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Policy Without Power? An Analysis of Power Imbalances in Local Governance and Tourism Policy Implementation in South Africa

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Abstract

Tourism plays a vital role in developing and diversifying economies in developed and developing countries. With 2030 around the corner, many institutions across all spheres of governance are working diligently to meet their targets and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This paper examines the disconnect between policy formulation and implementation by analysing the role of district municipalities in tourism governance in the context of the O.R. Tambo District Municipality, South Africa. Qualitative research methods were employed, utilising interviews with government officials and other tourism stakeholders, including tourism organisations and local municipalities. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to identify and target those who held positions in the district municipality, local municipalities, and regional and local tourism organisations. This study's findings reveal a contradiction. While the national government mandates local implementation of tourism policies, the study shows that district municipalities still lack the capacity. Furthermore, the findings elucidate that financial resources limit their powers and decision-making process when implementing policies. Although the government facilitates a leadership role through platforms like tourism workshops, inadequate funding hinders the implementation of local initiatives. The findings further underscore the lack of implementation of most policies at the national level. Practical recommendations include redefining municipal authority and establishing targeted funding mechanisms to bridge the gap between policy goals and local capacity.

Keywords: Policy without power, policy implementation, stakeholder theory, tourism governance, rural tourism development.

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Introduction

Tourism has emerged as a sector for advancing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in developing nations where it catalyses employment, entrepreneurship, and inclusive growth (Azam et al., 2018). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2025), tourism contributed approximately 10% to global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and supported over 357 million jobs globally. These reports show a path to recovery and resilience in the tourism sector. However, achieving these outcomes depends on effective governance structures that bridge the gap between policy formulation and implementation. In South Africa, while collaborative frameworks exist among tourism stakeholders (Gursoy & Nunkoo, 2019), significant challenges persist in translating national policies into local action (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). The South African tourism policy framework, anchored by the White Paper on Development and Promotion of Tourism (South Africa. Department of Tourism, 2025) and the Tourism Act (South Africa, 2014), emphasises collaborative governance across government spheres. However, a fundamental disconnect remains. Even though the national government leads strategic planning, implementation rests with under-resourced district municipalities like the O.R. Tambo District Municipality (ORTDM) (Jenkins, 2015; Silwana & Dube, 2022). This reflects a global pattern where decentralisation often fails to empower local implementers (Rogerson & Sixaba, 2022; Timothy, 1998), creating "policy without power." Power dynamics in tourism governance manifest through growth-related strategies like the National Tourism Sector Strategy, constrained by limited municipal budgets; local by-laws and regulations (e.g., attraction hours, liquor sales), lacking local enforcement capacity. These imbalances between policy developers (national/provincial governments) and implementers (district municipalities) form the focus of this study. Grounded in stakeholder theory, this study addresses questions around multi-government structures that allow or hinder policy implementation. This study answers how inadequate resources limit the relationship between policy mandates and local capacities. This study is based on theoretical and practical analysis, showing how power imbalances undermine collaborative governance. Rogerson & Rogerson (2021a) suggest that the government should address any challenges and lead the development of the tourism sector in South Africa. This research also provides actionable insights on achieving SDG10 and suggests an equitable power-sharing model for a decentralised model. The significance of this study lies in its timing as South Africa approaches dual deadlines for the National Development Plan (NDP) and the SDGs, due in 2030. Meeting these deadlines requires functional tourism governance at the local level.

Theoretical underpinning of the study

This study focuses on the ORTDM, a rural district where structural imbalances limit the tourism potential. To address these challenges, it is essential to ensure that tourism development involves multiple stakeholders who receive equal representation

