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# Tourism Collaborative Governance: The Views of Tourism Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Rural Areas

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**Abstract:** It is recognised that collaborative governance offers better solutions to problems than those fashioned exclusively by government agencies. Collaborative governance involves several relevant parties, particularly in the travel and tourism sector. The integrative processes of collaborative governance in the tourism industry provide a direct face-to-face alternative, leading to thorough and comprehensive strategic planning. Recent tourism governance research has explored the role of multiple actors in governing destinations but has not comprehensively investigated the role that tourism small and medium-sized enterprises play as important stakeholders at rural tourism destinations. Since tourism small and medium-sized enterprises are critical players in tourism collaborative governance, there is a need for an evaluation of the role they play in this context. This study explores the opinions of tourism small and medium-sized enterprises regarding collaborative governance at rural tourism destinations. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and employed a purposive sampling method, a non-probability sampling technique to select participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The results of the investigation indicate that tourism small and medium-sized enterprises recognise the need for their participation in tourism collaborative governance, the necessity of knowledgeable conveners, the importance of equal voices during stakeholder meetings, and mutual trust among stakeholders as essential components of effective collaborative governance. The study recommends active and equitable community participation, building mutual trust among stakeholders, and promoting effective collaboration between all parties involved in tourism collaborative governance.

**Keywords:** Small and medium-sized enterprises, collaborative governance, rural tourism, stakeholders, Nqileni village.

## 1. Introduction

To promote the growth of the tourism industry, the sector has adopted collaborative governance (Lim, 2019). According to Presenza et al. (2015), the goal of tourism governance is to plan and coordinate tourism destinations while working with local stakeholders to develop and design attractive tourism offerings. Collaborative governance should support policymakers in enacting sustainable development and promote beneficial forms of dedication, cooperation, and synergy between public and private actors (Lim, 2019). Governance is concerned with structures and procedures to comprehend the how and why of various elements, including shared networks, institutional design, and interpersonal relationships. Rather than considering the interests of many stakeholders, tourism governance frequently concentrates on those of the government and business (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Suntikul, Butler, & Airey, 2016).

Prior studies have demonstrated that transparency, legitimacy, efficiency, and participation are all components of "good governance" (Bichler & Lösch, 2019). Tourism is a fragmented industry, with multiple actors collaborating to provide tourism services, making actor collaboration crucial for good governance (Jamal & Budke, 2020). Managing relationships with stakeholders becomes essential in this context to guarantee acceptance and legitimacy (Hall, 2019). However, these relationships are complicated by several obstacles, including a lack of time, expertise, and dedication (Vanneste &

Ryckaert, 2013), and they can be expensive and time-consuming. Given that these relationships can be costly and demanding, the question arises: T*o what extent are tourism small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in rural areas involved in collaborative governance, and what key enabling factors should be in place to enhance tourism collaborative governance in rural areas?* Tourism SMEs may be willing to participate in tourism governance, but this is rarely achieved (Vanneste & Ryckaert, 2013), particularly in rural areas where almost all businesses are micro and small enterprises (Surya, 2021). This paper investigates the views of tourism SMEs on collaborative governance in Nqileni village in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Nqileni village offers an exciting setting because of the structures that manage tourism in the area.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Governance and collaborative governance

The notion of governance can generally be defined as "the capacity to harmonise the collection of differing interests to advance policies, initiatives, and programmes that authentically reflect the public good" (Trousdale, 1999, p. 842). Stoker (1998) suggested the evolution of governance styles, where the distinctions between and within public and private sectors have become indistinct. Effective governance for rural tourism increasingly relies on suitable tourism planning and management, whether through collaborations among key stakeholders or dedicated tourism authorities (Sharpley, 2003). Furthermore, governance is now seen as the foundation for success in destinations that attain sustainable development. It encompasses a complicated array of institutions and stakeholders sourced from both within and outside the government (Wawo, 2020) and conveys principles such as participation, transparency, discussion, communication, effective leadership, creativity, and collaboration. Ultimately, the aim is to guide and oversee the social, political, and administrative functions of the governed sector (Kooiman, 1993). The variety of stakeholders, often referred to as the fragmentation of the tourism sector, is regarded as an obstacle to "effective governance," which involves the partnership between public and private sectors, along with civil society. Jamal and Getz (1995) argue that although coordinating these three types of entities is challenging, the task is achievable. However, governance frequently hinders effective collaboration in destination management. A key strategic choice in destination management is determining the governance structure and coordinating efforts among partners. Jamal and Getz (1995) propose that a convener of collaboration is needed to identify and assemble genuine stakeholders at the discussion table. Local government is seen as an appropriate organiser, primarily since it is often the public goods of the location that are involved. Additionally, local government typically holds authority over matters related to promoting future growth and development. Morgan et al. (2012) and Hjalager (2010) argue that scholars pay scant attention to the role of tourism SMEs in collaborative governance within rural areas.

