

# Governance decisions and tourism resource conservation in Tanzania: A political economy perspective

Ladislaus Batinoluho \*

<sup>1,2</sup> *The Open University of Tanzania, Tanzania*

\*Corresponding author: [Ladislaus.batinoluho@out.ac.tz](mailto:Ladislaus.batinoluho@out.ac.tz)



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## ABSTRACT

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Despite Tanzania's strong policy and legal frameworks for sustainable tourism and community-based conservation, little is known about how governance decisions affect tourism resource conservation. This study examines how political economy dynamics shape these decisions using qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, and document review across Tanzania's four tourism circuits. Findings reveal highly centralized governance with limited local fiscal and decision-making autonomy, constraining community participation and adaptive management. Political incentives and revenue-driven performance targets prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term ecological sustainability. Power asymmetries favor investors and central authorities, resulting in inequitable benefit-sharing and reduced local support, while weak transparency and limited institutional capacity undermine trust in governance mechanisms such as Wildlife Management Areas. Effective conservation requires aligning political incentives with ecological goals, strengthening local capacity, and fostering meaningful community participation. Limitations include qualitative focus and partial coverage. Future research should examine long-term governance impacts, tourism taxation, and regional comparative analyses to identify best practices in sustainable tourism governance.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Historical Perspectives

Understanding the historical trajectories of tourism governance and resource conservation in Tanzania is essential for appreciating present political economy dynamics. Tourism and wildlife conservation did not emerge in isolation but are deeply rooted in colonial conservation regimes that prioritized state control and exclusionary protectionist approaches. Early wildlife laws introduced under colonial rule formalized protected area creation and centralized authority over wildlife resources, often marginalizing local communities and their customary management systems. This legacy persisted well in the post-independence era, shaping governance structures and attitudes toward community rights (Nelson et al., 2007).

Following independence in 1961, Tanzania initially reinforced central control over natural resources, reflecting broader socialist state ideologies and prioritizing national over local interests. Despite tourism's slow takeoff in the 1960s and 1970s due to infrastructural and economic constraints, the state maintained a dominant role in infrastructure development and policy formulation (Luvanga & Shitundu, 2003; Kulindwa et al., 2001). A landmark shift occurred in the 1990s, when structural reforms associated with broader economic liberalization opened the tourism sector to private investment and led to the creation of new governance arrangements such as the Tourism Master Plan (1996) and subsequent policy revisions that encouraged community-based tourism and private sector engagement (Mwakalobo, 2016; Kimeto & Mkwizu, 2023).

Concurrently, wildlife governance reform introduced Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) as part of decentralization efforts intended to devolve rights and benefits to local communities adjacent to protected areas. While intended to integrate conservation with local development, these reforms have been shaped by the entrenched legacy of centralized control, often resulting in limited actual devolution of power and ongoing tensions between state agencies, private investors, and local stakeholders (Nelson et al., 2007). Key conservation successes such as Chumbe Marine Park (est. 1994) demonstrate early experiments in participatory and privately supported conservation that blend ecological protection with tourism, yet these models remain exceptions rather than the rule in broader governance practice (Olearnik & Barwicka, 2020; Mkwizu, 2023). Historically, governance reform in Tanzania has been a dialectic between centralizing legacies and decentralizing aspirations, with political, economic, and institutional pressures continuing to shape who makes decisions, how benefits are shared, and how conservation objectives are prioritized in tourism governance today.

## **Global Overview**

In an increasingly globalized world, tourism has become both a driver of economic growth and a source of environmental and social pressure, prompting scholars to foreground governance as a critical determinant of sustainable resource conservation (Oktavio et al., 2024). Sustainable tourism governance involves coordinating multiple actors, state, private sector, civil society, and communities to manage natural and cultural assets in ways that balance economic benefits with long-term ecological protection (Sharpley, 2022). Governance mechanisms, including policy coherence, stakeholder participation, and institutional accountability, significantly influence the ability of tourist destinations to adapt to sustainability challenges and conserve resources while catering to tourism demand (Opare-Addo, 2023).

Globally, scholarships increasingly recognize that the complexity of tourism governance requires multi-scale and multi-actor arrangements (Wijaya et al., 2025). For instance, debates

on sustainable tourism governance emphasize that fragmented jurisdictions and competing interests can undermine sustainable outcomes unless governance is integrated and adaptive, highlighting the need for nuanced policy analysis tools to address these complexities in both developed and developing contexts. Research from China demonstrates that ecological governance positively influences sustainable tourism development, indicating that strong institutional frameworks and environmental policy alignment at national and sub-national levels are crucial for balancing economic growth with conservation imperatives. This spatial analysis shows that regions with robust ecological governance frameworks have more successful outcomes in protecting natural tourism resources while sustaining economic benefits.