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and benefits from the sector. Therefore, the stakeholder theory is applied in this research. Developed by American scholar Edward Freeman in the 1980s, the stakeholder theory emphasises the interconnected relationships between an organisation and other parties affected by its decisions (Baah et al., 2021; Dmytriyev et al., 2021; Freeman, 1984; Freeman, 2010). This theory is relevant to the current study because effective tourism governance requires input from various stakeholders impacted by decisions in that area. Ideally, tourism governance should create value for all involved stakeholders (Stakeholder Map, n.d.), particularly the local community. The stakeholder theory differentiates between primary and secondary stakeholders (Silwana, 2021; Todd et al., 2017). In this study, local municipalities within the district are considered primary stakeholders. Secondary stakeholders, on the other hand, are not directly affected by the organisation's activities (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2010; Silwana & Dube, 2022). Although secondary stakeholders, such as private tourism businesses, members of tourism forums, non-governmental organisations, and community members, do not directly engage with primary stakeholders, their involvement in tourism policy development is crucial for building consensus and ensuring its successful implementation. While applying the stakeholder theory in this context maps out relationships, the context of the study area reveals its limitations, such as power imbalances and financial constraints, making tourism stakeholders powerless despite the inclusion. While the stakeholder theory is appropriate for this study, it fails to address the structural inequalities that persist as a legacy of apartheid (Rogerson & Sixaba, 2024) and underdevelopment in rural regions like the ORTDM. Therefore, this study adopts this theory by focusing on the actual influence of these stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 1997), other than predefined roles, revealing why the district municipality has not implemented its policies.

Literature review

Government's role in tourism planning

Tourism is one of the largest economic sectors and constitutes the largest share of the global service industry (World Bank, 2022). Therefore, governments across the globe should support the tourism sector, as it makes meaningful contributions to job creation, economic development, and diversification. According to Higgins-Desbiolles (2020), governments should take a leading role in tourism development and create an enabling environment to support the well-being of communities and grow sustainably. However, Kubickova & Campbell (2020) argue that the government faces challenges in determining the appropriate level of involvement necessary to regulate tourism activities effectively. Such challenges could originate from the fragmented nature of the tourism sector since various stakeholders are involved in tourism development. Glen & Mearns (2018) recommend that tourism stakeholders provide valuable insight into how they affect tourism development. Muresherwa et al. (2022) describes stakeholders as organisations with a stake in tourism planning and those affected by tourism development outcomes. They include government and other role players like donor agencies, civil societies, and local communities (Mudimba & Tichaawa, 2017). Therefore, the government must carefully assess its involvement and define its role in tourism planning and policy implementation. There are different ways that governments get involved in tourism. For example, Kim (2017) states that the government may adopt a passive, active, or intermediate role in tourism planning. Passive involvement occurs when the government neither discourages nor encourages tourism (Lyon et al., 2017). The government adopts a general position in development processes and design plans to assist tourism in development, but they are not explicitly designed for tourism. For example, the government may draft interregional trade agreements, visa regulations, and air traffic agreements. Active participation refers to the government's direct involvement in supporting tourism initiatives, like the National Department of Tourism, which facilitates tourism development. The department developed various policy documents to support the tourism sector, such as the White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa (SADT, 2025), the Tourism Act No. 3 of 2014 (South Africa, 2014), and the National Tourism Sector Strategy (SADT, 2017). According to Hall (1994), the government is responsible for coordination, planning, legislation, regulation, and promoting tourism. George (2013) states that the government should create a favourable policy environment to help tourism businesses thrive and encourage community participation in tourism development. Tourism should be government-led, private sector-driven, and community-centred, and the government should facilitate the growth, resulting in substantial financial and administrative commitment from the government (Liu et al, 2020b). All levels of government have different roles and powers in policy implementation, and the current paper examines the disconnect between policy formulation and implementation by analysing the role played by the government in district municipalities.

The role of provincial government in tourism policy implementation

The provincial government can be defined as a legislative and political leadership accountable for service delivery to people in their respective areas (COGTA, 2017; Silwana, 2021). According to the O.R. Tambo District Municipality (2014), the state tasked the provincial government to enhance the quality of life for its citizens. Tourism has a positive role in socio-economic development in communities (Mishra & Verma, 2017). According to Timothy (1998), the provincial government should support tourism development plans from the national government. This can be done by allocating much-needed resources for tourism development (de Oliveira, 2003; Liu et al., 2020a). Also, with the introduction of different programs, they are being delegated to other municipalities for implementation. Provincial plans should be developed within the framework of the national tourism policy (Andriotis et al., 2018). The provincial tourism plan is developed within the National Tourism Sector Strategy guidelines in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. These plans must focus on regional policy and transportation networks of facilities and services (Inskeep, 1987; Kester et al., 2018). These plans should be closely monitored to ensure implementation and infrastructure development. Sitinga & Ogra (2014) indicate that well-developed and strategically positioned infrastructure

can attract tourists. Therefore, provincial plans should outline specific details regarding infrastructural development. According to Beleli (2005) and Liu et al. (2020b), these plans should also encompass the necessary institutional structures and investment policies. As a result, regional planners must create policies that foster economic development while considering potential social and environmental impacts (Roberts, 1994; Scheidel et al., 2020). Inskeep (1991) emphasises that regional education and training programs should be integrated into provincial tourism planning, and municipalities must take responsibility for their implementation.

