

Sustainable Development and Empowerment Evaluation in Cultural Heritage Village: A Case Study of Seribu Rumah Gadang

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage village conservation has generally been considered a means for cultural identity sustainability and promoting sustainable development in highly valued historical areas. Thus, this paper assesses how critical reflection, and empowerment evaluation can support the sustainable development of the Seribu Rumah Gadang, a West Sumatra, Indonesia, and cultural heritage village. Using a mixed-method strategy, the study looks at how community engagement works for heritage conservation through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, empowerment evaluation workshops, and reflective critical sessions. Results show an apparent conflict between cultural preservation and economic growth, with community-based initiatives able to resolve this interesting conflict more successfully. The research highlights the role of empowerment evaluation in increasing the relevance and sustainability of projects and points out the critical role of continuous reflection in adjusting the strategy in response to changing community needs and requirements. The study discusses implications for empowerment evaluation by suggesting ways to strengthen community engagement, improve access to resources, and promote more inclusive tourism practices that do not contradict cultural values. Therefore, this research contributes to continuing the debate on environmental sustainability in cultural heritage sites and bringing new insights to policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers.

Keywords: Empowerment Evaluation, Sustainable Development, Cultural Heritage, Community Involvement, Heritage Conservation, Seribu Rumah Gadang

INTRODUCTION

The protection and sustainable development of cultural heritage villages are increasingly recognized as fundamental elements at global and regional levels for cultural sustainability and environmental management. Seribu Rumah Gadang is an excellent example of a living cultural landscape representing the richness of heritage the Minangkabau people carry. It is located in Solok Selatan, West Sumatra, Indonesia. The village is very famous for its unique traditional houses of the Minangkabau people, known as "rumah gadang," which

are not only beautiful examples of architectural forms but also stand as symbols of cultural identity and continuity (Bahauddin, 2023; Malik, 2023).

Nevertheless, the sustainable advancement of these heritage sites is hugely challenged, especially in finding compatibility between the desires to maintain cultural authenticity and those of modernization and tourism. Recent research underscores that the detriments associated with uncontrolled tourism development could, for instance, lead to the commodification of cultural assets and environmental degradation if not meticulously regulated (Kumar et al., 2024). Besides, local communities remain uninvolved in the heritage management process, which usually results in developing corresponding policies and practices that are not in line with the cultural and social contexts of the populations they are aimed to help (Mu & Aimar, 2022; Theodora, 2020).

In this context, community empowerment through empowerment evaluation has been a very effective approach to meeting the challenges. Empowerment evaluation, characterized by engaging community members during the assessment and formulation of development initiatives, has shown the ability to improve the effects and the long-lasting efforts of heritage management works (Labadi et al., 2021). In particular, the methodology is very important, much more so in the context of Seribu Rumah Gadang, since local populations possess deep insights into their cultural aspects and are directly influenced by the results of developmental policies.

Recent studies highlight the significance of engaging local populations in heritage preservation initiatives, indicating that this engagement enhances the sustainability of these initiatives while simultaneously cultivating a sense of ownership and accountability among community members (Aureli & Del Baldo, 2023; Labadi et al., 2021; Rosetti et al., 2022). Through Seribu Rumah Gadang, this will enable the community to take charge of their cultural heritage toward safeguarding and sustainable advancement, as well as being culturally relevant and befitting of the local setting.

Critical reflection underpins the essence of empowering the community. It enhances the ability of communities and stakeholders to establish the efficacy of development activities, address environmental and social impacts, and become adaptive with corrective measures through stimulated and continuous reflection and learning (Docrat, 2023; Van der Watt, 2016). In this respect, the adaptive approach is even more helpful for the complex topic of cultural heritage management when the needs and priorities of the community change with time.

The integration of critical reflection and empowerment evaluation needs to be examined in light of promoting environmental and cultural sustainability in Seribu Rumah Gadang. This case example hopes to add to the wider discussion regarding the management of cultural heritage and, by so doing, further enrich knowledge in similar contexts within Indonesia and beyond.

Based on the information above, this study explored these research questions: 1) How does critical reflection best integrate into making cultural heritage village development sustainable, specifically within the framework of Seribu Rumah Gadang?; 2) What is the role of empowerment evaluation in empowering Seribu Rumah Gadang's local community to work actively to preserve and develop their cultural heritage?; 3) What challenges and opportunities exist for implementing empowerment evaluation in sustainable development regarding Seribu Rumah Gadang?; 4) How can lessons learned from Seribu Rumah Gadang

inform broader strategies for the environmentally sustainable development of cultural heritage villages in Indonesia and globally?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature identifies the sustainable development of cultural heritage villages as an issue intertwined with cultural preservation, environmental management and socio-economic development. The following chapter reviews recent research that investigates critical reflection, empowerment evaluation appraisal, community empowerment, and challenges related to heritage site management.

