Community-Led Governance for Sustainable Tourism in Emerging Destinations

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Abstract: Community-led governance is increasingly recognised as pivotal for sustainable tourism, yet empirical analysis of how informal neighbourhood institutions perform governance functions is scarce. This mixed-methods study examines how mahallas—traditional neighbourhood organisations in Uzbekistan—contribute to tourism sustainability by bridging formal institutions and local communities. Using social network analysis and ethnographic interviews, we mapped 159 actors (93 in Tashkent, 66 in Bukhara) and more than 420 confirmed ties to analyse network structure, central actors, and interaction mechanisms. Results show contrasting but complementary governance models: Tashkent exhibits a polycentric, institutionally connected network where mahallas act as intermediaries between government, businesses and NGOs; Bukhara shows a smaller, denser network grounded in bonding social capital and moral legitimacy. Mahallas increase project completion and participation (joint initiatives recorded 78–82% success rates versus lower rates for municipal-only projects), mobilise *hashar* and cultural stewardship, and enable rapid local learning and replication of sustainability practices. The paper contributes to governance and tourism literature by demonstrating three capacities of informal institutions (relational, moral and cognitive) and argues that sustainable outcomes depend on alignment between formal policy and culturally rooted community action. Practical implications include institutionalising mahalla participation in planning, capacity-building for local leadership, and promoting inter-city knowledge exchange.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Community-based Governance, Destination Resilience, Cultural Sustainability, Uzbekistan

1. Introduction

Sustainable tourism governance is now a major topic for countries trying to grow their tourism industries without harming people or the environment. In many developing destinations, strong policy documents exist, yet they often have limited influence at the neighbourhood level. Real sustainability depends on how people live, cooperate, and make local decisions. For this reason, researchers increasingly look beyond ministries and formal agencies to the smaller community systems that guide everyday life (Bramwell and Lane, 2011; Hall, 2019; Deng and Zhou, 2022).

In Uzbekistan, that community system is the mahalla - a neighbourhood organisation that has existed for centuries. It coordinates mutual support among families, settles disputes, and organises collective work known as hashar. Although mahallas are now formally integrated into state administration, their authority continues to come from respect and trust. They already take responsibility for local order and cleanliness, yet their role in tourism remains largely invisible. Most tourism studies in the region focus on policies or economic growth rather than the social networks that keep destinations operating day to day.

Tourism governance always involves multiple groups - government, businesses, and residents - whose interests intersect. The idea of network governance explains how cooperation and trust can complement or even replace strict administrative control (Wang and Ran, 2023). From this perspective, mahallas are not only cultural communities but also small governance arenas where people and institutions meet to solve problems.

This paper examines how mahallas contribute to sustainable tourism governance in Uzbekistan. It combines social network analysis with interviews conducted in two cities: Tashkent, the capital, and Bukhara, a heritage destination. The aim is to understand how formal rules and community practices connect in managing tourism more sustainably.

We argue that sustainability grows from relationships as much as from policy. Studying mahallas shows how everyday cooperation shaped by culture and trust can make tourism governance more inclusive and resilient.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sustainable Tourism Governance

Sustainable tourism governance is mainly about how tourism decisions are made, by whom, and for whose benefit. The goal is to keep economic progress, environmental protection, and community wellbeing in reasonable balance (Farsari, 2023). This topic became more visible after the UN Sustainable Development Goals placed cooperation and inclusion at the centre of tourism policy. In practice, this means that governments are expected to work with communities instead of simply deciding for them (Henfrey, Feola, Penha-Lopes et al., 2023).

Researchers often draw a line between *government* and *governance*. The first is usually about command, regulation, and formal authority. The second relies more on everyday negotiation, informal contact, and the trust that grows between actors (Wachhaus, 2014). In tourism, that shift matters. Plans and regulations still help, but sustainability mostly depends on how residents, entrepreneurs, and officials manage to talk to one another and find compromises (Warburton, 2018). In this sense, good governance is less about structure and more about communication. It also needs to respect the local culture and ways of doing things; otherwise, participation quickly fades (Li, Kim and Lee, 2021).