Collaborative governance refers to the partnership among stakeholders founded on common principles aimed at reaching objectives, such as advancing the tourism industry, which is also a responsibility of the government (Wawo, 2020). The roles of the actors encompass the government, the private sector, and the community. The government plays a significant role in establishing regulations and overseeing as well as assessing development. The community's role involves actively expressing its desires and needs; this can be achieved by establishing community groups that align with government initiatives, ensuring that the actions taken by these groups reflect the implementation of government programmes. Collaborative governance necessitates the involvement of multiple stakeholders, such as local authorities, businesses, and the community, each having a significant role. Collaborative governance refers to a process that, when executed, engages multiple agencies in reaching shared objectives (Indriani et al., 2021).

## 2.2 Collaborative governance in tourism

Collaborative governance within tourism addresses the issues and transformations involved in creating tourism destinations that serve various stakeholders within the framework of community development (Keyim, 2018). While extensive research has demonstrated that government plays a pivotal role in collaboration, several studies have highlighted the importance of the local community in effective collaborative tourism governance. Robertson (2011) noted that the locally focused tourism development strategy mainly aims at long-term sustainability in tourism. To improve associated programmes, the government should create a suitable institutional framework to support cooperation as the main regulatory body. The design of the institution should align with the requirements of relevant stakeholders to create and develop a destination, encourage meaningful engagement, and enhance collaborative value (Barandiarán et al., 2019; Bichler & Lösch, 2019). Through the creation of a suitable institutional framework and the promotion of a collaborative platform, the collaborative process within collective dynamics would lead to an agreement on setting and attaining shared objectives (Barandiarán et al., 2019).

Recent studies show that the focus of collaborative governance has transitioned from empowering communities to conserving nature in response to global climate change. As previously stated, sustainable tourism must incorporate the local community as an essential stakeholder. The primary aim of sustainable tourism is to manage the resources of a tourist destination in a way that fulfils economic, social, and human development objectives while complying with mutual cultural and ecological integrity criteria (Robertson, 2011). Considering this situation, Zeppel (2012) suggests six essential dimensions for assessing collaborative governance in the tourism sector: accountability, transparency, participation, organisation, effectiveness, and power. A notable discovery indicates that both research and management strategies for local involvement are still lacking (Bichler, 2021).

## 2.3 Challenges of collaborative governance in tourism

Collaborative governance in tourism is implemented to improve both physical aspects and managerial elements. Although it is designed to equalise the impact on all stakeholders within the environment, its implementation may still encounter many challenges, particularly in the tourism sector. These challenges can range from organisational context issues related to implementing action plans to limited benefits in terms of socioeconomic impact (Keyim, 2018). Moreover, several problems may arise due to rigid organisational hierarchies and non-flexible stakeholder alliances (Keyim, 2018). Issues can also occur due to various organisational flaws, including a lack of transparency and consensus among collaborators (Bichler & Lösch, 2019; Djosetro & Behagel, 2020). The lack of clarity can rapidly lead to detrimental effects, including mistrust and misunderstandings among stakeholders, exacerbated by the absence of a forum between the public and private sectors (Anderson et al., 2017; Djosetro & Behagel, 2020). Additionally, the lack of consensus among government organisations and elites regarding citizen participation poses a challenge in collaborative tourism governance (Bichler & Lösch, 2019; Djosetro & Behagel, 2020; Ferreira et al., 2020).

The preconditions for collaboration are trust, conflict, and social capital, which can either facilitate or impede collaboration. In the collaborative process, the rules are established by institutional design (Laksmana, 2002). Leadership is essential for mediating and facilitating the collaborative process. This process involves face-to-face interaction, trust-building, commitment to the process, shared understanding, and intermediate outputs (Gunawan & Ma'ruf, 2020). In essence, there are three essential contingency components: time, trust, and interdependence, with trust and interdependence having interactive effects. Interdependence fosters a sense of commitment to more meaningful collaboration. Trust can be built in high interdependence situations; thus, research and empirical evidence are needed to demonstrate that if involvement in a collaborative governance structure is

well managed, it can be a strength in creating an effective collaborative governance framework (Nasrulhaq, 2020).

