

Digital-Based Religious Tourism Governance: An Integration Model of Smart Tourism, Creative Economy, and Local Wisdom in Strengthening the Sustainability of the Community Economy in Gorontalo

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation in the tourism sector is driving the development of technology-based religious tourism as part of efforts to increase destination competitiveness. However, the implementation of digitalization in religious tourism in the regions still faces limitations, not only in infrastructure and community capacity, but also in governance, coordination between stakeholders, and integration with the local economy. This study aims to analyze the governance of digital-based religious tourism in Gorontalo Regency through the integration of smart tourism, the creative economy, and local wisdom in strengthening the community's economic sustainability. This study used a mixed methods approach with data collected through in-depth interviews, a survey of 210 respondents, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The results indicate that smart tourism readiness is still in the low to moderate category, characterized by the low quality of digital promotion, the condition of facilities, and coordination between stakeholders. Local wisdom has relatively strong potential, but has not been optimally integrated with the creative economy and digital systems. This study produces an integrative governance model that emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, strengthening the role of the community, and preserving cultural values in the development of inclusive and sustainable religious tourism.

Keywords: Governance, Religious Tourism, Smart Tourism, Creative Economy, Local Wisdom

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, religious tourism has become more than just a visit to sacred sites, but has evolved into a social phenomenon that integrates the spiritual, cultural, and economic

dimensions of society. From a sustainable development perspective, religious tourism has strategic potential to strengthen local identity while promoting community well-being through the utilization of cultural resources and traditions (Chantarungsri et al., 2024; Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Therefore, the development of religious tourism is not only oriented towards increasing the number of visits, but also towards maintaining a balance between economic growth, cultural preservation, and the sustainability of the spiritual values that are the main foundation of the destination.

Gorontalo Regency is one of the regions with strong potential for developing religious tourism based on local wisdom. Islamic traditions, such as the tumbilotohe and Walima celebrations, harmoniously blend with local culture, demonstrate that religious practices in Gorontalo are inextricably linked to the social and cultural context of the local community. Destinations such as the Bubohu Tourism Village, the Walima Emas Mosque, and various other religious sites serve not only as places of worship but also as spaces for social and economic interaction involving the local community. In this context, religious tourism plays a dual role: as a medium for cultural preservation and as an instrument for community-based economic empowerment (Gintulangi & Arsana, 2022).

Along with technological advancements, digital transformation has transformed the way tourist destinations are managed and promoted. The concept of smart tourism emphasizes the use of digital technology to enhance the tourist experience, streamline destination management, and integrate data-driven services (Boes, Buhalis, & Inversini, 2016; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). In practice, digitalization through social media, online platforms, and tourism information systems can expand promotional reach and open up broader market access, including for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). However, the application of technology in religious tourism cannot be separated from the local social and cultural context, as digitalization has the potential to create tension between the need for modern promotion and the preservation of sacred values and cultural identity (Sigala, 2020).

These issues are evident in the development of religious tourism in Gorontalo Regency. Although several destinations have utilized social media as a promotional tool, the application of technology remains partial and has not been integrated into a comprehensive management system. Limited infrastructure, low digital human resource capacity, and weak coordination among stakeholders are major obstacles to the implementation of smart tourism. Furthermore, there is a gap between the digital image presented and the actual conditions on the ground, such as poorly maintained facilities and suboptimal services. In the context of religious tourism, this gap not only impacts tourist satisfaction but also has the potential to diminish the spiritual significance and cultural credibility of the destination.

On the other hand, the development of religious tourism also faces challenges in substantially integrating the creative economy and local wisdom. Traditional culinary products, handicrafts, and religious traditions have great potential to support destination differentiation and expand economic benefits for local communities. However, in many cases, community involvement remains limited and has not been structured within the framework of

community-based tourism, which positions communities as the primary actors in destination management and development (Richards, 2011). Without active community involvement, digital tourism risks becoming a shallow promotional activity that fails to create sustainable economic value.

Furthermore, digitalization in religious tourism also creates a dilemma between modernization and the preservation of spiritual values. On the one hand, digital technology can increase the visibility of destinations and attract the interest of the younger generation. However, on the other hand, there is a risk of commodifying cultural and religious values when spiritual practices are reduced to objects of tourist consumption (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). This phenomenon demonstrates that digital transformation in religious tourism cannot be understood as a linear process of progress, but rather as a complex social process involving negotiations between economic interests, cultural values, and religious practices.