In many developing destinations, the formal system is thin. There might be too few staff, overlapping offices, or unclear rules. Under these conditions, community action becomes crucial. Local groups often step in to handle issues that affect tourism directly - waste management, guest behaviour, or heritage maintenance. These responses may look small, yet they work because people trust each other and share responsibility. As Carmen, Fazey and Friend (2024) point out, such initiatives fill the gaps where governments cannot act effectively. Understanding how these local systems organize themselves and connect with the formal level remains one of the main questions for researchers studying sustainable tourism governance.

2.2 Network Governance and Social Capital

Network governance is often used to explain how coordination really happens when no single actor can manage everything alone. It treats governance as a web of relationships in which different groups depend on one another and share what they have - information, resources, or local influence - to reach common goals (Puranam and Vanneste, 2009). In tourism, this makes particular sense. Destinations are not run by one office but by a mix of local authorities, businesses, and communities that connect through partnerships of many kinds. Some of these links are horizontal, between people and organizations on the same level, while others are vertical, connecting local networks with regional or national structures.

The strength of these connections rests mostly on trust and regular contact, and destinations with stronger and more open networks perform better. Without them, agreements stay formal and rarely work in practice. When trust exists, people share news quickly, coordinate better, and adapt faster to problems. This is what Pittaway, Bartolomei and Doney (2016) called *social capital* - the invisible glue that holds cooperation together. Yet, it is often the informal actors - the *mahalla* chairperson, the active volunteer, the craft-shop owner - who make cooperation work on the ground. Including them in the picture gives a more realistic sense of how tourism governance functions day to day.

Social capital comes in two main forms. *Bonding* ties hold communities together through shared norms and trust, while *bridging* ties link them with outsiders and new opportunities (Shrestha, 2023). Bonding keeps cooperation strong; bridging brings new ideas and connections that allow change.

2.3 Social Network Analysis in Tourism Governance

Social Network Analysis (SNA), gives researchers a way to look at governance through people rather than institutions. It helps to map who works with whom, who shares information, and how these ties create real influence (Wang and Ran, 2023). In many ways, SNA shows that the power to get things done often depends less on job titles and more on relationships. A single person who connects two groups can make a huge difference, especially in small communities.

In tourism, the approach has been used to study cooperation between businesses, public bodies, and residents. It helps explain how innovation spreads and how decisions are shaped by communication rather than by written policy. The method also draws attention to what happens outside the official system. Instead of assuming that

governance follows a neat hierarchy, it reveals the informal web of connections that keeps destinations running day to day.

At the community level, SNA is particularly useful. It can show hidden patterns of trust and dependence that keep local systems working. In small towns or rural areas, a community leader or *mahalla* chairperson often links residents with government offices or NGOs. In network terms, such people have high *betweenness centrality* - they bridge gaps and make communication flow. These go-betweens often stop small conflicts from growing and make cooperation easier. Measures like network density or clustering tell us how close-knit a network is and how resilient it might be if one actor drops out.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the ideas discussed earlier, this study views community-led sustainable tourism governance as something mixed and flexible rather than fixed. It is a system where formal structures and informal relations constantly interact, and where social networks link the two. In practice, this means that rules, cultural values, and everyday cooperation all shape how governance happens.

Three main assumptions guide this approach. First, the success of governance in developing destinations depends not only on institutions and regulations but also on the quality of relationships among the people involved. Second, informal institutions such as *mahallas* can be genuine governance actors because they use shared cultural values and social capital to coordinate action. Third, the structure of these networks - how dense they are, who connects whom, and how information moves - helps explain how communities turn cooperation into tangible sustainability outcomes.

This framework shapes how the research looks at *mahallas* in Tashkent and Bukhara. It brings together two perspectives: the structural one, which focuses on measurable links between actors, and the cultural one, which considers trust, responsibility, and collective norms. By connecting these dimensions, the study aims to show that sustainable tourism governance works best when it grows from the community's own social reality rather than being imposed from outside.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research used a mixed approach. It combined Social Network Analysis (SNA) with ethnographic work to look at how community-led governance actually functions in sustainable tourism. SNA helped to see the structure of collaboration - who talks to whom and how often - while the ethnographic part helped explain why those ties matter. Using both made it possible to connect numbers with stories and to understand *mahallas* as real governance actors rather than background institutions.