Governance in the tourism sector requires greater trust, transparency, and accountability, which relates to the free will of individuals who, when presented with incentives, can make either incorrect or correct decisions (Sufianti et al., 2013). Governance in planning, meanwhile, demonstrates a learning paradigm in which efforts to alter views and decisions are deemed more essential. The planned governance paradigm represents a more developed approach. The argument is that this paradigm is an ethos rather than just a characteristic. Ethos demands increased sensitivity and participation. In the context of participation, a sign of effective engagement is when the system is dominated by trust and involvement (Palangda & Dame, 2020).

Nevertheless, collaborative governance in tourism has emerged as a foundation for developing subsequent tourism research. Adequate collaborative management has resulted in positive socioeconomic effects on community-based tourism in Lieksa, Finland (Keyim, 2018). The collaboration between the private and public sectors is expected to enhance tourism development through knowledge transfer among involved stakeholders to meet common interests (Gori et al., 2021). Furthermore, understanding collaboration by investigating the role of stakeholder engagement in partnerships is also necessary to deepen knowledge of collaborative tourism governance (Schofield et al., 2018).

## 2.4 Community tourism collaborative governance

The aim of collaborative governance is to arrange society fairly. This objective, which highlights the fair distribution of resources and advantages among members of the wider community, aligns with the social equity tenets of sustainable development. In tourism, certain researchers (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Bramwell, 2011) contend that customised and efficient collaborative governance is necessary to foster sustainable tourism in destinations and communities that seek to harmonise the three aspects of sustainability (i.e., economic, socio-cultural, and ecological). Due to fundamental flaws in understanding the 'parental paradigm' of sustainability (Sharpley, 2010), sustainable tourism and sustainable rural community development have taken on multiple definitions. Nonetheless, by prioritising equality in societal organisation through cooperative practices between state and non-state participants, the idea of collaborative governance aligns with several principles of sustainable tourism. As stated by Sharpley (2010), sustainable tourism principles involve, among other aspects, promoting and anticipating the involvement of local communities in tourism (i.e., planning, development, and management) with backing from government and industry, and ensuring fair distribution of tourism benefits among all parties involved. Therefore, the enhancement of sustainable rural community development through tourism can occur if the policies and practices for community-based tourism development correspond with the criteria for collaborative governance.

## 2.5 Rural tourism SMEs

Tourism is a multifaceted industry that includes various parties, such as government entities and their agencies, the hospitality sector, tour operators, transportation providers, the food and beverage sector, and retailers. Tourism entrepreneurs, who engage directly with visitors, hold an important position and serve as key connections in the supply chain. They assist in showcasing the possibilities of nature, culture, and heritage of specific locations and sites that may be developed into tourist destinations (Koh & Hatten, 2008). Likewise, Komppula (2016) indicates that the tourism supply chain and entrepreneurs are crucial to the overall competitiveness of the destination. Tourism entrepreneurs primarily consist of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMEs) play a significant role in promoting sustainable economic growth and job creation in various rural tourism locations (Ayyagari, Beck, & Demirguc-

Kunt, 2007). SMEs are frequently referred to as the "engines of employment" and the "foundation of economic growth" (Müller et al., 2016; Mandl et al., 2016). To perform this crucial function in the economy, SMEs need to adjust to various internal and external influences, including their geographical surroundings. In addition to the typical challenges encountered by many SMEs, such as limited resources, they are frequently influenced by their operating environment, specifically whether they are situated in a rural or urban region (Zhao & Jones-Evans, 2017). In a rural setting, SMEs can play a significant, beneficial role in fostering growth and promoting sustainable rural development (Korsgaard, 2015). SMEs and their owner-managers are generally more integrated into their rural communities and surroundings (Harangozo & Zilahy, 2015). As a result, their sense of accountability for their areas is often greater, prompting SMEs in rural regions to influence their future, generate new employment, pursue advantages for the community, and promote innovation (Berlemann & Jahn, 2016). However, given their lack of human, cultural, or financial capital, rural spatial contexts can create additional challenges for SMEs, ranging from economic decline and underemployment to limited export possibilities, lower qualification levels, and underdeveloped infrastructure (Mayer & Baumgartner, 2014; Korsgaard, 2015). At the same time, rural areas can also offer unique historical, cultural, or physical resources (Korsgaard et al., 2015), thus opening opportunities for SMEs.