Cultural Heritage Villages for Sustainable Development

Recent research highlights the twofold objectives in management: preserving cultural identity and promoting economic development through sustainable tourism and local advancement. According to studies conducted by Ramele and Wongso (2021), heritage villages like Seribu Rumah Gadang can potentially become drivers for regional development if appropriately managed. Still, the authors specify that tourism could cause cultural value erosion and environmental degradation without proper planning and local involvement. Meissner (2021) argues that sustainable development in heritage villages has to balance economic viability with conserving the intangible cultural assets of traditional knowledge and practice while addressing environmental impacts.

Empowerment Evaluation and Community Empowerment

The effectiveness of empowerment evaluation is gradually being recognized as a mechanism for improving community empowerment in the stewardship of cultural heritage sites. For instance, evaluation that actively involves local communities, such as that by Petti et al. (2020), raises the chances of the project results with heritage being both sustainable and culturally relevant. The importance of this issue is particularly acute in the context of Seribu Rumah Gadang, in which the community's profound knowledge of their cultural heritage is essential in designing development programs that respect and sustain their cultural identity. Gallou (2020) gives a supportive view, arguing that empowerment evaluation appraisal generates a sense of ownership among the community members, a precondition for the long-term success of heritage conservation initiatives.

Critical Reflection and Adaptive Management

Critical reflection in cultural heritage management is increasingly recognized by scholars and practitioners, who realize the need for adaptable and responsive strategies to changing conditions. As Schmidt et al. (2021) state, critical reflection allows stakeholders to regularly review and improve their practice and methodology so that developmental practices remain relevant and effective under changing conditions. This is pertinent as a reflexive practice in heritage villages like Seribu Rumah Gadang, where the cultural and environmental dynamics are complex and multifarious. Including critical reflection in the management process allows stakeholders to better address environmental and socio-cultural impacts, ensuring more resilient and sustainable outcomes.

Challenges of Cultural Heritage Management

The administration of cultural heritage sites is faced with many challenges, especially in balancing the imperatives of conservation with the needs of modernization and economic development. According to Labadi et al. (2021), the prevalent challenges include a lack of financial resources, no traditional skills, and conflicting interests with the development agenda. Under the program of Seribu Rumah Gadang, these challenges are even more acute because of the demands and requirements of tourism combined with the need to fulfil the authenticity of cultural practice under conditions of commercialization. Surmounting these challenges requires an advanced approach that uses empowerment evaluation, critical introspection, and community empowerment to ensure that development initiatives are environmentally sustainable and culturally appealing.

Integration of Environmental Sciences in Cultural Heritage Management

Integrating environmental sciences into cultural heritage management is crucial for achieving sustainable conservation. Environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are essential tools that help identify potential ecological impacts of heritage projects, ensuring that conservation efforts do not lead to environmental degradation (Alberts et al., 2021). Eco-friendly tourism practices, such as low-impact visitor management and sustainable resource use, play a key role in minimizing the environmental footprint of tourism while preserving cultural heritage (El Moslem Badr, 2022). Additionally, incorporating green technologies and sustainable materials in heritage restoration aligns with both cultural and ecological goals, as seen in successful case studies like the Galápagos Islands Preservation (Bocci., 2022). For Seribu Rumah Gadang, adopting these practices can enhance the sustainability of conservation efforts, balancing cultural preservation with environmental stewardship.

Conceptual Framework

Towards this end, this research borrows from the literature reviewed in proposing a conceptual framework in which critical reflection and empowerment evaluation become central to environmentally sustainable cultural heritage management. The framework aims to guide the sustainable development of Seribu Rumah Gadang by emphasizing key steps: ensuring active empowerment of local communities, continuous learning and adaptation, and finding a balance between conservation and socio-economic development.