Studies also point to dynamic governance approaches that emphasize flexibility, stakeholder engagement, and inter-sectoral collaboration as effective means of enhancing policy effectiveness and sustainability. Such approaches encourage shared responsibility among governmental bodies, local communities, and private actors, promoting innovation and resilience in tourism governance. Finally, global policy initiatives reflect the elevated importance of sustainability and governance in tourism. For example, over 50 countries recently signed a UN sustainable tourism declaration at the COP29 summit, incorporating tourism into national climate strategies and underscoring governance commitments to environmental stewardship at international levels. Overall, the global literature demonstrates that governance structures profoundly shape tourism resource conservation outcomes by mediating policy priorities, stakeholder power, and institutional capacity, insights that are highly relevant for comparative analysis in the Tanzanian context.

### **Regional and National Status**

Tourism is a cornerstone of economic development and conservation engagement across the East African Community (EAC) region, which includes Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The sector contributes significantly to regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP), export earnings, and employment, and wildlife and nature-based tourism are among its most marketable assets. Regional governance frameworks seek to harmonize policies on sustainable tourism and wildlife conservation, with initiatives such as the EAC's strategic objectives to strengthen policy and legal frameworks, enhance law enforcement capacities, and build local community livelihoods through sustainable resource use (refer to the East African Community (EAC) Treaty of 1999, Chapter 19 (Articles 111–114)). These efforts aim to address shared challenges such as poaching, habitat loss, and limited policy harmonization across borders, reflecting a collective approach to conservation and tourism governance within the region.

Despite these regional ambitions, there remain significant implementation challenges. Policy coordination is uneven, and governance capacity gaps persist, particularly in how regional directives translate into local action. For example, while EAC tourism policies emphasize harmonized wildlife management and conservation, member states differ in enforcement capacity and community inclusion, leading to mixed outcomes on community benefits and biodiversity protection. Additionally, regional cooperation efforts around iconic transboundary ecosystems such as the Serengeti–Mara corridor illustrate both policy potential and practical limitations. While regional policy frameworks envisage community benefit and cultural heritage preservation, studies show that cultural benefits are often not sustainable for host communities, with heritage commodification failing to deliver equitable community outcomes.

Tanzania occupies a central position in regional tourism, boasting some of East Africa's most globally recognized natural assets, including the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Kilimanjaro, and world heritage coastal sites. These resources have positioned Tanzania as a leading safari and biodiversity tourism destination, contributing substantially to foreign exchange earnings and national development.

The country's conservation governance landscape has evolved through a series of reforms aimed at balancing state authority with community participation. The introduction of WMAs reflects policy efforts to devolve wildlife rights and tourism benefits to local communities adjacent to protected areas. However, research shows that translating *de jure* rights into meaningful *de facto* power remains challenging, with centralized control over revenue and rule-making often diluting local influence. Contemporary studies also indicate that while benefit-sharing mechanisms linked to conservation can enhance local support and mitigate conflict, they do not always sufficiently address human-wildlife conflict or equitable access to natural resources, suggesting ongoing governance gaps in policy translation and implementation.

Moreover, conflicts between conservation priorities and community land use such as restrictions on grazing, farming, and resource access near protected areas highlight persistent tensions in how conservation policies are operationalized. These tensions underscore that community involvement in governance remains a critical area for improvement if conservation initiatives are to be sustainable and socially just. Tanzania's tourism governance also includes notable eco-tourism innovations, such as marine protected areas and privately managed conservation ventures such as Chumbe Marine Park, which illustrate how partnerships between government, communities, and NGOs can support biodiversity protection while diversifying tourism offerings.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Tourism resource conservation has emerged as a central concern for sustainable development globally, given the sector's reliance on natural and cultural assets and its contributions to economic growth (Ward et al., 2022). However, in many developing countries, conservation outcomes are not determined solely by ecological factors; they are deeply shaped by governance decisions embedded within political and institutional contexts. Research in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) indicates that the quality of governance, including transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation, significantly affects conservation effectiveness, equitable benefit-sharing, and the sustainability of ecotourism initiatives (Forje et al., 2022). Despite these insights, there remains limited empirical evidence that specifically interrogates how political economy dynamics influence governance decisions and, in turn, tourism resource conservation, especially in understudied contexts like Tanzania.