Although various studies have discussed smart tourism, the creative economy, and local wisdom as important elements in tourism development, most studies still place these three aspects separately and have not fully examined them from a governance perspective, particularly in the context of digital-based religious tourism at the local level. In practice, however, the success of religious tourism development is determined not only by the use of technology, the strength of local culture, or community economic activities alone, but also by the ability of governance to build coordination between stakeholders, clarify institutional roles, and integrate the interests of local governments, destination managers, communities, MSMEs, and religious leaders within a collaborative and sustainable management framework. The limitations of these studies indicate a significant research gap, particularly in regions like Gorontalo that have strong religious and cultural potential but still face challenges in aspects of digitalization, facilities, and coordination of destination management. The novelty of this research lies in the effort to formulate an integrative governance model that connects smart tourism, the creative economy, and local wisdom in the development of community-based religious tourism in Gorontalo. Based on these conditions, this study aims to analyze the digital-based governance of religious tourism in Gorontalo Regency through the integration of smart tourism, creative economy, and local wisdom, as well as formulating a management model that is able to strengthen the economic sustainability of the community without ignoring the cultural and spiritual values that are the main characteristics of the destination.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of digital-based religious tourism governance in Gorontalo Regency. This approach was chosen because the phenomenon studied is not only related to perceptions, experiences, and social interactions between stakeholders, but also requires measuring the level of readiness, integration, coordination, and satisfaction in managing religious tourism destinations (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Thus, the use of mixed

methods allows this study to capture governance issues more comprehensively, both in terms of socio-institutional dynamics and measurable empirical trends.

The research was conducted at several religious tourism destinations in Gorontalo Regency, with a primary focus on Bubohu Tourism Village and its surrounding areas, demonstrating the interconnectedness of religious practices, local culture, and community economic activities. This location was chosen because it represents the character of community-based religious tourism, which is facing the challenges of digitalization in its management. The research subjects included various stakeholders in the religious tourism ecosystem, namely visitors, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), destination managers, community leaders, and local government representatives. Informants were selected purposively, taking into account their direct involvement in religious tourism activities and management, so that the data obtained could describe the condition of governance from the perspectives of the various actors involved.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore informants' perceptions, experiences, and views regarding the implementation of smart tourism, creative economy support, the role of local wisdom, and patterns of coordination between stakeholders in developing religious tourism. Second, a questionnaire survey was used to measure respondents' perceptions of several key indicators, namely the quality of digital promotion (Digital Promotion Quality), facility conditions (Facility Condition), coordination between stakeholders (Coordination), creative economy support (Creative Economy Support), integration of local wisdom (Local Wisdom Integration), level of satisfaction (Satisfaction), and intention to revisit (Intention to Revisit). The survey involved 210 respondents consisting of visitors, MSMEs, and managers or related officials. Third, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted as part of the process of deepening the findings, clarifying relationships between actors, and validating the resulting integrative governance model, involving representatives from the government, destination managers, local communities, MSMEs, and academics.

(Adelliani, Sucirahayu, & Zanjabila, 2023) Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis through the stages of data reduction, coding, categorization, and meaning-making to identify patterns, relationships, and key issues in digital-based religious tourism governance. This analysis aimed to examine how technology, the creative economy, and local wisdom are linked in destination management practices, as well as how the roles of each actor are shaped in the process. Meanwhile, quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using statistical analysis by calculating the average value, distribution, and trends of respondents' answers for each research indicator. This quantitative analysis aimed to strengthen the qualitative findings while providing an overview of the level of destination readiness, stakeholder perceptions, and the state of digital-based religious tourism governance in Gorontalo Regency.

To ensure data validity and reliability, this study employed triangulation of methods and data sources by comparing the results of interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions

(FGDs). Furthermore, the reliability of the survey instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha to ensure the internal consistency of the indicators used. Through these steps, this study is expected to produce findings that are not only substantively comprehensive but also academically sound, explaining a digital-based religious tourism governance model relevant to local destination development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research survey involved 210 respondents across three main groups: visitors, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and destination managers or related officials. The composition of respondents showed a relatively balanced distribution between men and women, with average ages varying by respondent role. Visitors were on average younger than MSMEs and managers, indicating that perceptions of digital-based religious tourism come from diverse groups, both in terms of demographics and involvement in destination activities. This diversity is important because it allows the research to capture the readiness, challenges, and opportunities for developing digital-based religious tourism from the perspectives of various actors involved.

In general, the survey results show that most indicators are still in the moderate to low category. This condition indicates that digital-based religious tourism governance in Gorontalo Regency is not yet optimal. Although there is quite strong potential in the aspect of local wisdom, elements of digitalization, physical facilities, stakeholder coordination, and visitor satisfaction have not shown strong achievements. This finding confirms that the development of digital-based religious tourism cannot be understood as a mature governance system, but rather is still in the early stages that require strengthening institutions, infrastructure, and community participation (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Gretzel et al., 2015). Smart tourism readiness from a governance perspective.