Mshenga and Richardson (2013) noted that while considered small-scale, SMEs significantly contribute to and serve as the foundation of the tourism industry, as most tourism destinations are typically launched by small businesses. Getz and Petersen (2005) argued that the tourism sector is mainly composed of SMEs, particularly in rural regions. Due to their significance, the function of SMEs in tourism is a topic of research and policy examination, as it has the potential to help alleviate poverty and enhance income and economic growth (Mshenga & Richardson, 2013). Despite the potential highlighted earlier for tourism SMEs, they consistently encounter numerous challenges. In contrast to established large companies, SMEs are more vulnerable to market pressures, possess less capital, and lack essential skills (Jones & Haven-Tang, 2005). In addition to issues associated with market pressures and insufficient capital, SMEs encounter obstacles regarding their involvement in governance frameworks within their communities (Mshenga & Richardson, 2013). These SMEs frequently find themselves excluded from decision-making processes, with their opinions largely ignored (Koh & Hatten, 2008).

## 2.6 Theoretical review framework for collaborative governance

This study is embedded in the theoretical framework by Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) regarding collaborative governance regimes (CGRs). These authors define collaborative governance (CG) as "the processes and structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage people across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private, and civic spheres to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished" (p. 18). According to Voets (2021), Emerson and Nabatchi employed this broad definition to integrate various theoretical, normative, and empirical perspectives in developing the concept of collaborative governance regimes (CGRs) at the core of their framework. A CGR is "a particular mode of, or system for, public decision-making in which cross-boundary collaboration represents the prevailing pattern of behaviour and activity" (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 6). The authors use terms like "regime" and "system" to clarify that the focus should be on achieving a sufficient level of stability and formalisation, wherein a genuine joint commitment to the goals and the process is essential (Gray & Purdy, 2018).

Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) argued that the integrative nature of the framework draws on new institutionalism, social network studies, and the study of negotiations, as well as performance literature. Their model allows for informal CG and creates a new link to public value/purpose, indirectly referring to collaborative advantage. The framework is dynamic, beginning with the

system context and drivers in which a collaborative regime is situated and develops. It examines the interaction process within the regime, labelled collaboration dynamics, and pays attention to actions, outcomes, and adaptations. The dynamic nature of the CGR permits the inclusion of additional systems-level properties (Panyik, 2015), namely a clear sense of temporality, some loose allusions to feedback relationships, and recognition of broader system contexts or exogenous factors. The model also considers the role that feedback regarding outcomes can play (in best-case scenarios) in informing regime learning and adaptation. Effective CG begins with what Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) describe as "principled engagement" for involving key stakeholders.

As the stakeholders engage, common or shared goals emerge. Definitions of performance goals and objectives are said to follow a process of deliberation that leads to a set of decisions (or determinations) resulting in action. This process mirrors what various authors have noted as the "cycle of inquiry," a process of dialogue, decision-making, action, and evaluation (Voets, 2021). In this regard, if the process of establishing common ground and a shared purpose is successful, it fuels a cycle of "shared motivation" to make the collaboration work, requiring commitment, trust, mutual understanding, and the establishment of internal legitimacy (Voets, 2021).

Panyik (2015) suggested that Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) also highlighted the capacity for joint action, which refers to the foundational idea of collaborative governance: that collaboration should enable achievements that each actor cannot secure individually. By developing procedural and institutional arrangements, leadership, resources, and knowledge, the collaboration is strengthened, fuelling the cycles of principled engagement and shared motivation, and jointly leading to meaningful actions (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). The key premise of CGR theory lies in the notion that forms of strong engagement will produce fairer, more durable, robust, and effective determinations. Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) recognised that many collaborative arrangements require the intentional use of institutional design and the strategic utilisation of resources. They outlined a typology of CGRs that includes self-initiated, independently convened, and externally directed CGRs. This typology provides a valuable framework for defining one or more loci of control in the initiation and implementation phases of collaborative activities.