In the African literature, studies have examined tourism governance and ecotourism policy in several countries, highlighting challenges such as limited community participation, inequitable revenue sharing, and the dominance of central authorities in decision-making (Musavengane & Leonard, 2022; Forje et al., 2022). While this body of work illuminates broader governance issues, it rarely adopts a political economy lens that explicitly explores the interplay between political incentives, institutional power relations, and conservation outcomes. As such, systematic analysis of ecotourism governance in SSA underscores that empirical evidence is fragmented and calls for more nuanced research on governance principles such as equity and efficiency (Forje et al., 2022). These gaps are even more pronounced when focusing on Tanzania, where tourism is a cornerstone of the national economy, yet governance challenges persist at multiple levels.

Existing studies on Tanzania have examined specific components of tourism and conservation policy, such as benefit-sharing mechanisms and community-based conservation frameworks but have not fully addressed how political economy forces shape governance decisions that affect conservation outcomes (Kajembe et al., 2021; Batinoluho, 2022). Research analyzing policies and legislation governing wildlife and protected areas highlights central government roles and regulatory frameworks but lacks in-depth analysis of how political priorities and institutional power dynamics influence implementation and local outcomes (Kicheleri et al., 2018; United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2007). Moreover, accounts of disputes over land use for tourism versus community livelihoods, such as controversies involving the Maasai in conservation areas, reveal tensions between state conservation objectives and local socio-economic rights, yet systematic investigation of the governance drivers of these conflicts remains limited (Oakland Institute report, 2023).

Justification for this study stems from the need to bridge these gaps by focusing specifically on how governance decisions, influenced by political incentives, institutional

arrangements, and stakeholder power relations, affect the conservation of tourism resources in Tanzania. A political economy perspective can help unpack the structural incentives that shape policy design, resource allocation, and implementation practices, providing evidence on why certain governance choices succeed or fail in conserving key tourism assets. Filling this knowledge gap has important implications for policy reforms that seek to align economic development objectives with sustainable conservation and inclusive governance in Tanzania's tourism sector.

### **Objectives and Questions of the Study**

Generally, this study aims to examine how governance decisions shaped by political economy dynamics influence tourism resource conservation in Tanzania. Specifically, the study intends:

- a. To examine governance structures, institutional arrangements, and policy frameworks shaping tourism resource conservation in Tanzania.
- b. To analyze how political incentives influence local government priorities in tourism development and conservation.
- c. To assess how stakeholder interests and power relations influence tourism resource conservation outcomes.
- d. To identify governance challenges, including transparency, institutional capacity, and revenue distribution mechanisms affecting tourism resource management.
- e. To explore strategies for aligning governance processes with sustainable tourism resource conservation in Tanzania.

Similarly, the study intended to respond to the following questions:

- a. How do governance structures, institutional arrangements, and policy frameworks shape tourism resource conservation in Tanzania?
- b. How do political incentives influence local government priorities in tourism development and conservation?
- c. How do stakeholder interests and power relations affect tourism resource conservation outcomes?
- d. What governance challenges, including issues of transparency, institutional capacity, and revenue distribution, affect tourism resource management in Tanzania?
- e. What strategies can improve governance processes to better align tourism development with sustainable resource conservation in Tanzania?

### **Contribution of the Study**

This study contributes to the literature on tourism governance and conservation by advancing a political economy perspective to explain how governance decisions shape tourism resource conservation outcomes in Tanzania. Theoretically, it enriches existing scholarship by integrating institutional, regulatory, and political economy perspectives to explain how power relations, political incentives, and institutional capacity influence conservation governance in tourism-dependent contexts. Empirically, the study provides qualitative evidence from key stakeholders across Tanzania's major tourism circuits, offering context-specific insights into governance dynamics, stakeholder interactions, and challenges affecting conservation practices. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of triangulating interviews, focus group discussions, and policy document analysis to examine governance processes in complex socio-political environments. Practically, the findings inform policymakers and practitioners by identifying governance reforms, such as enhanced transparency, fiscal decentralization, inclusive stakeholder participation, and improved institutional coordination, that can strengthen sustainable tourism resource conservation and equitable benefit-sharing in Tanzania.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Review**

Research on tourism governance and conservation increasingly draws on interdisciplinary theories that explain how institutions, actors, and power structures shape outcomes. Institutional theory underscores the importance of formal rules, norms, and organizational structures in guiding collective behavior and legitimizing policy outcomes. According to contemporary work in tourism governance research, institutional theory helps explain how formal governance frameworks (e.g., laws, policies) interact with informal norms to influence decisions and stakeholder behaviour in tourism systems (institutional theory; regulatory theory; policy implementation theory; public choice theory), pointing to the need to understand both institutional design and power dynamics in governance processes.

Regulatory theory and policy implementation theory also frame governance as a structured response to market failures, externalities, and public goods undersupply, with governments deploying policy tools to mediate conflicts between economic growth and environmental conservation. Regulatory theory extends this by examining relationships between states, society, and markets, highlighting how governance arrangements evolve in response to socio-economic pressures, a key consideration in political economy approaches to tourism governance.