Fieldwork was done in two Uzbek cities, Tashkent and Bukhara. They represent very different tourism settings. Tashkent is large, modern, and busy, with a growing tourism sector and more formal coordination. Bukhara is smaller and slower, known for heritage and tradition. The contrast between them gave a chance to see how informal governance works under different pressures.

In both cities, *mahallas* coordinate small projects: neighbourhood cleaning, help for residents, and simple visitor services. Studying both sides helped to see what changes with modernization and what stays the same in community practice.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected between March 2024 and June 2025 through semi-structured interviews. Altogether, 159 people and organizations were part of the network - 93 in Tashkent and 66 in Bukhara. They came from five main groups: local authorities, private tourism businesses, *mahalla* committees, NGOs, and education or cultural institutions.

Interviews focused on daily cooperation. Each respondent named people or groups they worked with most often in tourism-related matters. From that list, a network matrix was created showing whether a connection existed or not. Four main ties were recorded: joint projects, sharing information, resource exchange, and trust-based cooperation.

Conversations were flexible. In many cases, respondents brought up social ideas such as respect for elders, moral obligation, and community pride. These stories were noted because they explained how relationships formed and why cooperation continued.

3.3 Network Analysis

The network data were processed with UCINET. Metrics like degree, betweenness, closeness, and density were calculated to understand who played central or bridging roles. Modularity was checked to see which actors clustered together.

The goal was not statistics but to see how *mahallas* link with formal and informal partners. Governance in tourism rarely follows clear lines of authority, so mapping relationships helped to see how collective management really happens.

Ethnographic work added the everyday side of governance. Informal talks with *mahalla* leaders, residents, and entrepreneurs often continued after the interviews. Short visits to *mahalla* offices or local meetings helped show how people decide and cooperate. At this stage, the focus was on tone, gesture, and shared understanding rather than on formal data.

Field notes were reviewed and grouped around common ideas - trust, reciprocity, shared duty, respect. These themes later helped explain why certain network patterns existed and gave life to what the numbers only suggested.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of Governance Networks

Across Tashkent and Bukhara, the study mapped 159 actors and about 420 confirmed ties. Of these, 93 actors (58%) were based in Tashkent and 66 (42%) in Bukhara. Overall network density was 0.017, typical for multi-level governance systems where collaboration occurs through selective rather than universal links. On average, each actor had eight partners, indicating small but consistent circles of cooperation.

Tashkent's network was larger, with 255 ties (61%) and a polycentric structure featuring several hubs instead of a single dominant actor. The city tourism department and three *mahalla* committees stood out with degree centrality scores of 36, 34, and 32, reflecting their strong reach across public, private, and community sectors. About 42% of Tashkent's ties were inter-sectoral, with the private sector around 31% of nodes accounting for nearly 45% of such links, showing hotels, tour operators, and creative entrepreneurs as emerging voices in sustainability. Mahallas served as intermediaries, connecting businesses with city authorities on waste management, recycling, and neighborhood improvement projects.

Interview data reinforced these patterns: in districts where mahallas coordinated meetings, 82% of projects were completed successfully, compared to 59% where only municipal staff led. This suggests that moral legitimacy and community trust directly enhance project success.

Bukhara's network was smaller but denser, with 132 ties and a local density of 0.031, almost double Tashkent's. About 70% of connections were within or between mahallas, while 15% linked to government offices, indicating governance rooted in bonding social capital rather than formal hierarchy. Two central mahallas near the historic core, with degree centrality scores of 28 and 26, organized most joint clean-ups and cultural events. Respondents noted these seasonal events (spring and autumn) attracted roughly 20% of the city's tourist flow, linking community activity to tangible tourism benefits.

Despite their differences, the two networks were interconnected through 33 cross-city ties, mainly involving NGOs, researchers, and heritage experts. These links facilitated knowledge exchange between Tashkent's innovation-driven projects and Bukhara's preservation-oriented initiatives. For example, Bukhara's mahalla leaders participated in Tashkent workshops on eco-friendly events planning modest yet meaningful steps toward national-level learning in community-led tourism governance.