Earlier, in the introduction, the research question was posed: "To what extent are tourism small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in rural areas involved in collaborative governance, and what are the key enabling factors that should be in place to enhance tourism collaborative governance in rural areas?" The framework explained above, which underpins this study, defines collaborative governance as the processes and structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage people across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and the public, private, and civic spheres to achieve a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished. In this regard, the question at hand is: to what extent are tourism SMEs, as key stakeholders in collaborative governance, involved in tourism collaborative governance that may not be achievable without their participation? The key premise of CGR theory lies in the notion that strong engagement will produce fairer, more durable, robust, and effective outcomes. Therefore, this CGR theoretical framework is applicable in evaluating the participation of tourism SMEs in tourism collaborative governance in rural areas.

## 3. Methodology

In pursuit of its research goal, which places significant emphasis on exploratory and interpretative research, this study investigates the views of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises regarding their role as stakeholders in collaborative tourism governance in Nqileni village, situated in the Mbashe Local Municipality of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. Utilising a qualitative research approach that aligns with the study's research question, this method allows for a comprehensive exploration (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010) of the complexities surrounding collaborative tourism governance in rural areas. The interpretive paradigm is particularly relevant in capturing the

subjective experiences and perspectives of the stakeholders involved (Thanh & Thanh, 2015), providing a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play. Within the qualitative framework, the exploratory design enables an in-depth investigation (Mason et al., 2010) into the strategies that can enhance the role of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises in collaborative tourism governance in rural areas.

The study employed a purposive sampling method, which is a non-probability sampling technique, and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The study sample was selected based on participants' involvement in the tourism sector and their participation in the governance of tourism in Nqileni village. In this case, twelve (12) informal small and medium-sized tourism enterprises were identified for inclusion in the investigation. Once consent was obtained from the participants, the information gathered during the semi-structured interviews was recorded on audiotape, and verbatim transcripts were created for data analysis. The verbatim transcripts were manually analysed using the content analysis approach, considering the manageable amount of information, and coding was employed to generate themes from the study data.

*Table 1:* Sample profile

| Identifier | Type of establishment | Number of years in operation | Number of employees |
|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Fishing | 11 | 3 |
| P2 | Canoeing | 9 | 2 |
| P3 | Hiking | 10 | 2 |
| P4 | Village tour | 9 | 1 |
| P5 | Cultural tour | 11 | 1 |
| P6 | Herbalist tour | 5 | 1 |
| P7 | Surfing | 8 | 2 |
| P8 | Full body massage | 6 | 2 |
| P9 | Sunrise pancakes | 9 | 2 |
| P10 | Learn to drum | 9 | 2 |
| P11 | Secret beach tour | 8 | 1 |
| P12 | Incubator tour | 10 | 2 |

\* 'P' in column one stands for 'participant,' which is accompanied by their allocated number.
\* The number of full-time employees in column four excludes owners/managers.

In terms of ethical guidelines, ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (REC): Social, Behavioural and Educational Research (SBER) at Stellenbosch University. The research ethics application was reviewed by the Department/Faculty Ethics Screening Committee (DESC/FESC): School of Public Leadership (Environmental Management) in July 2024 and was subsequently classified as a low-risk project. This committee approved the application, and the approval certificate was issued along with the ethical clearance certificate, which included project ID: 27322. The ethics certificate granted permission for data collection, and all participants in the study completed an informed consent form, ensuring that they were fully aware of their decision to participate. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were carefully maintained, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The researchers also assured that anonymity would be upheld when disseminating and publishing the research findings.

## 4. Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section presents a discussion of the results from the collected data. The data generated four themes: stakeholder participation in tourism collaborative governance, skilled and legitimate conveners, equal voices during meetings, and mutual trust and unity.

## 4.1 Theme 1: Stakeholder participation in tourism collaborative governance

Collaborative governance involves the integrated involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making to ensure collective growth and development. In the tourism industry, collaborative governance seeks to establish working relationships between stakeholders. If stakeholders can collaborate effectively, their efforts could lead to community development. The results under this theme suggest that there is a working relationship between community representatives (in this case, those involved in the tourism industry), the government (local municipality), and the village Chief through his representatives. Collaborative governance in Nqileni village involves the Chief as a key figure, and his participation in decision-making in areas where he holds jurisdiction is essential. The Chief also collaborates with the government to ensure the community receives necessary services. Additionally, the Chief addresses the complaints of the people. This emphasizes collaborative governance through the interconnected relationship between the community, the Chief, and related government entities. The participants' narratives regarding collaborative governance in tourism in rural areas are reflected below.