Shone et al. (2016:2) note that "there is extensive literature examining public sector involvement in the tourism sector. Researchers should strive to understand the rationale, roles, and activities associated with this engagement, especially at the local government level." This paper seeks to determine the role played by the district municipality in developing and implementing tourism policies at the ORTDM. In South Africa, district municipalities play a vital role in translating tourism plans into action and supporting tourism development in municipalities (Local Government Management Agency, 2017). Districts play an essential role in implementing development plans. Municipal plans differ from provincial or national plans in that they function more as operational strategies with specific details on achieving national objectives. Jenkins (2015) argues that the role of local government should not solely be associated with addressing market failures or imperfections. Their participation in coordinating tourism development initiatives is essential, and such development is likely to falter if it is solely entrusted to profit-driven private sector entrepreneurs. Armenski et al. (2018) highlight the significance of collaborations between the public and private sectors and the necessity community engagement to guarantee that all parties involved in tourism can participate in decision-making concerning tourism planning. Local governments should consistently prioritise the best interests of the broader destination community. Municipalities are deeply invested in tourism activities, and their involvement goes beyond just infrastructure development, revenue collection, and waste management. Therefore, local municipalities should be recognised as essential and influential stakeholders in destination development. According to Ramaano (2021), municipalities and elected officials must implement effective tourism policies to bring tourism development principles to life. Local policies should align with national and provincial development goals while addressing the community's specific needs (de Jong et al., 2016). One significant challenge hindering tourism development in district municipalities is poorly developed infrastructure and inadequate facilities (Chakwizira et al., 2010; Guri et al., 2021). Sitinga & Ogra (2014) opine that well-developed destinations have strong infrastructure. This developed infrastructure can create various economic opportunities; for instance, upgrades to airports or hotels may stimulate growth in the local construction sector.

According to Tharage (2016), tourism is an essential element of economic development in district municipalities. In contrast, Saad et al.'s (2014) research focused on exploring responsible tourism development and credited the role of local authorities in tourism development. Churugsa et al. (2007) suggest that the role of local government in planning and regulating tourism development is essential in ensuring sustainable and equitable development objectives. The development duties of the municipality are discussed in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Berrisford, 2011). The tourism industry generates activities that play a crucial role in developing a destination and help reduce economic disparities among various regions in the country (Lopes & Soares, 2017). Tourism is essential for advancing rural areas, as its contributions to the rural economy can help bridge the gap between rural and urban economies. Before implementing any tourism development strategy, policymakers must identify the key economic, natural, cultural, and heritage resources and other tourism assets that possess distinct and potentially unique features (Lopes & Soares, 2017). Policymakers and destination planners can create various tourism products by pinpointing tourism resources. Some challenges may affect the implementation of tourism development policies. For example, local authorities have a limited influence on the national government, which could result in a contradiction between government policies (Eastern Cape Government, 2017). Communities also form an essential part of tourism planning and visitors' experience. Therefore, they must be included in every aspect of planning and decision-making about tourism planning and development. Sitinga & Ogra (2014) illustrate that in some communities, tourism is perceived as an activity for the wealthy who are not interested in any development associated with tourism. Therefore, the district municipality must lead by continuously monitoring to ensure a link between tourism, the government, and communities.