Figure 1.
Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Cultural Heritage Management in Seribu Rumah Gadang

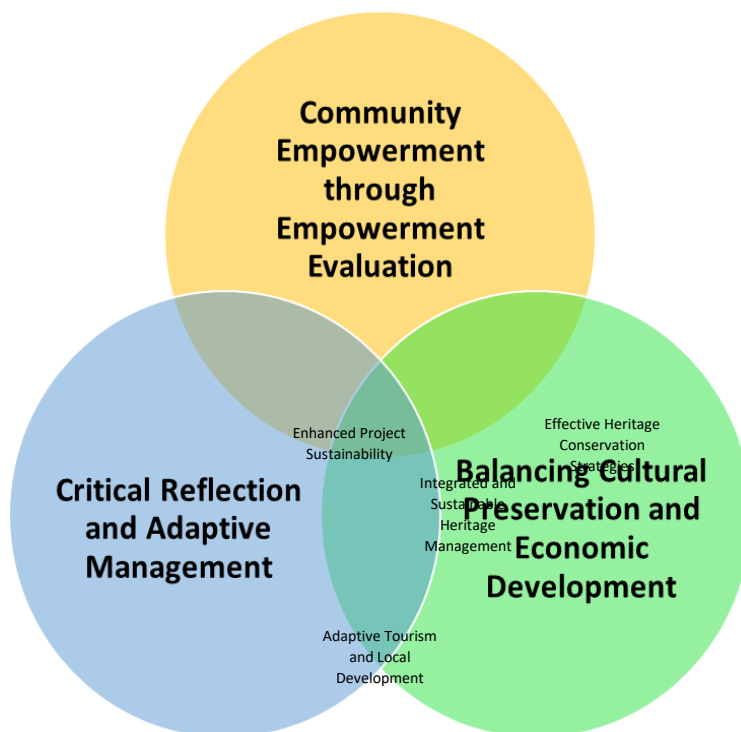


Figure 1 shows that the proposed conceptual framework of sustainable cultural heritage management is based on three interrelated pillars, each crucial for the proficient stewardship of Seribu Rumah Gadang. The first pillar is Community Empowerment through empowerment evaluation appraisal, which underscores the need to engage local communities in assessing and developing heritage conservation efforts. Putting the community at the centre of these processes ensures that conservation is kept consonant with local values and needs and works toward viable and culturally relevant results. The second pillar refers to critical reflection and the adaptive management of heritage management practices. The principle advocates for an adaptive approach by which stakeholders can continually review and adapt strategies in light of emerging challenges and opportunities to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of conservation efforts over time. The third principle, Preserving Cultural Heritage in the Face of Economic Progress, highlights the need to balance cultural heritage preservation with the imperatives of modernization and economic development. It promotes approaches that allow sustainable tourism and regional development without infringing on the cultural and environmental integrity of Seribu Rumah Gadang. All of these base factors integrate to provide an overarching structure that allows for empowerment by the community, flexible management, and equable development to ensure the heritage site's long-term sustainability and cultural vibrancy.

METHOD

The research methodology utilized in this investigation is specifically crafted to examine the sustainable advancement of Seribu Rumah Gadang through integrating empowerment evaluation (EE) alongside a case study framework. This methodological choice is especially suitable for the present study, as it facilitates a comprehensive understanding of intricate social phenomena within a defined context while engaging the community in the research endeavour (Fetterman, 2019; Fetterman, 2023).

Research Design

This research is based on the qualitative research paradigm anchored on Empowerment Evaluation. The EE approach is preferred due to its focus on empowering communities through self-evaluation and systematic reflection, using the 3-Step Model which includes mission clarification, taking stock, and planning for the future. This model is particularly effective in contexts where continuous adaptation and community-driven decision-making are crucial (Fetterman, 2019; Fetterman, 2023). Additionally, the integration of environmental sciences into this design ensures that sustainability considerations are incorporated into the management practices being evaluated. In the context of Seribu Rumah Gadang, EE allows the researchers to collaborate meaningfully with local stakeholders so that research outcomes do not simply address an intellectual concern but are also contextually relevant and useful to the community. Besides, a case study methodology provides broad and deep insight into Seribu Rumah Gadang's specific setting. This approach best applies to a study that tries to understand complex phenomena within their real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomena and context are unclear (Yin, 2012). With this methodology, the distinct challenges and opportunities associated with the sustainable development of Seribu Rumah Gadang were deepened further.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection for this study has utilized multiple qualitative methods, ensuring triangulation of data to enhance the validity and reliability of the research findings (Moon, 2019). It is further sectioned between primary and secondary data collection, each justified by its relevance to meeting the research objectives.

Primary Data Collection

In-Depth Interviews

Several semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants, including community leaders, cultural heritage representatives, government organization officers, and tourism organization stakeholders. This is chosen as the methodology that allows for very detailed information about the views and experiences of the participants about the sustainable development of Seribu Rumah Gadang (Dragouni, 2017). We used open-ended questions to obtain as complete responses as possible; however, a certain measure of flexibility was ensured to explore unexpected insights.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

FGDs were conducted among community participants to gather diverse opinions and foster discussion on heritage conservation challenges and opportunities. This method is particularly useful in studying social norms, cultural practices, and community interactions, all of which form the basis of the study (Shoko et al., 2024). FGDs were conducted openly, allowing community members to freely discuss topics around the issues most important to them.