> *Collaborative governance is where everyone involved in the tourism business is not left behind in all the decisions needed to uplift/grow the business to perform well (Participant 7).*

> *We work together with the municipality; we submit our requests to the municipality, and the municipality responds. (Participant 1).*

> *We work with both the municipality and the ward councillor. We do report to them on certain things, especially our roads and so on, so we do engage with them, and they do their best to try and assist us (Participant 10).*

> *We collaborate with the government as we request certain things like roads, and we then go to them and ask for assistance. For example, we met with the ward councillor because we wanted a road; he tried and failed. We tried to go to the municipality for things like solar, but we are still in that process. Though we already had the electric-charged car, municipal officials were coming to check on what we lacked (Participant 2).*

> *The municipality also trains people from the village who work here at the lodge, the tour leaders, and our guides (Participant 4).*

The participants' views on collaborating with the government, including the municipality and the roles both these structures play, reflect the opinions of Gede Oka Wisnumurti et al. (2019), who contend that the government is responsible for providing supporting infrastructure for the tourism industry. The participants agree with Gede Oka Wisnumurti et al. (2019) that the government has a responsibility to enhance the skills of community members and must empower them to access funding for grants and other forms of financial assistance. Furthermore, the government is responsible for training local community members in entrepreneurship and business-related skills.

> *There is a collaboration between the village Chief and the municipality. As a tradition, everything in the village must involve the Chief. Bulungula Lodge has just bought the first electric car in Africa (it is the Mercedes). The Chief was here to say a word, bringing many tourists, not only from overseas but from around. I know that because I did take it, I left my car, took the electric car, and paid (Participant 8).*

> *The Chief is trying to work with the government so that his people may benefit from service delivery and other things from the government. For example, things come from the municipality; we are the people of the municipality and receive what we have from the municipal government. In all, we are trying with our Chiefs because we do take the people's complaints to the Chief, and the Chief takes them further because even then, they are led (Participant 12).*

> *As community members, we trust in the leadership of our Chief. We constantly collaborate with the Chief, the selected committee that manages tourism affairs in our village, and the Induna (Head man). These stakeholders always inform community members of their decisions regarding tourism in our village (Participant 3).*

The results above align with the views of Emerson and Nabatchi (2015), who noted that effective CG begins with what they described as "principled engagement" to involve key stakeholders. In this context, there is engagement with the village chief, a key stakeholder, and the selected committee that manages tours in the village. The participants believe that common or shared goals emerge as the stakeholders engage.

## 4.2 Theme 2: Legitimate and skilled conveners

The views of the participants above regarding collaborative governance point to the need for legitimate and skilled conveners. In this regard, participants highlighted the role played by government and traditional chiefs in the village as those they see as providing leadership. Participants' views align with earlier arguments by Parker (2000), who suggested that partnerships and collaboration in the tourism industry perform better under the direction of a convener who is regarded as legitimate. Participants see these role players as possessing power, legitimacy, knowledge, and resources. In this context, participants believe these stakeholders will ensure broad and equal participation among stakeholders who can adequately represent their groups and ensure that collaborative governance is non-hierarchical and flexible among these players.

Besides the identified driving factors of collaborative governance, participants also noted the importance of leaders in achieving effective collaborative governance. Participants viewed leaders as those who provide vision and guidance. They suggested that the leaders in collaborative governance must be skilled and legitimate. Participants noted that it was the role of leaders to create and maintain the vision for tourism growth and progress. Leaders were also seen as facilitating holistic community development by ensuring that stakeholders work together. Legitimate and skilled leaders were also perceived as problem solvers for the challenges in the community. Such leaders should also ensure that mutual benefit is equal for all community members and not just for the selected few.