Methods

The paper utilised a qualitative research method and semi-structured interviews. A pilot test was conducted with three tourism stakeholders to ensure the interview guide was clear, unbiased, and concise. This was helpful as it allowed researchers to find the answers to the role of the district municipality in developing and implementing tourism policies at the ORTDM. The virtual interviews were scheduled with participants in tourism. The study targeted tourism stakeholders who are engaged in the development and implementation of tourism policies in ORTDM. Consequently, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants (tourism stakeholders). Ethical considerations were strictly maintained throughout the data collection process, as the participation was voluntary, and no form of payment was made to encourage participation. It was also communicated that the participants could withdraw from the study at any time with no prejudice to themselves. The participants provided critical information to address the problem, and the researchers guaranteed that anonymity was maintained in the presentation and publication of the research results. This study was conducted in the region of the ORTDM, a map of which is depicted in Figure 1 below.

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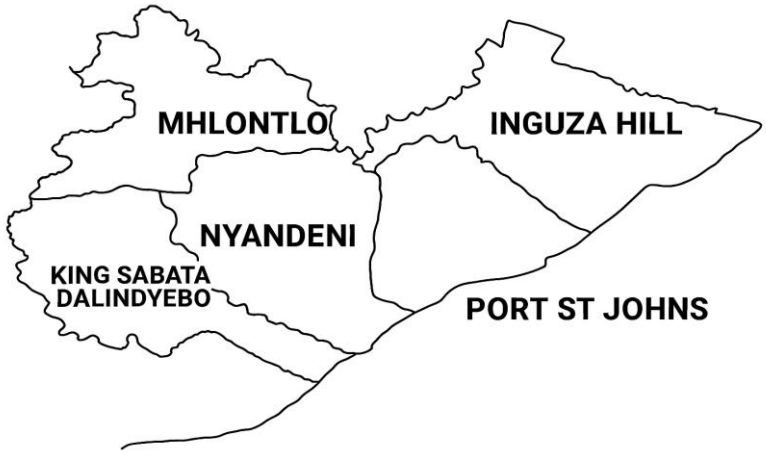

Figure 1: Map showing O.R. Tambo District Municipality
Source: Nzewi et al. (2016: 40)

Located in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, ORTDM comprises five local municipalities, namely King Sabata Dalindyebo (KSD), Nyandeni, Ngquza Hill, Mhlontlo, and Port St Johns (PSJ) (Silwana, 2021). According to the district development agency, Ntinga O.R. Tambo Development Agency SOC Ltd. (2024), the district municipality has untapped natural beauty with many tourism attractions and the coastline that stretches over 120km of the Wild Coast of South Africa. According to Silwana (2021), anti-apartheid stalwarts like Mama Winnie Mandela, Oliver Reginald Tambo (after whom the district is named), and the first democratically elected president of South Africa, Mr Nelson Mandela, were born within the ORTDM. The region has a rich cultural heritage and tourism, together with natural and beautiful beaches, which Ramukumba & Sethwana (2024) describe as key elements that could present an opportunity for spatial impacts. This paper employed purposive and snowball sampling methods to identify and target those who held positions in the district municipality, local municipalities, and regional and local tourism organisations. While there are two sampling methods (probability and non-probability), this study employed the non-probability sampling method. Ntoi & Ndlovu (2025) report that researchers such as Dlomo & Rogerson (2021), Muresherwa & Bama (2024), and Ramukumba (2019) have also successfully employed the non-probability sampling method. A purposive sampling method was used to identify key tourism stakeholders and employees from the above-mentioned local municipalities that make up the ORTDM. The starting point for applying snowball and purposive sampling techniques was to contact the regional economic development and tourism managers, who helped to identify key participants, resulting in 14 tourism stakeholders making up the research sample (Silwana, 2021). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key participants from different entities until saturation point was reached. Similarly, in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) study, saturation point was also reached after conducting 14 semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually to allow for discussion around the research problem, roles of the district municipality, and policy implementation challenges in the context of the ORTDM, South Africa.