Empowerment Workshops

Workshops promoting empowerment were conducted to involve the community in evaluation and planning activities. The structure of these workshops aims to empower attendees by including them in the decision-making process, which in turn cultivates a sense of ownership regarding the results (Sanoff, 1999). The workshops incorporate empowerment evaluation methodologies such as mapping, ranking, and scenario planning to enhance active empowerment and produce practical insights.

Secondary Data Collection

The preexisting documents

To gather secondary data, preexisting documents, including governmental reports, earlier investigations, and archival records related to Seribu Rumah Gadang and other similar cultural analysis sites, were analyzed. This is an important strategy for document analysis, not just to locate research about existing scholarship but also to identify the deficits that the present study aims to challenge (Laplace & Ochiai, 2024).

Literature Review

This back-and-forth shall entail an in-depth analysis of existing literature on sustainable development, including the management of cultural heritage and, finally, that of empowerment evaluation, to locate the research in a broader academic conversation. Besides, the literature review identifies best practices and theoretical frameworks that may apply to the case of Seribu Rumah Gadang.

Empowerment evaluation

Empowerment evaluation is also a critical aspect of the study and is aligned with EE principles. In this context, local people were integrated into the investigation of the degree of success of current heritage conservation and identified areas where such success can be strengthened. Recent research further explains this method as a tool that promotes the sustainability and relevance of developmental projects (Fetterman, 2019; Fetterman, 2023).

Evaluation Design

The evaluation was guided by the Empowerment Evaluation (EE) framework, specifically the 3-Step Model. This framework incorporates qualitative and quantitative indicators to comprehensively assess the outcomes, focusing on mission clarification, taking stock of current efforts, and planning for future initiatives. Key indicators include the community's alignment with cultural preservation goals, satisfaction with the empowerment

process, and the broader economic impacts (Fetterman, 2019; Fetterman, 2023). The framework was jointly developed with the community to ensure it reflects its priorities and interests.

Data Collection for Evaluation

The data needed to evaluate empowerment assessment was collected from respondents through questionnaires, focus groups, and empowerment observations. The quantifiable aspect of the questionnaires was about the community's perception and the impacts of conservation efforts, but the discussions and observations served to bring out the experience and views of the community.

Critical Reflection Sessions

Critical reflection should be integrated into the research process to support constant learning and adaptability. Periodically, reflective sessions were undertaken among all the stakeholders, including the research team and the community, to examine the study's progress, review challenges, and adopt adjustments wherever needed (Penuel et al., 2020). Similar research has indicated that critical reflection is warranted by its effectiveness in improving the flexibility and responsiveness of developmental interventions (Lines et al., 2021).

Reflection Techniques: Methods including reflective journaling, narrative storytelling, and collective reflection meetings were utilized to rigorously motivate participants to assess their experiences and the research's resultant outcomes. These methods have been selected because they promote profound reflection and produce novel insights that enhance continuous research (Gilliam et al., 2020).

Use of Reflection Findings: The knowledge derived from the critical reflection sessions shall be utilized to make iterative improvements to the research design and its implementation. This flexible methodology ensures that the research remains responsive to the community's changing needs and priorities, supporting the development initiatives sustainably (Welsh & Dehler, 2013).

Data Analysis

Data analysis during the thematic and content analysis processes shall be conducted to reveal patterns, themes, and insights based on the data obtained. Qualitative data from interviews, FGDs, and workshops was analyzed using thematic analysis. This is appropriate for identifying common themes and patterns from the data, leading the researchers to draw meaningful conclusions about the experiences and opinions of the community (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These documents and secondary data were analyzed through content analysis, quantifying the frequency by which themes and trends reoccur in existing documents and literature. According to Krippendorff (2018), content analysis applies to the systematic examination of large amounts of textual information and to relating findings from different sources. Triangulation was utilized to guarantee the validity and reliability of the research results through the cross-verification of data derived from various sources and methodologies (Flick, 2018). This approach strengthens the study's rigour by offering a more thorough comprehension of the research issue.

Ethical Consideration

The empowerment nature of this study makes matters of ethics extremely important. The study was conducted with the basic principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for the culture and customs of the participants (Orb et al., 2001). It was also conducted in accordance with relevant ethical considerations regarding empowerment evaluation studies to protect the rights and dignity of each participant involved in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Consent

A research study explained the purposes of the research, the expected duration of the subjects' empowerment, and any potential risks to the subjects. Written informed consent was obtained from the subjects.