> *Legitimate leaders are important because they have a vision to progress and can investigate more about tourism (Participant 11).*

> *Leaders in collaborative governance play a prominent role in providing leadership and guidance that ensures good working together amongst the stakeholders (Participant 1)*

> *For instance, the community cannot do anything without getting approval from the Chief. As a community, we must start first with the Chief; we want a big yes from the Chief (Participant 6).*

> *Also, another very important stakeholder is the headmen, not even the Chief because I am not from here, so first thing when I came here was a community meeting. I went to be introduced to the traditional authority. Then the traditional authority said, "Okay, we have a mother here; she will be staying with us, and for every person employed here, we take them to the Chief and traditional authority. Hence, we work together (Participant 5).*

> *I will start with the board members. Our responsibility is mainly when there is a problem here at the lodge; the board members first sit, and if they do not come up with a solution, we extend it to the headmen (Participant 10).*

> *The role of leaders in our community is to assist us when we cannot solve something. When something has happened, we take it to the community leaders, and when that problem needs the involvement of the police, we then take it to the police (Participant 9).*

> *Without these skilled and legitimate leaders, tourism in our village may not benefit the community; it may end up benefiting a few people in the village (Participant 12).*

> *Skilled and legitimate leaders are known to the community, and their role is to ensure that tourism governance is implemented properly and correctly (Participant 2).*

The opinions of the participants above are supported by Parker (2000), who noted that partnerships and collaboration in the tourism industry perform better under the direction of a convener who is regarded as legitimate. Earlier, Jamal and Getz (1995) argued that a convener can be a local tourism organisation, an industry firm or association, a government institution, or a local leader who possesses power, legitimacy, knowledge, and resources. The investigation's findings revealed that the village chief and headman were among the key stakeholders in the tourism collaborative governance in the area. The participants in the investigation believe that their leaders are providing proper direction in managing tourism in the village.

## 4.3 Theme 3: Equal voices during meetings

Participants also noted what is needed for effective collaborative governance in Nqileni village. They referred to this as the driving factor in creating strong collaborative governance for community development. Meetings, idea exchanges, profit sharing, working together, and trust and unity were identified as central to effective collaborative governance. Meetings were highly ranked as they entail communication and knowledge exchange. Regular meetings between community members and the Management Committee are important for achieving effective village development. These sessions provide an opportunity for community members to propose and discuss ways in which tourism can benefit the community and foster collaborative governance. Participants felt that profit sharing is a key issue that needs to be addressed in a manner that can enhance community benefit and development. They also noted that working together is fundamental to achieving collaborative governance that can develop the community through tourism. To deliver development for the community through tourism, it is important to collaborate with stakeholders, including the four main stakeholders; workers, community members, community leaders, and tourists highlighted trust and unity as key contributors to collaborative governance. Participants noted that the driving factors for collaborative governance are reflected in the following verb.

> *Meetings between community members and the governance committee are important to ensure effective community development in our village. These meetings are important because they provide a platform where community members can suggest better ways that the tourism industry can use to benefit the community (Participant 3).*

> *These meetings also provide a platform where community members can make suggestions of what the profits generated through tourism stays at the lodge can be used for in a way that will benefit everyone in the village (Participant 7).*

> *At the end of each year, all stakeholders involved in the tourism industry in the village are invited in a meeting wherein we discuss how the industry performed and what can be improved to sustain the industry. In this meeting, everyone is given a fair opportunity to suggest the best strategies to improve and protect our tourism industry (Participant 10).*

The views projected by the participants regarding the need for meetings as a platform to suggest ways that will ensure effective collaborative governance coincide with earlier assertions by Bentrup (2001), who suggested that face-to-face meetings among stakeholders are necessary to build collaborative governance since, during this process, stakeholders can ascertain opportunities for shared gains. The same author further suggested that face-to-face discussions are central to removing typecasts and other obstacles that may avert the investigation of shared gains in the first place. Warner (2006) further supported this, projecting that face-to-face discussion is at the centre of trust-building, shared respect, common understanding, and a pledge to the process. The results above are

further supported by the assertions of Voets (2021), who contended that the deliberation process in stakeholder meetings leads to a set of decisions (or determinations) that lead to action. This process mirrors what various authors have noted as the "cycle of inquiry," a process of dialogue, decision-making, action, and evaluation (Voets, 2021). In this regard, if the process of establishing common ground and a shared purpose is successful, it fuels a cycle of "shared motivation" to make the collaboration work, requiring commitment, trust, mutual understanding, and establishing internal legitimacy (Voets, 2021). The views of the participants above seem to have heeded the warning by Koh and Hatten (2008), who noted that SMEs frequently find themselves excluded from decision-making processes, with their opinions largely ignored.