Descriptive analysis results show that the average digital promotion quality is around 2.5–2.6. This figure indicates that digital promotion of religious tourism destinations in Gorontalo Regency is still relatively low. While social media has been used as a means of publication, its utilization remains inconsistent, unintegrated, and unsupported by a comprehensive destination information system (Abdilla, 2024). In the context of smart tourism, these findings indicate that digitalization remains at the basic promotional level, having not yet developed into comprehensive digital services such as the integration of destination information, navigation, visitor experience, and transaction support (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Gretzel et al., 2015). From a governance perspective, this condition demonstrates that digital transformation is not yet supported by institutional capacity capable of directing the use of technology in a planned and sustainable manner.

The Facility Condition indicator also showed a low score, around 2.3–2.7. These results indicate that physical aspects of the destination, such as cleanliness, comfort, places of worship, and accessibility, remain major issues. The poor condition of facilities demonstrates an imbalance between digital promotion efforts and the destination's actual readiness. In

tourism studies, the actual visitor experience is a crucial factor in determining the sustainability of visits. Therefore, digitalization will not be effective if it is not supported by adequate facilities (Neuhofner, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2015). From a governance perspective, these facility issues also reflect suboptimal destination planning, management, and maintenance as part of the responsibility for local public service governance.

Furthermore, the stakeholder coordination indicator ranges from 2.4 to 2.6. These results indicate that the collaborative relationship between local governments, destination managers, local communities, and MSMEs is not yet optimal. This low level of coordination demonstrates that digital transformation is not yet supported by strong collaborative governance. From a smart tourism perspective, technology should be present in a connected ecosystem, not operating fragmentarily. Therefore, the low coordination score reinforces the finding that the main obstacle to developing digital religious tourism in Gorontalo lies not solely in technology, but also in institutional structure and governance capacity (Boes et al., 2016) (Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2016).

These quantitative findings align with interview results, which indicated that some destinations still rely on individual promotion and lack structured digital management. Linked to smart tourism theory, this situation indicates that Gorontalo Regency is still in the early stages of becoming a smart destination, where technology is not yet fully integrated with destination infrastructure, coordination, and institutions (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Gretzel et al., 2015). In other words, the main problem is not only the low utilization of technology, but also the lack of digital governance capable of effectively connecting the roles of various actors.

Integration of creative economy and local wisdom in destination management

In the creative economy aspect, the Creative Economy Support indicator ranges from 2.6 to 2.9. This value indicates that support for the connection between religious tourism and local creative economic activities is still considered moderate to low. Empirically, MSMEs have utilized tourist visits to sell typical culinary products and local crafts, but the economic impact has not been significant. This indicates that the potential for the creative economy does exist, but it has not been optimally integrated with a digital-based tourism system. This finding aligns with the view (Richards, 2011) that the creative economy in tourism only develops strongly if there is a stable flow of visitors and a supportive market ecosystem. From a governance perspective, this condition indicates that the distribution of economic benefits from religious tourism has not been fully organized through policies and management mechanisms capable of sustainably empowering local actors.

In contrast, the Local Wisdom Integration indicator showed a relatively higher score, around 3.1–3.3. This value indicates that local wisdom elements are still perceived strongly in religious tourism in Gorontalo. Traditions such as tumbilotohe, Walima, local Islamic culture, and regional religious identity remain the main strengths of the destination. However, a high local wisdom score does not automatically mean strong destination management. This finding

actually points to a paradox: local culture is still alive and recognized, but has not yet been fully converted into a sustainable digital management and promotion force. This condition aligns with the argument (Sigala, 2020) that cultural values in digital tourism require a co-creation process so that they do not stop at symbolism but are able to generate real experiences and economic value.

From a quantitative perspective, the discrepancy between the relatively higher local wisdom scores and the lower creative economy scores indicates a gap between cultural potential and economic utilization. In other words, Gorontalo possesses strong symbolic and cultural richness, but mechanisms for connecting this potential to markets, MSMEs, and digital platforms have not yet been fully developed. This means that the main challenge lies not in the absence of local culture, but in the weak institutionalization of culture within community-based tourism business models (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015).

When viewed from a community-based tourism perspective, this situation indicates that local communities have not yet fully assumed the role of primary actors controlling the economic value of religious tourism. Local wisdom remains widely present as a cultural identity, but has not yet been maximized as a source of organized economic benefits. Therefore, the integration of digitalization, the creative economy, and local wisdom needs to be directed toward a more participatory management model oriented toward community empowerment (Gintulangi & Arsana, 2022). Within a governance framework, this emphasizes the importance of governance that not only preserves cultural heritage but also ensures that these cultural values are part of the strategy for managing and strengthening the local economy.

