

**Shaping the future of tourism:
Administration and development strategies in Cotabato City, Philippines**

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ABSTRACT

Tourism plays a pivotal role in driving local economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability, particularly in developing cities (UNWTO, 2022; Dela Cruz & Santos, 2020). This study evaluated the extent of implementation of tourism development strategies and the level of attainment of tourism development objectives in Cotabato City, Philippines. Guided by a descriptive quantitative research design, the study utilized a researcher-made survey instrument administered to 100 respondents, including key stakeholders, tourism personnel, and local government representatives. The assessment focused on four strategic components—policy formulation, fund support, and logistics—and three core objectives: promotion of tourism-related programs, ensuring the well-being of the Filipino people, and upholding the right to a balanced and healthy ecology. Findings revealed that tourism strategies were highly implemented, particularly in logistics ($M = 3.46$) and fund support ($M = 3.46$), while policy formulation received a moderate implementation rating ($M = 3.38$). In terms of objectives, all categories were rated highly, with the highest mean scores recorded in the protection of natural resources ($M = 3.70$) and cultural heritage ($M = 3.59$). These results align with the perspectives of Hall (2020) and Richards (2021), who emphasize that sustainable tourism thrives when cultural identity and environmental assets are prioritized. Nevertheless, certain indicators—such as the promotion of bayanihan spirit and provision of recreational spaces for families—garnered relatively lower scores, suggesting opportunities for targeted improvement. Overall, the findings indicate that Cotabato City has established a solid foundation for sustainable tourism development through consistent funding, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship. The study recommends strengthening community-based participation, enhancing family-oriented facilities, and diversifying funding strategies to foster inclusive and resilient tourism growth, echoing global best practices in destination management (UNWTO, 2023; Dwyer & Kim, 2003).

Keywords: tourism, tourism development, tourism project, tourism activities and program, physical, networking and linkages, Cotabato City, Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism continues to be one of the most dynamic sectors in the global economy; however, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 triggered unprecedented disruptions in travel, forcing destinations to re-evaluate strategies for recovery and long-term resilience. Globally, research has shown that destinations with integrated approaches — combining sound infrastructure, targeted marketing, robust safety protocols, and meaningful host-community engagement — have demonstrated faster recovery in visitor arrivals and improved competitiveness compared to those with fragmented efforts (UNWTO, 2021; Hall et al., 2022). In the Philippine context, the tourism industry suffered a significant decline in inbound arrivals in 2020, leading to a sharp drop in its contribution to national GDP. The Department of Tourism (DOT) reported that from 8.26 million foreign arrivals in 2019, the figure fell to 1.48 million in 2020 and further declined in 2021 before gradually recovering in 2022–2023 (DOT, 2023). This prompted the national government to recalibrate its policies through the National Tourism Development Plan (NTDP) 2016–2022 and its successor framework, focusing on sustainable recovery, competitiveness, and inclusivity (DOT, 2022).

Cotabato City, strategically located in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), is endowed with diverse cultural heritage, natural attractions, and unique traditions that can serve as drivers of local tourism development. Despite its potential, empirical studies specifically examining the city's tourism administration remain scarce. While related literature on nearby destinations — such as South Cotabato's Lake Holon ecotourism (Garces et al., 2021) and community-based cultural tourism in Maguindanao (Santos & Lopez, 2022) — offer insights, there is still limited research that systematically analyzes Cotabato City's policy implementation, infrastructure readiness, marketing strategies, safety and security measures, and stakeholder participation.

Recent studies emphasize that tourism infrastructure, when complemented by effective promotion and marketing strategies, significantly boosts destination appeal and arrival rates (Agustin et al., 2020; Kim & Lee, 2021). Similarly, safety and security measures, particularly health protocols and risk communication introduced during and after the pandemic, are critical for restoring tourist confidence (Bae & Chang, 2021). Moreover, cultural and natural attractions remain key competitive assets, but their development must be community-driven to ensure sustainability (Tolkach & Pratt, 2022). Stakeholder involvement, including local government units, private sectors, and community groups, plays a pivotal role in achieving inclusive growth and equitable benefit sharing (Garces et al., 2021; Santos & Lopez, 2022).