From a political economy perspective, governance is not only about rules and institutions but also about power relations, incentives, and actor interests. This approach emphasizes the distribution of power and resources, how political incentives shape priorities, and how stakeholder interests (state, private sector, communities) compete and cooperate in tourism conservation decision-making. Such frameworks help illuminate why some governance decisions privilege economic development goals over conservation, or why community interests are marginalized in policy implementation, and thus are highly relevant to the Tanzanian context where formal conservation policies exist but political economy forces influence actual conservation outcomes.

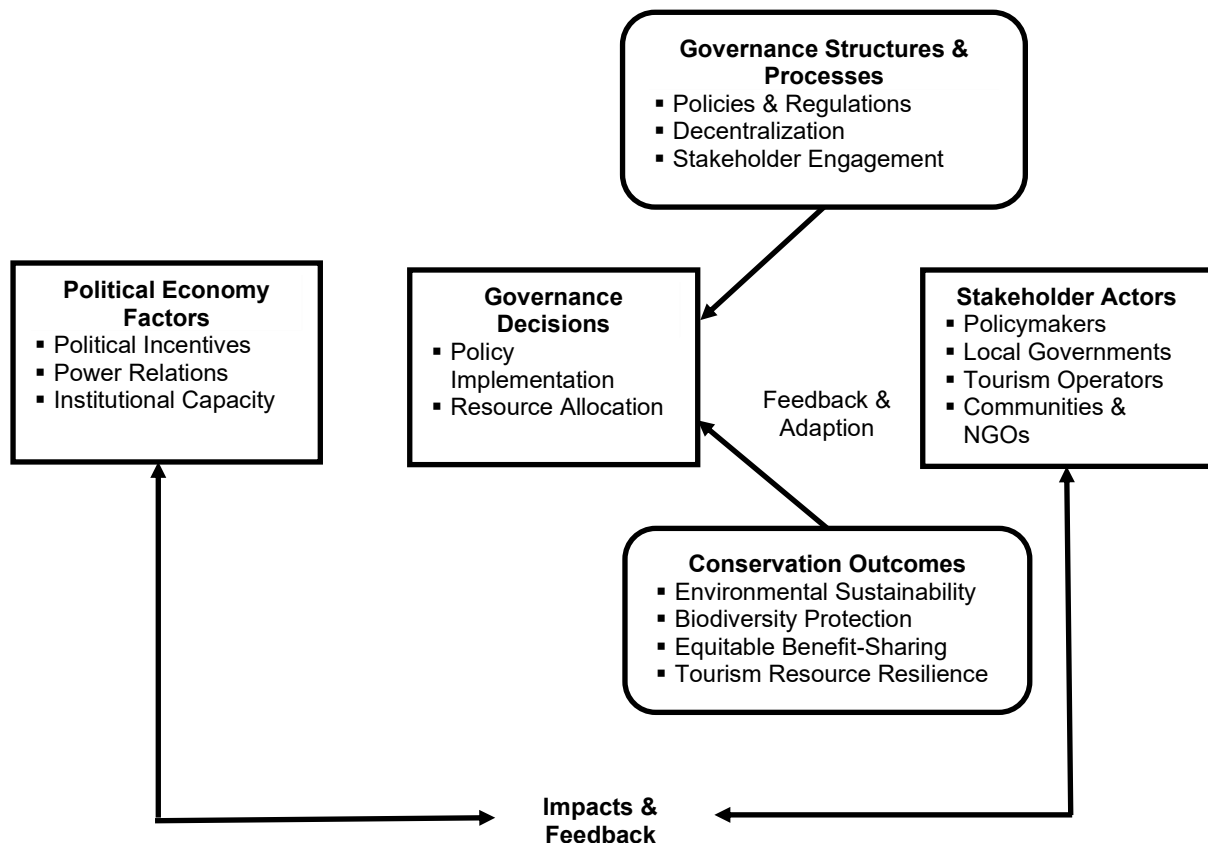
### **Empirical Review**

Empirical research on governance and tourism resource conservation demonstrates varied contexts but highlights persistent gaps. Studies in South Africa show that governance quality can significantly impact tourism development outcomes, linking effective governance with sector growth and suggesting that governance weaknesses undermine sustainable tourism (Meyer & Rheeders, 2023). In African governance studies, tourism governance is critiqued for neglecting inclusion, justice, and equitable power relations critical for conservation and sustainable development. Research across South Africa and Zimbabwe shows that existing governance frameworks often fail to incorporate meaningful community participation or address power imbalances, thus undermining conservation objectives. In Tanzania, systematic reviews of conservation-related benefit-sharing mechanisms underscore that while community benefits are documented, these studies largely focus on socio-economic outcomes rather than on how political economy factors shape governance decisions affecting conservation results. For example, the review of over 1,000 articles on benefit-sharing shows variability in community acceptance but points to the need for examining deeper governance structures that shape these outcomes. These empirical lines indicate that research has yet to adequately integrate political economy analysis with governance studies in tourism resource conservation, especially in Tanzania, a gap this study aims to fill by linking theory with Tanzanian institutional and political dynamics.