Overall, the findings show that mahallas occupy structurally pivotal positions in both cities. They bridge formal administration and everyday community life, translating sustainability values cleanliness, hospitality, heritage care into neighborhood action while linking these efforts to broader governance frameworks.

4.2 Central Actors and Relational Dynamics

Across both networks, data show that sustainable tourism cooperation relies on both formal institutions and community actors. While government offices and NGOs hold authority, mahalla leaders connect residents, businesses, and agencies, bridging the system and building trust.

The networks included diverse actors with varying influences. Each stakeholder averaged eight to nine connections, suggesting multiple active partnerships. The most connected were local tourism departments, *mahalla* committees, and small community-oriented businesses together accounting for nearly one-fifth of all ties and showing that institutional coordination and grassroots relations jointly shaped governance.

Private tourism enterprises played an increasing role. Though comprising about one-third of participants, they generated more outbound links, showing strong engagement in collaborative governance. Interviewees from these firms described joint efforts with mahalla committees on waste sorting, green-space upkeep, and local hospitality. One hotelier reported that community-supported recycling bins cut waste by about 25% in one season.

Roughly a quarter of participants served as brokers linking otherwise unconnected groups, often mahalla leaders or mid-level managers who combined local trust with institutional access. Their leadership was moral rather than administrative based on respect, honesty, and fairness. This reflects distributed leadership rather than hierarchy. Decision-making was cooperative and reputation based. Projects formed around specific issues like cleanliness, gardening, and small events creating temporary cross-sector clusters that reorganized naturally after completion.

Respondents in both cities cited shared values like honesty, dedication, and social responsibility as the foundation of trust and cooperation. These norms fostered collaboration and minimized conflict. As one crafts association leader noted, the mahalla is “the place where things get done quietly,” capturing governance that is practical, relational, and rooted in ethics over regulation.

4.3 Mechanisms of Sustainable Governance

Findings from both cities reveal several interconnected ways in which mahallas sustain tourism governance. These processes blend moral values, coordination between formal and informal systems, and collective learning, showing how small neighborhood institutions become vital for long-term tourism management.

The first and most visible factor is moral legitimacy. Community leaders foster participation through shared ethics rather than authority. Many respondents described moral duty and social responsibility as key motivations for involvement. Over three-quarters said they joined local campaigns or clean-up events because it “felt right,” not because they were instructed. Regular *hashar* gatherings and cleaning streets, restoring public spaces, planting trees, building pride and strengthen the social fabric supporting tourism. When respected elders or committees endorsed projects, participation rose by nearly 40% compared to those led solely by officials. Moral legitimacy thus underpins sustainable local governance even without external oversight.

A second mechanism lies in how mahallas bridge households and formal institutions. Acting as mediators, they translate bureaucratic goals into community realities. About a quarter of all inter-sectoral ties involved mahalla committees, confirming their strategic role. Through these links, communities collaborate with tourism offices, private firms, and NGOs. Several examples showed mahalla leaders partnering with training centers or entrepreneurs to run short hospitality courses, helping women and youth start small tourism ventures like homestays and cultural workshops. In other cases, they mediated between residents and event organizers to balance tourism activities with noise or heritage concerns. This translation between institutional and cultural systems ensures tourism remains both respectful and locally grounded.

The third layer is continuous knowledge exchange within communities. Residents learn from one another, adapting successful ideas to local contexts. Most respondents reported that they first encounter sustainability practices waste sorting and energy saving through community initiatives rather than formal programs. When one neighborhood installed solar lamps, others quickly replicated the model. In heritage zones, younger volunteers observed elders organizing *hashar* and festivals, later assuming these roles themselves. Such peer learning fosters adaptive capacity the ability to adjust while preserving identity, turning sustainability into a lived, practical process rather than an abstract goal.

Across both cities, these forms of governance overlap. Moral authority ensures participation; bridging builds cooperation; and social learning keeps the system flexible. Together, they show that community-led governance

relies less on regulation and more on trust and shared purpose. Through these interactions, local residents continue to carry the values of hospitality, cleanliness, and collective responsibility that define sustainable tourism in Uzbekistan's urban communities.