Statement of the problem

Against this backdrop, this study aims to evaluate the administration of tourism development in Cotabato City by focusing on the extent of implementation of strategic components — policy formulation, fund support, logistics, marketing and promotion, safety and

security, and stakeholder involvement — and determining their impact on core objectives: increased tourist arrivals, tourism revenue, investment growth, and destination competitiveness. By situating the study within the post-2020 tourism recovery context and drawing from both national and global literature, the research seeks to fill a critical knowledge gap and provide evidence-based recommendations for aligning local tourism initiatives with national recovery priorities.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a descriptive research design, which was deemed appropriate as it utilized quantitative analysis through survey methods and statistical tools to examine the data collected. This approach was chosen because the study sought to describe the implementation and strategies of tourism development, focusing on the perspectives of key community stakeholders.

The research was conducted in Cotabato City, a first-class city within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. According to the 2015 national census, the city has a population of 299,438 people distributed across 37 barangays. The socio-cultural profile of Cotabato City reveals that Muslims constitute 53% of the population, Christians 37%, and Lumads 10%. The city is linguistically diverse, with Tagalog spoken widely in a local accent, alongside Illonggo, Ilocano, Maguindanaon, Maranao, and Tausug dialects. Cotabato City is also recognized for its vibrant cultural life, celebrating five major events annually, including Araw ng Cotabato, Shariff Kabunsuan Festival, Christian religious festivities, and Muslim observances such as Ramadan. Its growing reputation as a tourist destination stems largely from its booming economy and cultural richness.

The respondents of the study consisted of 100 bona fide residents of Cotabato City, selected from different sectors of the community. These included barangay and local government officials as well as individuals directly or indirectly engaged in the local tourism industry, such as those involved in producing and selling pasalubong products. To identify these respondents, the researcher employed quota sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that allowed the selection of participants based on accessibility and defined quotas. This method was particularly suitable given the study's limited scope and the need to ensure representation across relevant community groups.

To gather data, the researcher developed a self-made survey questionnaire under the guidance of the research adviser. The instrument consisted of three main sections: statements about the implementation of tourism development, items addressing the strategies employed, and questions related to the objectives of tourism development. All items were close-ended and measured using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from “Highly Implemented” (4) to “Least Implemented” (1). To establish content validity, the instrument was subjected to expert evaluation by three validators: one internal validator, a professor from Cotabato City Polytechnic College, and two external experts in the field. Revisions were made based on their feedback to ensure that the items accurately reflected the study's objectives. Reliability testing was conducted through a pilot test administered to 20 residents of Cotabato City who were not part of

the final sample. The results, analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielded a coefficient of 0.839, indicating that the instrument was highly reliable.

The data collection process followed a systematic procedure. Initially, communication letters were prepared and submitted to relevant authorities, including the Dean of the Graduate College and the Local Government Head of Cotabato City, to secure permission for the conduct of the study. Once approval was obtained, the researcher personally distributed and retrieved the survey questionnaires from respondents. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the process, including obtaining informed consent from participants and providing them with a clear orientation on the purpose of the study.