### **Conceptual Model**

Figure 1 denotes a model that conceptualizes governance decisions as mediating processes shaped by political economy forces and resulting in varying conservation outcomes. It highlights feedback loops, where conservation outcomes influence future governance priorities and stakeholder power dynamics, aligning with institutional and political economy theories. The conceptual model positions governance decisions at the center of tourism resource conservation, emphasizing their mediating role between political economy

forces and conservation outcomes. Political economy factors, including political incentives, power relations, and institutional capacity, shape both the priorities and the effectiveness of governance decisions. For example, a local government with strong political backing but limited institutional capacity may prioritize revenue generation over ecological sustainability, whereas well-aligned incentives can foster policies that balance economic and environmental objectives.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Governance Decisions and Tourism Resource Conservation in Tanzania**

Source: Author's Construct (2026)

Governance decisions include policy implementation, resource allocation, and regulation enforcement. These decisions are shaped by formal governance structures and processes, such as laws, regulations, decentralization practices, and stakeholder consultation mechanisms. The model underscores that governance decisions do not occur in isolation; they are influenced by stakeholder actors, including policymakers, local government officials, tourism operators, communities, and NGOs, each with varying levels of power, interest, and influence. These actors can support or constrain conservation efforts depending on their priorities, resources, and engagement levels. Conservation outcomes reflect the effectiveness of governance and stakeholder interactions. These outcomes include environmental sustainability, biodiversity protection, equitable benefit-sharing, and tourism resource

resilience. The model emphasizes feedback loops: conservation outcomes influence future governance priorities and political incentives. For instance, degradation of a national park due to weak governance may lead to policy reforms or shifts in stakeholder influence, while successful conservation outcomes can strengthen the legitimacy and capacity of governance institutions. By linking political economy, governance processes, stakeholders, and conservation outcomes, this model aligns with institutional theory (focusing on rules and structures), regulatory theory (emphasizing mechanisms for enforcement and compliance), and political economy theory (highlighting power relations and incentives). It provides a framework for analyzing how governance decisions can be optimized to achieve sustainable tourism resource conservation in Tanzania.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena such as governance decisions and conservation outcomes within their socio-political context. Qualitative approaches are particularly suited to understanding “how” and “why” questions by capturing participants’ perceptions, experiences, and meanings in depth (Lim, 2025). Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to explore governance processes and political economy forces that cannot be quantified easily but are essential for comprehensive understanding (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). This study’s population comprises key stakeholders involved in tourism governance and conservation in Tanzania, including policymakers (national and regional), local government officials, tourism operators, conservation NGOs, and community representatives from major tourism circuits, such as the Northern, Southern, Western, and Coastal zones. Participants were chosen for their direct involvement in governance processes affecting tourism resource management and conservation outcomes.

Data for this study were collected between June and September 2025 across Tanzania’s four tourism circuits, including the Northern, Southern, Western, and Coastal zones, which host key tourism operations and protected areas such as national parks, game reserves, wildlife management areas, and community-based tourism initiatives. This study adopted purposive sampling to identify stakeholders with deep knowledge of governance processes. Sample size in qualitative research is not determined by statistical formulas but by data saturation, the point at which no new insights emerge from additional interviews (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). While saturation does not prescribe a fixed number, empirical research suggests that for studies exploring governance and policy perspectives, approximately 36 interviews can be sufficient to reach thematic saturation, depending on heterogeneity and complexity of the topic (Guest et al., 2018; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In this study, a total of 40 purposively selected respondents were interviewed until saturation was achieved. Data

were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews (16 respondents), focus group discussions (FGDs) of 4 groups each with 6 participants making a total of 24 respondents, and document review of relevant governance and conservation policy documents (e.g., national tourism policies, legal frameworks). Each FGD was facilitated by the researcher with a co-moderator, following a structured guide to ensure all participants could share perspectives, while promoting inclusive discussion, managing dominant voices, and capturing consensus and divergent views. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility to explore participants' views while ensuring alignment with the research questions. FGDs were used to capture collective perspectives, particularly among community representatives. Document review helped contextualize interview findings within existing policy frameworks.

