road), direct empowerment of 1,000 fishing families as hosts, evidence-based monitoring through the INSTO–UNWTO framework (1), adaptation of successful practices of Balinese tourism villages on a micro scale (1.26**).**

Final actionable recommendations

2025–2026: Focus on improving the socio-economic foundations and implementing the North Sinjai INSTO pilot through collaboration between UNHAS and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy. 2027–2030: Commence gradual promotion with strict visitor quotas and ensure that 30% of mandatory tourism fees are returned to fishermen. 2030 Target: 150,000 visits per year, tourism management satisfaction level ≥ 85%, additional income for fishermen of at least IDR 4 million per family per month, and no cases of overtourism

North Sinjai is currently the purest example of chronic undertourism in Indonesia. Precisely because of this, this region has a great opportunity to become a national model for the transition from "invisible" to "sustainable and inclusive," as long as we don't repeat the mistakes of overtourism in other destinations. Truly sustainable tourism in North Sinjai is not when thousands of tourists come, but when local fishermen proudly say: "This is our tourism, this is our livelihood."

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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