After the surveys were retrieved, data were tabulated manually with the assistance of a statistician, and further analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Responses were encoded, coded, and analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. The computation of means served as the primary method for interpreting the level of implementation and effectiveness of tourism development initiatives in Cotabato City. This analytic approach ensured that the findings accurately reflected the perspectives of community members and stakeholders, thereby providing a reliable basis for drawing conclusions and recommendations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Physical aspect of tourism development

The results indicate that Cotabato City's tourism development in terms of physical aspects is generally highly implemented, with a grand mean of 3.50. Among the indicators, the promotion of Shariff Kabunsuan Day as a tourist attraction obtained the highest rating (mean = 3.60), highlighting the city's strong focus on cultural heritage as a means of promoting tourism. This was followed closely by the development of Timako Hill for ecotourism (mean = 3.53) and the promotion of native seafood delicacies (mean = 3.51), both of which emphasize the integration of natural and culinary elements into the city's tourism identity. Strengthening the city as a business-friendly destination to attract tourists received a moderately implemented rating (mean = 3.44), while the tri-media campaign on tourism sites registered the lowest rating (mean = 3.40), also interpreted as moderately implemented. These results suggest that while physical initiatives such as cultural festivities, ecological attractions, and culinary promotion are given high priority, promotional campaigns still require stronger, more integrated strategies to increase visibility and competitiveness.

Human aspect of tourism development

In terms of human aspects, tourism development in Cotabato City was found to be moderately implemented, with a grand mean of 3.27. The formulation of ordinances to protect tourist sites like Timako Hill and Kutawato Cave earned the highest rating (mean = 3.48), which reflects the city's strong commitment to protecting its natural resources. On the other hand, the formulation of an organizational structure for a tourism hub in the city scored the lowest (mean = 3.05), suggesting weak institutional coordination and governance mechanisms. Other indicators

such as organizing transport systems for sea, land, and air travel (mean = 3.45), formulating a tourism committee to focus on development (mean = 3.29), and conducting a tourism summit in the city (mean = 3.09) all fell within the moderately implemented range. Collectively, these results reveal that while some progress has been made in terms of legislative support and basic organization, there is a pressing need to enhance stakeholder collaboration, strengthen governance structures, and build human resource capacity to fully sustain tourism growth.

Financial support for tourism development

Tourism development in terms of financial support was rated as moderately implemented, with a grand mean of 3.41. The provision of additional income to the small transportation sector due to the influx of visitors obtained the highest mean rating (3.49), followed by the generation of income from tourist arrivals in general (mean = 3.46), both of which were interpreted as highly implemented. These results reflect tourism's role in providing livelihood opportunities for grassroots sectors. Meanwhile, the provision of jobs for local people (mean = 3.41) and the expansion of businesses due to visitors (mean = 3.36) were moderately implemented. The lowest-rated indicator was the provision of additional tax sources for the LGU (mean = 3.32), suggesting that fiscal benefits from tourism remain underutilized due to possible informality in transactions or weak revenue collection mechanisms. Overall, these results highlight the need for more robust policies that will formalize enterprises, maximize fiscal revenues, and reinvest funds for sustainable economic growth.

Networking and linkages

Tourism development strategies in terms of networking and linkages were found to be moderately implemented, with a grand mean of 3.27. The highest-rated indicator was linking with the hotel and food industry for strengthening the tourism sector (mean = 3.39), showing that partnerships with key hospitality stakeholders are prioritized. Conversely, the lowest rating was collaboration with the Philippine National Police for the safety of tourists (mean = 3.19), which suggests a need for stronger and more visible security measures to ensure visitor confidence. Other initiatives such as linking with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (mean = 3.34), coordinating with international NGOs for assistance (mean = 3.20), and partnering with the Muslim Chamber of Commerce for pasalubong centers (mean = 3.23) were also moderately implemented. These findings demonstrate that while networking initiatives exist, they remain underdeveloped and require formalization, sustained engagement, and resource support to maximize their contribution to tourism growth.