Respondents were recruited using purposive sampling, targeting stakeholders with direct involvement in tourism governance and resource conservation in Tanzania, including national and regional policymakers, local government officials, tourism operators, conservation NGOs, and community representatives from four tourism circuits. Sampling criteria prioritized respondents' experience, decision-making roles, and knowledge of local conservation and tourism management practices. Interviews and FGDs were conducted at respondents' workplaces or community centers, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with informed consent to ensure accuracy, following strict protocols for confidentiality and ethical research conduct, including anonymization of respondents, secure storage of recordings, and adherence to institutional review board guidelines.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a rigorous and systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved transcribing interviews, coding textual data, and developing thematic categories that reflect governance processes, political economy influences, stakeholder interactions, and conservation outcomes. Reliability was ensured through consistent coding procedures and cross-checking between the researcher and a co-coder, while validity was strengthened by triangulating data from interviews, FGDs, and document review to capture multiple perspectives. Analyses employed both inductive and deductive coding, allowing emergent themes to be grounded in participants' perspectives while informed by the conceptual framework. To enhance analytical rigor and facilitate efficient data management, the transcripts and supporting documents were coded and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which enabled the identification of patterns, relationships, and themes related to governance structures, political incentives, stakeholder dynamics, and conservation outcomes. Ethical approval was obtained from the Open University of Tanzania. Informed consent was sought from all participants, emphasizing voluntary participation and confidentiality of responses. Participants were assured that their identities and responses would be anonymized, and data would be used solely for research

purposes. Respect for cultural norms and sensitivity to power dynamics were observed during interviews and FGDs.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Governance Structures, Institutional Arrangements and Policy Frameworks

Findings indicate that governance structures in Tanzania's tourism and conservation sectors are fragmented and hierarchical, limiting local influence on decision-making. Stakeholders noted that central government dominance in policy formulation often constrains local agency.

*"Most decisions about tourism revenues and conservation budgets are made in Dodoma or Dar es Salaam, with little room for village voices, even when the effects are felt locally". Ansgar Massawe, pseudonym, local leader, Kilimanjaro Region.*

Building on this respondent's perspective, the local leader from Kilimanjaro further elaborated on how centralized decision-making affects both conservation outcomes and community engagement. He explained that decisions on tourism revenues and conservation budgets are often finalized at the national level without adequate consultation with local authorities or communities that directly interact with tourism resources on a daily basis. According to him, this centralization weakens local ownership of conservation initiatives and reduces community motivation to support resource protection efforts.

The respondent emphasized that villages hosting tourism resources frequently bear the costs of conservation such as restrictions on land use, grazing, or access to natural resources yet have limited influence over how tourism revenues are allocated. He noted that when communities are excluded from budgeting and planning processes, conservation policies are often perceived as imposed rather than collectively agreed upon. As he added,

*"When people do not see their priorities reflected in decisions, they start questioning why they should protect resources that do not directly improve their livelihoods."*

He also highlighted that limited fiscal autonomy at the local government level constrains the ability of districts and villages to respond to conservation challenges in a timely manner. Even when local leaders identify urgent needs, such as mitigating human-wildlife conflict or repairing conservation infrastructure, they must often wait for approval and funding from higher authorities. This, he argued, undermines adaptive governance and weakens the effectiveness of conservation interventions.

Overall, the respondent's insights illustrate how centralized governance structures can marginalize local voices, erode trust, and ultimately compromise sustainable tourism resource conservation. This aligns with research by Robinson and Makupa (2015), arguing that WMAs

designed as community-based governance arrangements remain significantly influenced by central regulatory frameworks, limiting devolution of planning, regulatory, and revenue rights.

### **Political Incentives and Local Government Priorities**

Participants across the study area highlighted that political incentives often skew toward short-term economic gains, such as increasing tourist arrivals and revenue, over long-term conservation investment.

*“We are instructed to boost tourism revenue; without demonstrating growth, we risk losing budget support”.* Abdallah Hassan, *pseudonym*, district official, Arusha Region.

Reiterating from the statement made by the district official from the Arusha region, performance targets linked to tourism revenue generation strongly influence local government priorities and decision-making. He noted that district authorities are often evaluated based on measurable economic indicators, such as tourist numbers, park fees, and investment inflows, rather than on long-term conservation indicators. As a result, local officials feel pressured to prioritize activities that yield immediate financial returns, sometimes at the expense of ecological sustainability.

The respondent further observed that this revenue-driven pressure can lead to compromises in land-use planning and enforcement of conservation regulations. For instance, approvals for tourism infrastructure development may be fast-tracked to attract investors, even when environmental impact assessments raise concerns. He in addition remarked that:

*“When funding depends on showing growth, it becomes difficult to argue for restrictions that might reduce visitor numbers in the short term, even if they protect the resource in the long run.”*

Moreover, the official highlighted that budget uncertainty reinforces compliance with top-down directives. Districts that fail to meet revenue expectations risk reduced fiscal transfers, which affects their capacity to fund conservation activities such as patrols, community outreach, and conflict mitigation. This creates a cycle in which local governments remain dependent on central allocations and are incentivized to align with national revenue goals rather than locally defined conservation priorities.