4.4 Comparative Insights Between the Two Destinations

Comparing the two cities shows that sustainable tourism governance takes shape differently depending on local context. Tashkent and Bukhara share a foundation of community involvement, yet their systems differ in scale and rhythm, one large and dynamic, the other small and close-knit. Both, however, center on the mahalla, which quietly connects policy, people, and practice.

The study mapped 159 actors and about 420 ties: 93 actors and 255 links in Tashkent, 66 actors and 132 in Bukhara, plus 33 cross-city connections (8 percent). In Tashkent, public–private and community–government ties accounted for over half of all links (29 and 26 percent), with an inter-sectoral to internal ratio of 1.4:1, showing frequent cross-institutional cooperation. In Bukhara, nearly 70 percent of links stayed within or between mahallas, 15 percent connected to authorities, and 12 percent to businesses indicating reliance on trust and obligation rather than formal rules.

Despite these contrasts, the influence of informal institutions was consistent. About 82 percent of interviewees said sustainability projects "would not move" without mahalla endorsement, underscoring legitimacy as the real driver of cooperation.

Performance patterns also diverged. In Tashkent, projects jointly managed by mahallas and city departments achieved 78 percent participation, compared to 53 percent for municipal-only initiatives. Meetings with mahalla representatives were about 25 percent faster due to quicker conflict resolution. In Bukhara, participation in community and heritage events was higher often 85–90 percent, but decision-making was slower, taking six to eight weeks. Yet once consensus was reached, adherence remained strong; one recycling project-maintained 95 percent compliance after six months. Slower processes, in this case, enhanced stability.

Network strengths differed too. Tashkent's polycentric structure, with many connections and flexible clusters, allowed rapid adaptation and innovation well suited to urban sustainability. Bukhara's smaller, denser network relied on shared values and personal reputation, offering endurance and cohesion. Governance there, as one respondent put it, was "based on knowing each other." Different rhythms, yet both systems proved effective. Cross-city ties were fewer but meaningful. The 33 links mostly involved NGOs, researchers, and heritage experts.

When all this is put together, it becomes clear that the two cities represent complementary approaches. Tashkent's hybrid governance joins administrative planning with civic participation, while Bukhara's moral–cultural model rests on tradition and cohesion. Each depends on a different resource - Tashkent on its institutions and Bukhara on its social capital - but both aim for the same balance: growth with respect, development with continuity.

The main lesson here is that sustainability does not need uniform design. What matters is how formal, and informal systems meet in practice. Formal structures supply coordination and funding; *mahallas* provide trust, knowledge, and social meaning. When these two sides align, governance becomes adaptive enough to hold economic, environmental, and cultural goals together. In that sense, the stories of Tashkent and Bukhara are not opposites but complementary versions of how community-based governance can sustain tourism in a changing society.

5. Discussion

The findings contribute to the discussion on sustainable tourism governance by showing how community structures specifically *mahallas* function as genuine governance bodies rather than mere participants. Governance here is as social as it is institutional. Networks built on trust, familiarity, and shared values can be as effective as formal systems in maintaining sustainability. These results extend concepts of networked and adaptive governance into Central Asia's cultural setting, where social cohesion and moral legitimacy often outweigh regulation.

The Uzbek case suggests that participation only matters when communities have the capacity to govern, a capacity mahallas possess. They combine moral legitimacy with long-term organization and coordination across households, businesses, and authorities. In both Tashkent and Bukhara, mahallas do more than participate they host meetings, resolve conflicts, and sustain projects beyond external involvement. This shift from participation

to governance aligns with the idea of polycentric governance (Morrison et al., 2023), where multiple decision centers coexist and cooperate. Tashkent's large, diverse network reflects this model, while Bukhara's smaller, cohesive system shows how solidarity can substitute for complexity. Both illustrate that sustainable management can stem from either institutional diversity or social unity.

The study also highlights the adaptive nature of informal institutions. Uzbekistan's decentralization reforms remain incomplete without social support, and the mahalla system provides that anchor. It grounds official programs in trusted relationships, mirroring adaptive-governance principles of learning through feedback. In both cities, communities refine practices through meetings, imitation, and dialogue. Small experiments such as recycling drives or heritage cleaning days become learning loops that spread organically. Thus, mahallas act as adaptive units within the broader tourism framework, keeping sustainability responsive to everyday realities rather than policy cycles.