This study used the qualitative research method as the main problem investigated was the disconnect between policy formulation and implementation by analysing the role of district municipalities in tourism governance at ORTDM. The researcher sought an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences regarding the matter under investigation. Following Wellman & Kruger's (1999) guidance, the researcher conducted 14 semi-structured interviews to collect participant data and identify essential themes from the interview guide. This facilitated discussion by covering important points from the respondents' perspectives and experiences shared during the interviews. Since the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, most municipal activities were still virtual; thus, all 14 participants opted for virtual interviews (Microsoft Teams and Zoom). These virtual interviews were conducted to adhere to health and safety protocols. According to Muresherwa & Bama (2024), virtual interviews produce the same results as in-person interviews. Only tourism and economic development staff from the district, local municipalities, and tourism organisations with experience in developing and implementing tourism policies were purposively sampled to participate in the study. The interviews took between an hour and 1.5 hours for each participant, with their approval. All interviews were virtually recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The research data were checked against the voice recordings to ensure reliability and validity. This study complied with the organisation's ethical requirements, which included obtaining permission from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's Business and Management Faculty ethics committee (Clearance Certificate Number: 2019FOBREC738). The gathered data were analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process.

Results

Table 1 below provides an overview of the demographic profiles of the research participants. The methodology section indicated that 14 participants participated in this study. Most participants (8 = 57%) were females, working for the municipalities, tourism agencies, or tourism organisations.

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

Participant number	Gender	Entity where participant is employed	Years of employment	Highest qualification
R1	Male	Tourism Organisation	5	Matric
R2	Male	Local Municipality	5	Diploma in Public Administration.
R3	Male	Local Municipality	5	Honours in Development Studies
R4	Female	Tourism Organisation	3	Degree in Business Management
R5	Male	Local Municipality	1	Diploma in Tourism Management
R6	Female	Local Municipality	5	Master's Degree in Tourism Management
R7	Male	Tourism Organisation	6	Diploma in Marketing Management
R8	Male	Tourism Organisation	5	Degree in Business Management
R9	Female	Local Municipality	5	Degree in Tourism Management
R10	Female	Tourism Agency	5	Degree in Tourism Management
R11	Female	Local Municipality	5	Degree in Tourism Management
R12	Female	Tourism Organisation	3	Degree in Accountancy
R13	Female	District Municipality	3	Tourism Management
R14	Female	District Municipality	3	Tourism Management

Source: Silwana (2021)

Tourism stakeholders' capabilities

These 14 participants, as shown in Table 1 above, worked in different portfolios in their capacity as directors (1), deputy directors (1), tourism managers (2), chairpersons for local and district tourism forums (5), and tourism officers (6). It is important to note that 93% had a post-Matric qualification, and represented different tourism stakeholder groups, which are government interests, private tourism businesses, and community groups through tourism organisations. This ensured that the data gathered was sufficient to answer the research questions. According to Ramukumba & Sethwana (2024), tourism is a multifaceted industry; its development requires collaboration and trust from private and public stakeholders. This suggests that tourism policy development and implementation require a concerted effort from all stakeholders. Since many players are involved in developing and implementing tourism policies, Kubickova (2016) argues that the government sometimes has challenges deciding on the level of involvement within the industry.

Tourism structures in ORTDM

Figure 2 below graphically depicts the tourist structures within the ORTDM.

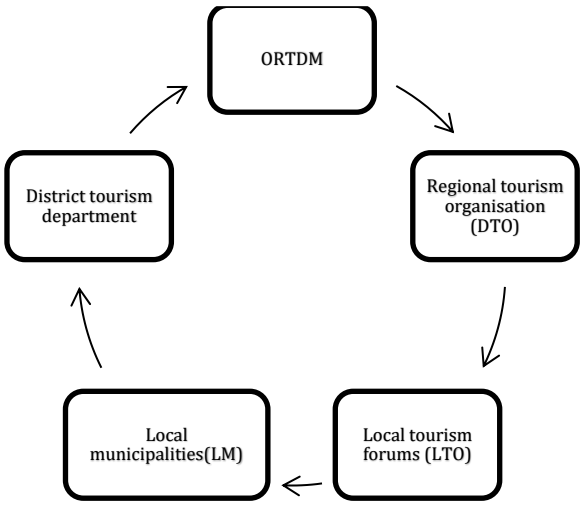

Figure 2: Tourism structures in ORTDM

Source: Silwana (2021)