Generally, these insights underscore how fiscal and political incentives embedded in governance systems shape tourism management decisions and can unintentionally undermine sustainable tourism resource conservation. Other scholars such as Forje et al. (2022) note similar dynamics in East African conservation governance, where local priorities are influenced by higher-level political pressures and fiscal incentives, reducing emphasis on sustainability and equity.

### **Stakeholder Interests and Influence on Conservation Outcomes**

Community members and NGO representatives consistently emphasized that power asymmetries shape conservation outcomes. Respondents noted that investors and high-level officials typically have more influence than local custodians of the land.

*“Investors’ interests in tourism lodges often overshadow our needs for pastureland and water resources”.* Martha Ngowi, *pseudonym*, community focus group participant.

Expounding on this concern, the community focus group participant explained that the expansion of tourism lodges and related infrastructure has increasingly encroached on communal land traditionally used for grazing and access to water. According to the respondent, decisions granting land to investors are often made without meaningful consultation with local communities, despite their long-standing dependence on these resources for livelihoods. This exclusion fosters a sense of marginalization and fuels perceptions that conservation and tourism primarily serve external interests rather than local well-being.

The participant further noted that restrictions associated with tourism development, such as fenced lodge areas or exclusive wildlife corridors, limit community mobility and intensify competition over remaining pastureland and water points. As he stated,

*“When land is set aside for lodges or wildlife, our livestock routes are blocked, and we are left with fewer options during dry seasons.”*

Such pressures, he argued, heighten vulnerability among pastoral households and can exacerbate tensions between communities, investors, and conservation authorities. He also emphasized that unequal benefit-sharing arrangements deepen these grievances. While tourism investments generate substantial revenues, local communities often receive minimal tangible benefits, such as employment or social services, compared to the costs they bear. This imbalance reduces community support for conservation initiatives and, in some cases, encourages non-compliance with conservation regulations. Overall, the respondent’s insights illustrate how power asymmetries in tourism governance allow investor interests to dominate decision-making, undermining both social equity and the long-term sustainability of tourism resource conservation. Empirical studies including that of Shoo et al. (2021), support this finding where WMAs have been shown to concentrate benefits with elites and external investors, while local villagers bear conservation costs and limited authority.

### **Challenges to Effective Governance of Tourism Resources**

Respondents identified key challenges to governance including lack of transparency, insufficient funding, and limited institutional capacity at local levels.

*“We know our land contributes to national tourism, but we often cannot access clear information on revenues or the rules guiding their distribution”.* Jumanne Bwendo, *pseudonym*, WMA committee member.

Building on this statement, the WMA committee member explained that limited access to financial information creates uncertainty and mistrust at the community level. He noted that although WMAs are promoted as participatory and benefit-sharing mechanisms, community representatives often receive only summary figures or delayed reports, making it difficult to understand how much revenue is generated and how distribution decisions are made. According to him,

*“We are told there is money from tourism, but the figures are not broken down in a way that ordinary members can question or verify.”*

The respondent further highlighted that unclear rules and inconsistent communication weaken the committee’s ability to plan and prioritize local development and conservation activities. Without predictable information on revenue flows, WMAs struggle to allocate funds for critical needs such as anti-poaching patrols, community projects, or compensation for human-wildlife conflicts. He also added that this uncertainty reduces accountability, as community members are unable to hold leaders or external authorities responsible for financial decisions.

Likewise, the committee member emphasized that lack of transparency undermines community trust in the WMA model itself. When people do not clearly see how tourism revenues translate into tangible benefits, skepticism grows and support for conservation declines. In his words,

*“If people cannot see where the money goes, they start to doubt the whole idea of conservation for tourism.”*

These insights illustrate how weak transparency and information asymmetries within WMA governance can erode legitimacy and ultimately compromise effective tourism resource conservation.

### **Strategies for Aligning Governance with Sustainable Conservation**

Participants emphasized enhanced transparency, inclusive planning, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms as pivotal strategies for improving conservation outcomes.

*“Local voices must be heard in setting tourism and conservation priorities, not merely after decisions have been made”.* Ramadhan Othman, *pseudonym*, conservation NGO representative.