Confidentiality

The protection of participants' data was rigorously upheld. Personal identifiers were eliminated from the dataset, and the results were presented to safeguard the participants' anonymity.

Cultural Sensosity

The research team shall collaborate closely with the local cultural leaders to ensure that scientifically used research methods and processes are culturally sensitive and, at least, considerate of indigenous ways and practices.

RESULTS

The results of this study provide an integrated assessment of Seribu Rumah Gadang's sustainable development, an understanding of the role of critical reflection, and the challenges faced by the community in balancing cultural heritage issues with those of economic progress. Results are phrased in terms of the research questions based on qualitative data acquired through interviews, focus group discussions, and workshops using the empowerment evaluation appraisal approach. Information enrichment comes with thematic analysis, where central themes are identified and analyzed in the conceptual framework.

Community Perceptions and Involvement in Heritage Conservation

The community has a great attachment to the Seribu Rumah Gadang cultural heritage as it is associated with relevant issues in their identity and social togetherness. In-depth interviews with the local leaders and residents have disclosed collective pride in their traditional styles of architecture and cultural practices that they consider significant for preservation by future generations. Nevertheless, there has been widespread recognition of the urgent need for economic development—especially via tourism—to improve the standard of living.

Table 1 outlines the main themes from the interviews, which represent community perceptions of the balance between cultural heritage preservation and economic development.

Table 1.
Key Themes from Community Interviews

Theme	Description	Representative Quote
Cultural Identity	A strong connection to heritage as part of community identity.	"Our houses and traditions define who we are."
Economic Development	Recognition of the need for tourism to generate income.	"Tourism brings money, but we must protect our culture."
Preservation vs. Modernization	Concerns about the impact of modernization on cultural authenticity.	"We need progress, but not at the cost of our heritage."
Community Involvement	The desire for greater involvement in decision-making processes.	"We want to be part of the decisions affecting our village."

The workshops were empowerment and demonstrated a growing interest in heritage conservation initiatives; however, at the same time, widespread frustration exists over the limited scope for local involvement in decision-making. Many participants asserted their wish for more transparency and inclusiveness in the design and implementation of conservation programs. In particular, this feeling was very powerful within the younger members of the community, who felt that their opinions were often ignored.

Effectiveness of Empowerment Evaluation

The empowerment evaluation in this research was an effective method to assess qualitatively varying strengths and weaknesses of ongoing heritage preservation endeavours. The review of the projects resulted in important findings from the critique that was implemented on the projects, conducting community empowerment and involvement.

For instance, it was found that projects with greater community involvement saw the best results generated concerning cultural preservation and economic impact. A case in point is the restoration of a traditional Rumah Gadang- a large house which serves the community as a centre for village meetings and ceremonial activities- by the community, which did as effective a job at maintaining the building's architectural authenticity as their input led to high levels of tourist patronage and their economic benefit for local craftsmen. By contrast, the projects that were implemented with little or no community input have usually failed to fulfil the local aspirations, and occasionally, the competition over resource use is revealed.

Figure 2 shows the level of community involvement that corresponds with the success of the conservation projects.