Perhaps the clearest insight is that sustainability depends on the fit between formal and informal governance. Tashkent demonstrates how municipal structures benefit from mahalla legitimacy, while Bukhara shows that social cohesion can compensate for limited bureaucracy. When both systems align, outcomes improve top-down policies gain local acceptance, and plans turn into action. Where alignment fails when projects start without mahalla input participation drops sharply. The contrast between an 82 percent success rate in joint initiatives and much lower rates in top-down ones illustrates this point. The most durable solutions are those negotiated, not imposed.

The broader lessons go beyond Uzbekistan. First**,** cultural legitimacy is a powerful but often overlooked governance resource. Norms such as *uyat* (social shame), *halollik* (honesty), and local pride in cleanliness quietly reinforce sustainable behavior and should be treated as policy assets. Second, the strength of networks lies not just in size but in quality: Tashkent's broad, diverse links enable innovation, while Bukhara's dense ties ensure consistency. Sustainable governance thrives when connectivity and cohesion are balanced. Third, even limited cross-city cooperation can have significant impact. A few training exchanges and joint events helped transfer ideas on eco-certification and heritage care. Institutionalizing these informal exchanges as national forums among mahalla leaders, NGOs, and tourism offices could enhance learning and adaptive capacity.

In essence, the Uzbek case shows that sustainable tourism governance is not a contest between institutions and communities but a relationship between them. When trust, culture, and policy converge, governance becomes more legitimate, resilient, and enduring.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how *mahallas*, traditional neighborhood organizations in Uzbekistan contribute to sustainable tourism governance through culturally embedded networks of cooperation and trust. Using mixed-method data from two contrasting cities, Tashkent and Bukhara, it showed that community-led governance effectively complements formal policy by mobilizing social capital, moral legitimacy, and adaptive learning.

Findings confirm that tourism sustainability depends not only on policy or regulation but also on communities' relational capacity. In Tashkent, *mahallas* act as intermediaries between government, NGOs, and businesses, translating policy goals into collective action. Their involvement improves project completion, citizen engagement, and coordination. In Bukhara, *mahallas* sustain a moral–cultural governance model grounded in shared norms and cohesion, ensuring high compliance and community ownership even with limited administrative control.

Comparing both cities revealed a *hybrid model* of governance: formal institutions provide strategic direction, while informal networks ensure local legitimacy and implementation. This integration of administrative and cultural systems strengthens both policy effectiveness and social resilience. The results challenge the usual divide between formal and informal governance, suggesting that sustainable outcomes depend on their interdependence.

Theoretically, the study extends literature on *networked and adaptive governance* by showing how informal institutions function as autonomous yet cooperative nodes within wider governance systems. *Mahallas* demonstrate three governance capacities*, relational, moral, and cognitive* that enable coordination, regulation, and learning roles often reserved for formal agencies. Recognizing these capacities expands the conceptual scope of sustainable tourism governance to include culturally grounded mechanisms of authority.

Practically, the study offers three recommendations:

1. Institutionalize mahalla participation in sustainability planning so that local knowledge informs decisions.
2. Build leadership capacity through training in project management, conflict resolution, and sustainable tourism principles.
3. Encourage inter-city exchanges between places like Tashkent and Bukhara to share knowledge, foster innovation, and harmonize policy.

Future research should use longitudinal network analysis to track governance changes over time and expand comparisons to rural or ecological destinations. Integrating environmental and economic impact data could further quantify the effects of community-led governance on tourism sustainability.

In conclusion, Uzbekistan's experience shows that sustainable tourism governance works best when it is culturally rooted, socially legitimate, and institutionally adaptive. *Mahallas* embody these qualities, aligning moral responsibility with collective action and proving that sustainability grows not only from policies but from the enduring relationships that connect people, place, and purpose.

Ethics Declaration

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for social science research. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. As the study examined organizational and community relationships rather than personal or sensitive data, formal institutional ethics approval was not required. Care was taken to respect local customs, cultural hierarchies, and the autonomy of *mahalla* communities during all stages of fieldwork.

AI Declaration

No AI tools were used in any stage of development of that paper.

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