All participants agreed that the district municipality supports local municipality tourism initiatives under the district's tourism department. The regional district tourism organisation represents the interests of its members (tourism businesses and communities) at the district level and delegates local responsibilities to local tourism forums. These structures are designed consistently with the recommended structure by the Department of Tourism at the national level. SA DT (2016) suggests that the municipality's tourism forums must be led by the district tourism manager, supported by the mayor's office and other relevant political and local players. According to the participants, these tourism forums (workshops) are facilitated through a collaborative effort between the district municipality and the Eastern Cape Parks Tourism Agency (ECPTA). Moreover, they are meant to serve as a platform to discuss tourism developments and challenges within the broader region of ORTDM. However, participants R1 and R12 indicated that their involvement is at the discretion of the facilitators. This was the response of participant R12 when asked about their participation: "We have been involved before I even got here. For example, tomorrow is the LED forum, and many stakeholders are called to the municipality, and then we engage…. We are only involved in the local tourism forum. It is the government's discretion to involve local tourism forums in their tourism forum, and when the local municipalities contact us, we provide suggestions". As members of the regional tourism organisation (DTO), the role of local tourism forums (LTOs) is to shape the local and district tourism strategy and serve as a voice for regional tourism and

hospitality businesses. Therefore, the participation of DTOs and LTOs is essential to coordinate and drive tourism activities within the district municipality. Collaboration amongst tourism stakeholders is necessary at the district level to avoid discrepancies and overlaps in policies at the local level (Ramukumba, 2019; Rogerson, 2021a). Corroborating Booyens (2010) and Espiner & Becken (2014), participant R14 stated that the district municipality supports tourism organisations by developing, managing, and maintaining tourism products and service facilities.

The role of ORTDM in tourism development and governance issues

This section presents findings concerning the disconnect between policy formulation and implementation by analysing the role of the district municipality in tourism governance in the context of the current study. The participants had mixed opinions about the role of the district municipality. For example, R13 pointed out the following about the role of the district municipality: "Our responsibility is to offer a tourism budget for the formulation and implementation of tourism initiatives, as well as to monitor and evaluate them...Meetings with various stakeholders to discuss tourism ideas are being organised...to ensure that local municipality policies are consistent with provincial and national objectives. Our mission is to guarantee that tourism policies are implemented correctly, to provide a framework for tourism planning, and to promote tourism policy integration and cooperation across all government domains." All participants from the local municipalities (LMs) and the district municipality shared similar sentiments and claimed that the government plays a leading role in developing, implementing, and monitoring tourism policies, as it should. When researchers asked participants from the tourism organisations about their roles, R1 was optimistic about the future; however, they highlighted that they were self-funded and emphasised the following: "It is our responsibility to promote the interests of private tourism and hospitality firms and establish norms and guidelines for tourism organisations... However, we are self-funded, so we engage with donors to support tourism initiatives such as fundraising and marketing campaigns." Limited funding for tourism initiatives was a dominant theme from all participants, and they highlighted that tourism does not get enough financial backing from the municipality, limiting their ability to grow tourism. As illustrated earlier, the district municipality facilitates tourism stakeholders' engagements through available structures, as illustrated in Fig. 2. However, the ability to translate these engagements into tangible outcomes remains a question. It is interesting to note how R7 highlighted their comprehension of the relationships between stakeholders as well as the tourism strategy and implementation process: "Our relations with local governments are driven by their mandate from local or provincial governments. For example, tourism is driven by the White Paper of 1996. Our tourism is based on the idea that tourism should create a conducive environment for private businesses to operate, but that is not the case…"