Figure 2.
Correlation Between Community Involvement and Project Success

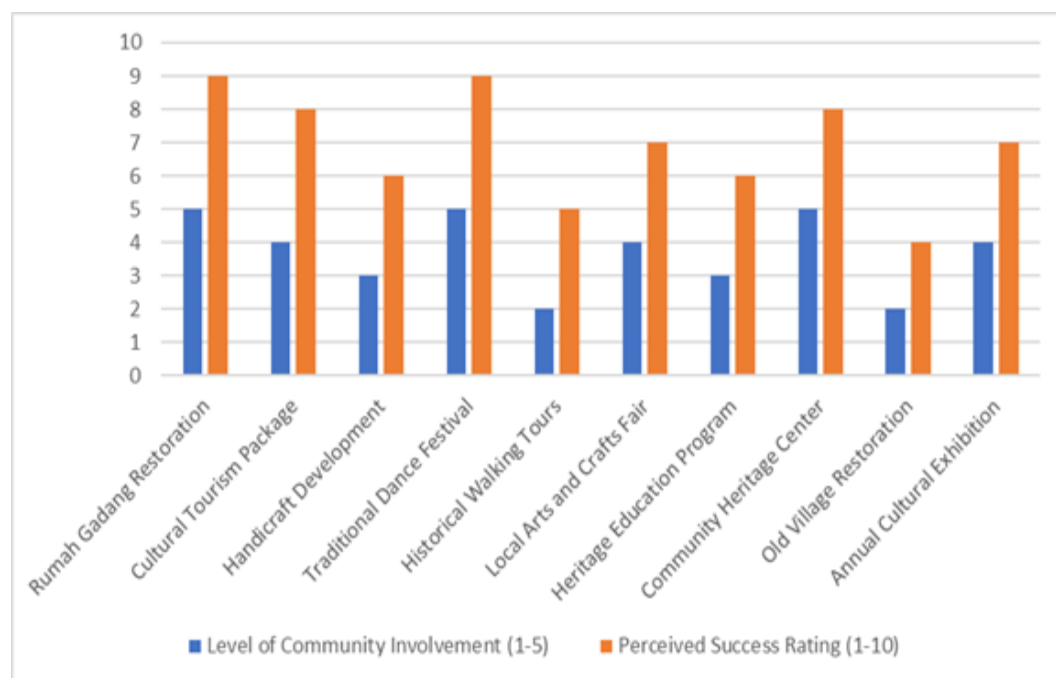


Figure 2 indicates explicitly a positive relationship between the level of community involvement in any conservation effort under myriad projects and the perceived level of success. Projects that involve a higher percentage of communities, such as the Rumah Gadang Restoration and Traditional Dance Festival, are more likely to have a higher rating and, thus, are more effective in cultural preservation and have commendable positive community effects. An important factor to be discussed was that community-based projects, such as the Historical Walking Tours and Old Village Restoration, with low community involvement, were viewed as less successful. From this, an inference can be made that active community empowerment ensures the relevance and sustainability of conservation efforts and creates a sense of ownership and effectiveness, underpinning the need to include local stakeholders in the concept stage and implementation of heritage conservation projects.

The empowerment evaluation identified areas for improvement, including insufficient access to available funding and technical expertise, which denied the community an opportunity to engage in more extensive conservation projects. Better coordination among the stakeholders locally and the government, with coherence among the projects, is also the need of the day for the set of priorities in the community and with regional development goals.

Role of Critical Reflection in Adaptive Management

Critical reflection sessions with the stakeholders at periodical intervals formed the basis for modifying the strategies to best adapt to Seribu Rumah Gadang's dynamic nature.

Such sessions enabled continuous appraisal of the outcomes, determination of the emerging challenges, and fine-tuning of the approaches in light of real-time feedback.

Preliminary sessions provided data showing that critical reflection engendered a more dynamic and responsive heritage management. For instance, an initiative to develop a cultural tourism package changed its structure following critical reflection, which realized that the proposed one underestimated the significance of incorporating local narratives into tourist experiences. This revised project, now with guided tours by residents of the area, increased the cultural authenticity of the experience and visitor satisfaction.

Table 2 summarises adaptations to ongoing ongoing projects learned through critical reflection sessions.

Table 2.
Outcomes of Critical Reflection Sessions

Project	Original Approach	Refined Approach	Outcome
Cultural Tourism Package	Standardize itineraries with minimal local input.	Inclusion of local guides and personal stories.	Increased tourist satisfaction and cultural engagement.
Rumah Gadang Restoration	Focus on architectural preservation.	Integration of cultural practices into the restoration.	It enhanced cultural relevance and community empowerment.
Handicraft Development	Production for external markets without community input.	Co-creation with local artisans for unique products.	Improved product quality and increased artisan income.

This critical reflection process also underlined the flexibility associated with the implementation of projects. According to the stakeholders, the ability to adjust the plans in light of constant reflection enabled an effective response to the various obstacles or changes, like variations in tourist flows or shifting community needs. Along these lines, this adaptive approach is coherent with the principles of sustainable development since it requires learning and continuous adjustment to ensure long-term success.

Challenges in Balancing Cultural Preservation with Economic Development

The research findings point to Seribu Rumah Gadang's intricate challenges stemming from the balance between cultural preservation and economic development. In this community, tourism is seen as an essential source of income, but there is also a sentiment that it might commodify cultural practices, thus wearing down the values of traditional culture.

Interviews and focus group discussions revealed fears among older residents that tourism might erode cultural traditions, while younger residents expressed concerns about

limited economic opportunities without tourism development. Local artisans faced pressure to produce mass-market souvenirs, which conflicted with their commitment to traditional craftsmanship. Community leaders emphasized the need to balance external investments with community-led initiatives.

Table 3 summarizes Issues Related to Balancing Preservation with Development as Perceived by Different Demographic Segments in the Community.