## 4.4 Theme 4: Mutual trust and unity

Participants also noted that working together could enhance their participation, bringing broad and equitable collaboration among stakeholders. They advanced that this can be achieved through a collective understanding of growth and development, working towards common goals, creating village amenities, and building trust and commitment to working together, even when there is no personal benefit but the benefit of the community at large. The significance of cooperation and trust in the community focuses on putting people experiencing poverty at the forefront. The objective is to increase trust and ensure that the most vulnerable persons receive support, even if it does not benefit everyone. In addition, trust leads to an environment in which differing opinions can be discussed and compromises can be made when there are diverse views. Hence, trust underpins the promotion of mutual understanding within a stakeholder group regarding conflict resolution. Mutual trust is paramount; there must be reciprocal trust between village residents and leadership.

> *Working together needs much trust, trusting the process, but you do not just say they trust us; you need to communicate from the beginning, say we need this, and because of this, we need this to happen, and yes, some of the people are not going to benefit now but in the long run (Participant 6).*

> *Trusting each other also allows the stakeholders to pull in the same direction and provides opportunities for debates and compromises when there are different viewpoints (Participant 8).*

> *Trust is crucial for developing this community because the leadership will speak the same language (Participant 5).*

> *Trust is earned, and they used to say that when tourism started in our village when the Bulungula Lodge was built because it was started by people of a different colour (aBelungu – White people), but those people earned the trust of the village people, and that of the Chief of the village and together with that of traditional authority and the way things are done here (Participant 9).*

Participants' reflections above regarding working together with various stakeholders to achieve the development of the community are embedded in Wondirad, Tolkach, and King's (2020b) views of defining collaboration as a process in which actors convene to discuss issues of shared interest to arrive at common ground. In this regard, matters relating to power issues, trust, interdependence, reciprocity, transparency, commitment, genuine participation, and accommodativeness determine the outcome and success of collaboration. A successful collaboration improves inter-organisational relationships, ensures broader actor participation, brings viable solutions to problems, and facilitates the implementation of joint decisions. The views of participants on trust issues reflect the views of Eyisi, Lee, and Trees (2021), who warned about the negative consequences of a lack of trust in collaborative governance processes. Further to the above, participants' views about the importance of trusting each other to ensure collaborative governance are supported by earlier views of Imperial (2005), who believed that the collaborative process is vital in trust-building between stakeholders. The view above was prompted by Murdock, Wiessner, and Sexton (2005), who argued that in cases

where there has been resentment in the past from stakeholders, the process of building trust could be complex in the early stages. Therefore, the implication is that collaborative leaders must acknowledge that they need to build trust with their opponents to avoid stakeholder manipulation. The results above are also corroborated by the views of Panyik (2015), who supported the ideas of Emerson and Nabatchi (2015), who stressed that the capacity for joint action, which refers to the foundational idea of collaborative governance, should help to do things that each actor separately cannot achieve. By developing procedural and institutional arrangements, leadership, resources, and knowledge, collaboration is strengthened, fuelling cycles of principled engagement and shared motivation, and jointly leading to meaningful actions (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study explored the perspectives of rural tourism SMMEs on collaborative governance in the tourism industry, an area that has not been extensively researched. The findings revealed that certain conditions must be met for successful collaborative governance in tourism. These include active and equitable community participation, mutual trust among stakeholders, and effective collaboration between community leaders, municipal officials, and government entities. The study emphasised the importance of community input through dialogues and meetings, ensuring that their contributions are considered in decision-making processes. This approach aims to harness tourism resources effectively for rural community development.

Despite its valuable insights, the study has limitations due to its minor qualitative nature and the use of a purposeful sample from a single village. As a result, the findings cannot be generalised to other contexts. The experiences of tourism SMEs in different villages or demographic backgrounds might vary significantly. Therefore, further qualitative research should include a broader range of SMEs from diverse locales to better understand their views on collaborative governance in tourism. This study contributes to the limited literature on this topic, highlighting the need for inclusive and fair community participation to achieve successful rural community development through tourism.

The study recommends fostering successful collaborative governance in rural tourism by ensuring active and equitable community participation, building mutual trust among stakeholders, and promoting effective collaboration between community leaders, municipal officials, and government entities. It further suggests that research should be conducted on the drivers and barriers for tourism SMEs participating in tourism collaborative governance to ensure the sustainability of the tourism industry in rural areas.

## 6. Declarations

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Data availability:** The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access will be granted to researchers who meet the data-sharing criteria established by the institutional review board or ethics committee.

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