Clearly, the district municipality exerts more influence and control over the tourism policy development process, using updated policy to guide its development efforts. The private sector's participation is at the government's discretion, yet they are expected to promote regional tourism growth. About 50% of the participants (R1, R4, R7, R8, R10, R12, and R14) highlighted the need for collaboration between the district municipality and the tourism organisations, and this was reiterated by R4, who mentioned that: "Politicians and the municipality need to support the SMMEs to improve and uplift the tourism standards in our area, since this area has few attractions for tourists…Success in tourism planning and stakeholder collaboration will undoubtedly positively impact the development of the tourism and hospitality sectors for the district municipality (ORTDM) and South Africa." However, R1 had a different view, claiming that they were often not included, and mentioned that there are contradicting marketing efforts, for example: "There was a payoff line that says, "Eastern Cape, the adventure province." People used to ask "what/where" these things are...when we asked those who were involved in developing the payoff line, they mentioned bungee jumping, which is in our region…so basically, the strategy was developed by visitors, people who did not come from here, as a matter of fact, it was never taken off. People do not buy into it here." Tourism governance and planning are not an island; getting buy-in from other stakeholders is important for it to succeed. If not done correctly, it is like going to a soccer match with a squad that has never trained together. Tourism governance requires equal involvement from all tourism stakeholders, as they are affected by tourism plans and policies, to offer concrete plans to implement policy decisions. Research findings revealed a lack of political buy-in to support tourism development initiatives. As a result, participants revealed limited political and financial support, limiting the district tourism department's ability to implement their intended objectives. For example, when asked how politics affects the district municipalities' ability to implement their tourism strategies, participants from local municipalities and tourism forums (R1, R5 and R8) revealed that politics plays a huge role in the development of the Eastern Cape and stakeholders' issues that exist, hence there is slow progress in tourism developments in the region of ORTDM. Taking it further, R1 revealed that: "The Eastern Cape was broken into two parts (Ciskei and Transkei) by the apartheid government. That political rift has not been healed yet. Until we get people who look beyond that…and until we use the Constitution and make this a selfless exercise, we will not move beyond that."

From the standpoint of developing tourism, ORTDM (formerly Transkei) lacks basics like having a destination marketing organisation (DMO) to promote the region. All participants revealed that East London (formerly Ciskei) has better facilities, where the Tourism Grading Council and the ECPTA head offices are located. Members of the DTO believe that rather than having someone from East London rate their facilities, they should have their own grading facilities and DMO. They added that they do not think they are significant enough to have the same facilities and resources as other areas. In addition to the above governance issues, participants (R4, R7 and R8) believe there are personnel management issues, like hiring people with limited experience in tourism development at the district municipality. Members of the tourism organisation claimed that the tourism department has inexperienced personnel who attend travel and trade shows (local and national) to take pictures, and there are no meaningful contributions. The issue of poor implementation of tourism strategies is one of the essential themes

predominantly emphasised by most participants (R1, R2, R3, R5, R6, R9, R11, R12 and R14). One of the respondents (R7) stressed the issue of incapacitated tourism personnel by declaring that: "As a businessperson, you must go to the municipality, knock on doors, and encourage government employees and tell them what they should do, especially on the tourism side…"
In the context of this study, findings revealed poor implementation of tourism policies in ORTDM, limiting their ability to develop tourism. To corroborate this, R1 revealed that: "A commercialisation strategy was developed in 2016 and launched in 2017. The tourism agency (ECPTA) has been sitting on this strategy since 2017; they cannot handle the workload, so they must call private operators to assist…There is a vast amount of land where the government has built tourism facilities, but they are not working. Since then, they have only allocated three facilities to the private sector…and we have about 10 reserves lying down, the government is not playing enough of a role to improve the tourism sector." Silwana (2021) states that a good strategy without execution is futile. All participants highlighted that the lack of policy implementation and inadequate financial support were significant issues, revealing gaps between policy intents and implementation. The ORTDM does not provide financial support for tourism development initiatives. Participants were asked about allocations for tourism development. When responding to the question, all participants from local and district municipalities indicated that a limited budget is allocated for tourism development at the ORTDM. However, the DTO and LTO revealed that they do not receive financial backing from the municipality and rely on their fundraising initiatives. R7 revealed that: "…we must constantly knock on the government's door and remind them what they should do. However, if you keep pushing, you somehow become the enemy and end up not getting invited when there are meetings and workshops relating to tourism businesses." This indicates discontent among the private sector members, which is meant to drive tourism growth. Throughout the data collection process, they pointed out governance issues limiting their ability to implement tourism policies. For example, R8, revealed that: "The district municipality is making deals with foreign companies rather than local businesses. The only act they focus on is the Marine Protection Act, which states that we are not allowed to build close to the coastline and houses must be 5km away. However, white people build homes close to the shoreline because they do EIA's and build private cottages. To get land, people bribe traditional leaders and get a piece of land, then go to ECPTA for EIA assessment approval to build these private cottages. We are fighting big wars when it comes to corruption and the implementation of policies and acts. The municipality has failed dismally. Surprisingly, they constantly develop new strategies but fail to implement what they have." Institutional limitations, like land claims and allocations, were also prevalent among participants. Themes of corruption, bribery, and systematic exclusion also emerged from the research findings. The following section of this paper discusses these findings.