Table 3
Challenges in Balancing Cultural Preservation and Economic Development

Demographic Group	Key Concerns	Representative Quote
Older Residents	Loss of cultural traditions due to commercialization.	"Our culture is not for sale; it is our way of life."
Younger Residents	Limited economic opportunities without tourism development.	"We need jobs but also want to keep our traditions."
Local Artisans	Pressure to produce for mass markets at the expense of traditional craftsmanship.	"The tourists want cheap souvenirs, but our work is more than that."
Community Leaders	Balancing external investments with community-led initiatives.	"We need to work with outsiders, but we must lead the way."

Addressing these challenges requires nuanced approaches that prioritize community-led initiatives and ensure equitable distribution of economic benefits. Successful examples include integrating traditional crafts into tourism in ways that respect and enhance cultural authenticity.

Overall Impact and Recommendations

This study assesses the overall impact of the sustainable development initiatives in Seribu Rumah Gadang, which has yielded mixed results regarding community empowerment and preservation of culture; however, on the economic side, communities strongly feel that development should not come at the cost of cultural integrity.

According to these findings, recommendations along the following lines are proposed:

Involve the community more in all project planning and implementation stages. Periodic empowerment workshops are the best way to do this during all the processes, and a formed community advisory board presides over heritage projects.

Enhance Funding and Technical Support: Easy access to funding and technical expertise allows the community to engage in bigger and more challenging conservation projects. Ties with universities, NGOs, and government agencies could be developed to provide the necessary support.

Develop tourism so that sustainability becomes the guiding concept, and put more focus on preservation and minimizing the ill effects of tourism on cultural authenticity. This could be implemented by promoting cultural tourism experiences, emphasizing earning and exchange rather than mere consumption.

Institutionalization of Critical Reflection: Ensure that critical reflection is embedded and regularly visited within the community and among stakeholders as a regular activity to ensure development initiatives continue adaptively and responsively.

Address Intergenerational Concerns: Attention needs to be given to addressing the concerns of the different demographic segments of the community, especially regarding treading the thin line between cultural preservation and economic advantage. Intergenerational dialogues could be held to bridge the gaps in understanding and priority.

These recommendations are expected to guide future efforts in the sustainable development of Seribu Rumah Gadang, ensuring the continuity of the community with a rich cultural heritage.

DISCUSSION

The findings are interpreted through the discussion section in light of existing literature, a theoretical framework, and the general context of sustainable cultural heritage development. The section offers a critique of the successes and challenges identified in the results, nuanced through an appropriate interpretation of the research objectives.

These results indicate a significant tension between cultural preservation and economic development in Seribu Rumah Gadang, reflecting challenges observed in other heritage sites globally. As Dragouni (2017) noted, heritage tourism can provide economic benefits but often risks commodifying cultural practices that are central to the heritage itself. This study corroborates these findings, noting that while tourism generated essential income, concerns about potential cultural heritage loss intensified. The strong attachment to cultural heritage within the community, emphasizing that heritage is a living aspect of community identity rather than just a commodity (Shoko et al., 2024), underscores the need for development approaches that enhance rather than diminish cultural values. The success of community-led initiatives in this study highlights the potential of empowerment approaches to achieve such a balance.

Such challenges identified as limited community involvement in some projects and the pressures of commercializing traditional crafts suggest that better-built frameworks should be developed to manage these dynamics. Future policies and projects should be incorporated with mechanisms that empower community influence on tourism development to steer the direction and align with its cultural preservation goals.

Through the study, empowerment evaluation successfully engaged the community in refining the projects to attain improved results. The finding, therefore, aligns with the postulation by Theodora (2020) that empowerment evaluation augments project relevance and effectiveness due to the incorporation of local knowledge and values in the assessment process. In Seribu Rumah Gadang, besides picking valuable feedback to fine-tune projects, the empowerment evaluation validated the place of the community as a rightful major stakeholder.

This is particularly important in heritage conservation endeavours where success is very much tied to people's involvement; hence, involving communities in heritage management and conservation approaches is imperative. This finding is on par with the work of Kumar et al. (2024), where it was established that highly locally empowerment projects are more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes. This research contributes to the increasingly available evidence that empowerment methods at the level of evaluation and implementation uphold sustainable management of cultural heritage sites (Aureli & Del Baldo, 2023; Petti et al., 2020; Rosetti et al., 2022).