Fund support

Tourism development strategies in terms of fund support were highly implemented, with a grand mean of 3.46. The allocation of income for tourism program development achieved the highest rating (mean = 3.53), reflecting the city's reinvestment in tourism infrastructure and services. Seeking financial assistance from the Department of Public Works and Highways for

upgrading and constructing sites was also highly implemented (mean = 3.49). Meanwhile, allocation of funds from the LGU's Internal Revenue Allotment (mean = 3.44) and seeking assistance from the Department of Trade and Industry (mean = 3.43) were both rated moderately implemented. The lowest score, though still moderate, was enhancing public-private partnerships for funding tourist spots (mean = 3.41). Overall, the findings reveal consistent efforts to finance tourism initiatives but point to the need for strengthening collaborative funding approaches and enhancing the strategic prioritization of financial resources.

Logistics

Tourism development strategies related to logistics were highly implemented, with a grand mean of 3.46. The provision of websites and hotlines for booking services received the highest rating (mean = 3.56), reflecting the city's efforts toward digitized tourism facilitation. This was followed by the provision of tourist bus services (mean = 3.53) and the construction of pasalubong centers in strategic areas (mean = 3.48), both of which highlight efforts to improve accessibility and cultural engagement. On the other hand, the provision of signage in strategic locations (mean = 3.44) and the distribution of leaflets and posters (mean = 3.29) were rated as moderately implemented. These results indicate that while digital infrastructure and mobility services are prioritized, traditional promotional materials and physical wayfinding systems require enhancement to improve overall visitor navigation and experience.

Promotion of tourism activities and programs

The attainment of objectives related to promoting tourism activities and programs was highly implemented, with a grand mean of 3.51. Protecting natural resources received the highest rating (mean = 3.70), showing the city's strong commitment to environmental conservation. Other highly implemented indicators included maintaining cleanliness through waste management (mean = 3.59), planting additional trees for a greener environment (mean = 3.49), and reducing water and air pollution in the city (mean = 3.47). The lowest rating, although still moderate, was preserving the natural beauty of the place (mean = 3.40). These results demonstrate the city's strong environmental orientation but also suggest a need to enhance landscape preservation and aesthetic planning to further strengthen its tourism appeal.

Tourism development and the well-being of people

Tourism development aimed at promoting the general well-being of the Filipino people was highly implemented, with a grand mean of 3.47. Promoting a healthy environment received the highest rating (mean = 3.53), while the promotion of values development (mean = 3.50) also ranked highly. These findings emphasize the role of tourism in fostering cultural identity, values, and community health. However, indicators such as providing recreational places for families (mean = 3.39), alleviating poverty in the community (mean = 3.40), and promoting the spirit of bayanihan (mean = 3.41) were rated as moderately implemented. While overall results are positive, the data suggest that more inclusive programs are needed to extend tourism benefits to families, strengthen community solidarity, and enhance poverty alleviation initiatives.

Tourism development and balanced ecology

Finally, the findings reveal that tourism development in Cotabato City strongly supports the right of people to a balanced and healthy ecology, with a grand mean of 3.52, interpreted as highly implemented. Strengthening cultural practices and respect received the highest rating (mean = 3.59), followed by strengthening religious practices and devotion (mean = 3.56), preserving cultural heritage and places (mean = 3.54), and promoting self-identity within the community (mean = 3.47). The lowest-rated indicator, although still highly implemented, was promoting unity toward culture preservation (mean = 3.46). These results affirm that Cotabato City's tourism initiatives align with ecological sustainability and heritage-based tourism, contributing significantly to cultural reinforcement, environmental protection, and community identity.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the tourism development strategies implemented in Cotabato City are generally highly implemented across the key areas of policy formulation, fund support, logistics, and the attainment of tourism development objectives. The results consistently showed grand means falling within the "Highly Implemented" range, affirming the city's strong commitment to strengthening its tourism sector. Among all the components, the highest mean ratings were observed in activities related to logistics, particularly the provision of websites and hotlines for booking services which received a mean score of 3.56, tourist bus services with a mean of 3.53, and the construction of pasalubong centers with a mean of 3.48. These findings underscore the city's prioritization of accessibility, digital facilitation, and cultural retail infrastructure. Similarly, objectives connected to the protection of cultural identity and practices were also rated highly, including the strengthening of cultural practices and respect (mean = 3.59), religious devotion (mean = 3.56), and the preservation of cultural heritage (mean = 3.54), reflecting the city's strong alignment with cultural and ecological sustainability.