Discussion

This paper set out to examine the disconnect between policy formulation and implementation by analysing the role of district municipalities in local tourism governance in the context of the ORTDM in South Africa. The research findings revealed ingrained power asymmetries, financial dependency, and institutional weaknesses undermining policy implementation in local governance. Despite national and provincial tourism strategies and frameworks promoting decentralisation of power and stakeholder involvement, district municipalities are still dependent on the national government to fund, provide policy direction, and authority (Lekgau et al., 2024; Rogerson et al., 2022; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). Moreover, this reflects what Dlomo & Rogerson (2021) discuss as local governance lacking power within South African municipal tourism systems. Even though it is conceptually empowering, this study's findings show that the decentralisation in tourism governance has not yet translated into meaningful autonomy for district municipalities. The results confirm that decentralising power in tourism governance is theoretically empowering. However, it has not translated into meaningful self-sufficiency for rural municipalities like the ORTDM. According to Rogerson & Sixaba (2022), decentralisation without the alignment of resource allocation merely reproduces centralised control under a different guise. Furthermore, findings extend this argument by showing that even the "participatory" tourism forums and workshops operate as a symbolic tick box exercise rather than a functional structure. While Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory advocates for equitable participation and benefits, study results show that participation without influence or financial authority does not achieve legitimate collaboration. Thus, this paper also contributes to the theoretical refinement of the stakeholder theory by revealing its limitations when applied in an unequal socio-political context. Echoing what Acha-Anyi et al. (2021) describe as inclusive participation, a participation accompanied by redistribution of power and financial capacity. Stakeholder theory assumes that there is a balanced relationship between stakeholders. However, the study findings revealed that power asymmetries persist even within formal governance structures in the ORTDM. Consequently, the concept of "policy without" is advanced here and captures a recurring paradox where participation exists without authority. Furthermore, it contributes to the growing body of African scholarship on tourism governance (Dlomo & Rogerson, 2021; Sixaba & Rogerson, 2023) by documenting participants' experiences. This research exposes how weak governance structures, like political fragmentation, limit budgeting and weak institutional coordination, preventing policy implementation into tangible outcomes. This underscores the urgent need to redefine the authority and the current resource allocation framework of district municipalities to minimise the gap between policy intent and implementation. Tourism forums must evolve from consultative bodies to decision-making platforms that enforce accountability and empower LTO and DTO with real decision-making and authority. The district municipality should lead and facilitate the establishment of DMO in the district municipality to promote and market tourism. By interrogating the interplay between policy, power, and governance, this study contributes to ongoing debates in African tourism policy implementation. It proves that decentralisation without empowerment perpetuates dependency and limits innovation at the local level. The study finding offers valuable insights that

could help policymakers seeking to achieve the National Development Plan (NDP) and UN Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDGs 8 and 10).

Concluding remarks and recommendations

The sample size of this study could have been bigger; however, due to financial constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher employed snowball and purposive nonprobability sampling methods. Participants were selected because they are involved in policy formulation and implementation. Due to travel restrictions and to adhere to safety measures, data was collected through semi-structured virtual interviews. Therefore, the researcher could not read non-verbal cues such as body language and gestures of the participants. Unfortunately, a representative from the Port St. Johns Local Municipality declined to participate in this study, and as a result, researchers did not get their input. Also, traditional leaders play a significant role in rural communities; however, the study did not investigate their roles in tourism policy development and implementation due to limited financial resources and time constraints. This study's findings reveal an essential contradiction. While the national government mandates the implementation of local tourism policies, district municipalities still lack the financial self-sufficiency, which limits their powers and decision-making process to implement policies. Although the government facilitates a leadership role through platforms like tourism workshops, inadequate funding undermines local initiatives. The findings highlight how power imbalances in decentralised systems weaken policy effectiveness, contributing to broader debates on tourism governance. In conclusion, there is a need to redefine the district municipal authority by developing a stakeholder-centred approach to tourism, hiring competent personnel, and establishing targeted funding mechanisms to bridge the gap between policy goals and local capacity.

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