However, the study also highlights several limitations in empowerment evaluation. The need for better coordination among local stakeholders and external agencies, along with problems associated with accessing money and technical expertise, reflects the view that, although empowerment evaluation has advantages, it needs to be balanced by broader institutional and resource frameworks. This creates a more integrated approach combining local empowerment and external support to ensure allowable and sustainable community-driven initiatives.

Critical reflection emerged as central to the adaptive management of projects geared toward conserving heritage in Seribu Rumah Gadang. Critical reflection emphasizes the ability to reflect on and adapt to change, which is the core of sustainable development (Docrat, 2023; Fetterman, 2019; Fetterman, 2023; Welsh & Dehler, 2013). Through critical reflection in this research, stakeholders were able to review and fine-tune approaches repeatedly, making the project outcome more attuned and effective.

In the redeveloped cultural tourism project, this renovation and adaptative process has developed cyclically, resulting in basic adaptive principles—learning and flexibility brought about by new information. This was important for responding to unexpected challenges and ensuring projects stayed within community values and priorities.

However, this research has also revealed that the institutionalization critical reflection was complex within community-driven projects. While the gains from critical reflection are quite obvious, the power of reflection lies in the willingness and ability of the stakeholders in continuous dialogue and learning. This, therefore, calls for capacity-building activities to ensure community members are empowered with a skill set and tools to conduct reflection that leads to adaptive management. Also, a culture of critical reflection within an overall governance framework can add to the resilience and sustainability of community-led projects on heritage conservation.

The study underscores the delicate balance between conserving cultural integrity and developing tourism, a well-debated issue in cultural heritage management literature. Concerns expressed by older residents about cultural commodification reflect broader debates on tourism's impact on intangible cultural heritage. This research supports the notion that while tourism provides economic benefits, it must be managed carefully to avoid undermining the cultural values and practices that constitute heritage.

The research also considered generational perspectives on tourism and development. Young members, while interested in economic opportunities, also view culture through the lens of heritage and are developing awareness of the need for sustainable development (Dragouni, 2017; Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil, 2021; Gallou, 2020; Shoko et al., 2024; Van der Watt, 2016). Integrating these perspectives is crucial for developing a comprehensive and sustainable approach to managing heritage resources.

A key implication of this research is that tourism development must be more inclusive and empowering, addressing the concerns and voices of all community members. Effective involvement of diverse demographic groups in decision-making and addressing power dynamics are essential for achieving economically beneficial and culturally respectful outcomes.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of community empowerment in heritage project evaluation. The role of heritage in Indigenous settlement management is critical, as it dictates how local communities can influence the management of their heritage, leading to more sustainable and culturally appropriate outcomes. Critical reflection should be integral to key stages of the management process. As demonstrated by the results, continuous reflection and adaptation are essential for managing heritage conservation while maintaining relevance to public needs and values.

The research highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of issues related to tourism development, weighing economic benefits against the need for cultural integrity. This requires community leadership, supportive policies, and guidelines that prioritize sustainability over short-term gains.

The research pinpoints that there is a need to develop a more detailed view of issues, more particularly within the peripheries of developing tourism, which was reached by weighing economic advantages against the need for cultural integrity. This needs community leadership, supportive policies, and guidelines for leading with sustainability ahead of short-term gains. Building on the findings and the limitations of the current research, the following future avenues are indicated. Firstly, longitudinal studies that track the long-term impacts of empowerment evaluation and critical reflection should be conducted in heritage conservation.

Intergenerational dynamics in heritage management, especially in the development of tourism, would benefit from further study. Understanding how people from different age brackets view heritage could help design more inclusive and effective management strategies. Finally, comparative studies across different cultural heritage sites help identify best practices and common challenges in the sustainable management of heritage. Comparing experiences

with others of similar sites builds up wider knowledge about the elements that contribute to successfully conserving heritage.

CONCLUSION

This study underlines the importance of the empowerment of the community and critical reflection on them in approaching the sustainable development strategies of heritage sites. In Seribu Rumah Gadang, such an approach helped sustainably align heritage project priority with community needs and actual realization. The research shows a dilemma between cultural preservation and economic development; hence, a balanced approach must be adopted to meet these conflicting demands. These findings suggest, therefore, that community-level initiatives, if supported by appropriate external inputs and underpinned even by some principles of adaptive management, are workable. Indeed, critical reflection has emerged from these findings as one of the valuable tools in assuring continuous adaptation and, hence, keeping projects responsive to the changing conditions of the community. The recommendations of the current study call for community empowerment enhanced funding and technical support, and sustainable tourism that respects cultural integrity. The findings enrich heritage-sustainable management discourse, offering practical pointers for future initiatives in similar cultural heritage settings.

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