Adding on this point, the conservation NGO representative stressed that community participation in tourism and conservation governance in Tanzania is often procedural rather than substantive. He explained that consultations frequently occur only at the implementation

stage, after key decisions on land use, investment approvals, or conservation priorities have already been finalized. As a result, community input tends to be limited to endorsing predetermined agendas rather than shaping outcomes. He noted,

*“Participation becomes symbolic when people are invited to meetings simply to validate decisions they had no role in crafting.”*

The respondent further highlighted that excluding local voices at the agenda-setting stage weakens the relevance and sustainability of conservation interventions. According to the Conservation NGO representative, communities possess valuable ecological knowledge and practical experience that could inform more context-appropriate conservation strategies, particularly in addressing issues such as human–wildlife conflict and resource use pressures. However, when this knowledge is overlooked, policies risk being poorly adapted to local realities and therefore less effective.

He also emphasized that meaningful participation requires more than consultation; it demands shared decision-making power and accountability mechanisms. This includes transparent information sharing, clear feedback loops, and institutional arrangements that allow communities to influence priorities and monitor outcomes. In his view,

*“When communities help set the rules, they are more willing to defend them.”*

Overall, the respondent’s insights reinforce the argument that inclusive governance, where local voices are integrated from the outset, is essential for aligning tourism development with long-term conservation and social equity goals.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study set out to examine how governance decisions influence tourism resource conservation in Tanzania from a political economy perspective. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving 40 purposively selected stakeholders drawn from policymakers, local government officials, tourism operators, conservation NGOs, and community representatives across Tanzania’s major tourism circuits. The findings reveal that tourism resource conservation outcomes are strongly shaped by centralized governance structures, politically driven revenue imperatives, and unequal power relations among stakeholders. Central government dominance over decision-making and fiscal control limits local autonomy and community participation, while political incentives tied to short-term revenue generation often undermine long-term conservation objectives. Additionally, weak transparency, limited institutional capacity at local levels, and inequitable benefit-sharing arrangements reduce trust in conservation governance mechanisms such as Wildlife Management Areas. Overall, the study demonstrates that effective tourism resource conservation in Tanzania depends not only

on the existence of formal policies and legal frameworks but also on how political priorities, institutional power dynamics, and stakeholder interests shape governance decisions in practice. This study recommends the rationalization and harmonization of tourism-related taxes and levies across levels of government to reduce multiplicity and administrative burden. Clear and transparent revenue-sharing formulas should be established to ensure that local governments hosting tourism activities receive a predictable and fair share of tourism revenues. Capacity-building initiatives are also recommended to strengthen local government financial management and revenue planning. Additionally, the introduction of stakeholder consultation mechanisms involving tourism operators, local authorities, and central government agencies would enhance policy coherence and compliance.

Implications

### **Implication of the Study**

The findings of this study have important policy, governance, and practical implications for strengthening sustainable tourism resource conservation in Tanzania. By demonstrating how centralized governance structures, political incentives tied to revenue generation, and unequal stakeholder power relations influence conservation outcomes, the study highlights the need for governance reforms that promote greater transparency, fiscal decentralization, and inclusive decision-making. For policymakers, the results suggest that aligning political and fiscal incentives with long-term conservation objectives is essential to avoid prioritizing short-term tourism revenues at the expense of ecological sustainability. For local governments and conservation institutions, the study underscores the importance of strengthening institutional capacity, improving access to information on tourism revenues, and establishing clearer and more equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, particularly within community-based conservation frameworks such as Wildlife Management Areas. Additionally, the study emphasizes the value of meaningful community participation and stakeholder collaboration in planning and implementing conservation initiatives, as these enhance local ownership, trust, and compliance with conservation regulations. Overall, the study provides evidence-based insights that can inform governance reforms aimed at balancing tourism development with environmental sustainability and community welfare in Tanzania.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research adopted a qualitative design with purposive sampling, which focused on obtaining in-depth perspectives from key stakeholders rather than generating statistically generalizable results across the entire tourism sector in Tanzania. Second, the study relied largely on self-reported perceptions from interviews and focus group discussions,

which may reflect subjective experiences or institutional positions that could influence responses. Third, although the study covered the four tourism circuits in the country, logistical and time constraints limited the number of communities and institutions that could be included, meaning that some regional variations in governance practices may not have been fully captured. Finally, the analysis focused primarily on governance and political economy dynamics and did not incorporate quantitative environmental or ecological data to measure conservation outcomes directly. Despite these limitations, the use of multiple data sources and stakeholder groups provided valuable insights into the governance processes influencing tourism resource conservation in Tanzania.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future studies should examine tourist price sensitivity to different types of tourism taxes and levies in Tanzania. Comparative research across East African countries would also provide regional insights into best practices in tourism taxation. Longitudinal studies assessing the long-term impacts of tax reforms on tourism investment, community welfare, and environmental sustainability are further recommended.

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