Financial strategies were also actively pursued. The allocation of income for tourism program development was rated highly implemented with a mean score of 3.53, while seeking financial assistance from the Department of Public Works and Highways for upgrading and constructing sites received a mean of 3.49. These results show deliberate efforts to reinvest in infrastructure and diversify funding streams. Other initiatives such as allocating funds from the LGU's Internal Revenue Allotment (mean = 3.44) and seeking assistance from the Department of Trade and Industry (mean = 3.43) were moderately implemented, suggesting areas that can be strengthened further. Moreover, while enhancing public-private partnerships for funding tourist spots was rated moderately implemented at 3.41, it nevertheless reflects potential for broader collaboration with external stakeholders.

The objectives of tourism development related to environmental protection and public well-being were also achieved at significant levels. Protecting natural resources gained the highest mean rating of 3.70, while maintaining cleanliness through waste management (mean = 3.59), planting additional trees to sustain a green environment (mean = 3.49), and reducing water

and air pollution (mean = 3.47) all demonstrated highly implemented initiatives. Similarly, promoting a healthy environment for the people was rated at 3.53, and promoting values development achieved a mean of 3.50, both showing tourism's positive contribution to quality of life and cultural growth. The grand means of 3.51 for promoting tourism activities and programs and 3.47 for ensuring tourism protects and promotes general well-being confirm the effectiveness of these objectives.

However, despite these favorable outcomes, certain areas were rated slightly lower though still positive, highlighting aspects that need further attention. Promoting unity in cultural preservation registered a mean of 3.46, which, while still classified as highly implemented, was the lowest among related indicators. Preserving the natural beauty of the place scored moderately implemented at 3.40, and providing recreational facilities for families received a mean of 3.39. Likewise, alleviating poverty in the community (mean = 3.40) and promoting the spirit of bayanihan (mean = 3.41) were rated moderately implemented. These findings suggest that while the city's development efforts are robust, there is a need for continuous improvement in promoting inclusivity, strengthening social participation, and addressing broader socio-economic concerns.

In light of these conclusions, several recommendations are advanced. To address the slightly lower rating in promoting unity toward cultural preservation, deeper grassroots participation must be fostered. Barangay-based consultations, cultural caravans, and capacity-building programs can enhance local ownership of cultural tourism initiatives. Sustaining high performance in environmental protection and cultural preservation requires institutionalizing green practices in tourism operations and encouraging community-driven heritage mapping to safeguard tangible and intangible assets. Investments in public facilities and family-oriented recreational spaces such as parks, eco-recreational zones, and accessible amenities can improve the well-being of residents and tourists, directly addressing areas where ratings were only moderately implemented. Financially, while strategies such as allocating income to tourism programs (mean = 3.53) and seeking DPWH assistance (mean = 3.49) are already strong, the city should expand its fund sourcing by exploring eco-tourism grants, private sector corporate social responsibility partnerships, and digital tourism platforms to diversify income streams. Finally, although logistics was highly implemented with a grand mean of 3.46, the moderate ratings for traditional promotional materials such as leaflets (3.29) and signage (3.44) suggest that promotion and awareness campaigns must be enhanced. Strengthening both traditional and digital platforms will amplify Cotabato City's visibility, attract more visitors, and improve overall tourist experience.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Cotabato City has established a solid foundation for tourism development, with consistently high ratings across policy, financial, logistical, and cultural dimensions. Yet, the areas of moderate performance—particularly inclusivity, recreation, unity, and grassroots participation—highlight the importance of continuous improvement. Addressing these gaps will ensure that tourism development in Cotabato City not only sustains economic growth but also fosters cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and the holistic well-being of its people.

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