Visitor satisfaction and repeat visit intention as a reflection of the quality of governance

The survey results showed that the satisfaction level ranged from 2.6 to 2.9. This score indicates that visitors' experiences at religious tourism destinations in Gorontalo Regency were not entirely satisfactory. This relatively low level of satisfaction is closely related to the condition of facilities, service quality, and the mismatch between expectations built through digital media and actual experiences on the ground. In the context of religious tourism, satisfaction is not only related to physical comfort, but also to the spiritual experience, environmental cleanliness, and the quality of the religious atmosphere experienced by visitors (Neuhof et al., 2015; Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Thus, the level of visitor satisfaction can be read as an indicator reflecting the overall quality of destination governance.

Meanwhile, the Intention to Revisit indicator ranges from 2.9 to 3.1. This value is slightly higher than satisfaction, indicating that even though visitors are not fully satisfied, there is still interest in returning. This can be explained by the destination's persistent cultural and spiritual appeal. In other words, religious tourism in Gorontalo still has considerable symbolic magnetism, even though it has not been fully accompanied by adequate management quality. This finding suggests that visitor loyalty in religious tourism can be

influenced not only by facilities, but also by symbolic attachment to the destination's cultural and spiritual values (Cohen & Cohen, 2012).

The relationship between facility conditions and satisfaction is a key finding. Data show a tendency that the better the facility rating, the higher the level of visitor satisfaction. This finding reinforces the argument that digital promotion without improving basic facilities will only generate short-term exposure, not tourist loyalty. From a sustainable destination development perspective, visitor satisfaction is a crucial prerequisite for continued visits, local economic revenue, and strengthening the destination's image in the digital space (Schönherr, Eller, Kallmuenzer, & Peters, 2023). From a governance perspective, this confirms that the quality of the tourist experience is significantly influenced by the ability of managers and stakeholders to provide services and facilities consistent with the destination's established image.

Quantitative implications for integrative governance models

The quantitative findings provide a strong empirical basis for the integration model proposed in this study. Low scores for digital promotion, facilities, and coordination indicate that the smart tourism component remains weak and requires structural strengthening. The low creative economy score indicates that the economic benefits of religious tourism have not yet optimally flowed to MSMEs and the community. Conversely, the relatively high local wisdom score indicates that the cultural and spiritual foundations are already in place and can serve as a starting point for development.

Thus, the integration model between smart tourism, the creative economy, and local wisdom was not born solely from conceptual assumptions, but rather from real needs demonstrated by survey data. This model positions local wisdom as the basis for social and cultural legitimacy, smart tourism as an instrument for management modernization, and the creative economy as a channel for distributing economic benefits to the community. All three must work simultaneously so that religious tourism does not cease to be a cultural symbol but develops into a sustainable ecosystem (Gretzel et al., 2015; Richards, 2011; Sigala, 2018).

Model validation through focus group discussions (FGDs), which yielded an average score of 3.6–4.3, reinforces the survey findings that the proposed model is deemed relevant by stakeholders. Meanwhile, the instrument's reliability value, above 0.70, indicates that the indicators used are sufficiently consistent in measuring respondents' perceptions. Thus, the quantitative results not only complement the qualitative findings but also serve as a basis for strengthening the legitimacy of the integration model proposed by this study.

Based on quantitative and qualitative analysis, this study produces an integrated model that illustrates the dynamic relationship between smart tourism, the creative economy, and local wisdom in strengthening community economic sustainability. This model demonstrates that these three components do not operate in isolation but interact within a system that forms a cycle of religious tourism destination development.

Figure 1. Smart Tourism, Creative Economy, and Local Wisdom Integration Model



This model positions smart tourism as a digitalization instrument that supports tourism promotion and experiences, the creative economy as a channel for distributing economic benefits through MSME activities, and local wisdom as the foundation of the destination's cultural and spiritual values. The interaction of these three elements results in strengthening the sustainability of the community's economy through enhanced tourism experiences, growth in local economic transactions, and cultural preservation. In this model, governance acts as a connecting system involving the government, community, local business actors, destination managers, and religious leaders in ensuring the sustainability and balance of religious tourism development. Thus, the resulting model not only illustrates the integration between elements but also emphasizes the importance of collaborative governance as a foundation for the development of inclusive and sustainable digital-based religious tourism. The content is supported by figures, tables, and equations referenced in the manuscript.

DISCUSSION

A more critical look at the quantitative results of this study suggests that the primary problem with digital religious tourism in Gorontalo Regency is not the absence of potential, but rather the weak conversion of that potential into a sustainable system. Low scores on the indicators of digitalization, facilities, coordination, and satisfaction indicate that destination development remains stuck at the symbolic promotion stage. Meanwhile, the high value of local wisdom indicates that social and cultural capital is already present. These findings align with the view that the success of digital transformation is largely determined by a destination's ability to connect technology with governance, user experience, and social sustainability (Schönherr et al., 2023; Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang, & Koo, 2015).

Without the support of good governance, community capacity, and adequate physical infrastructure, technology will only increase visibility without improving the quality of experiences. In the long term, such conditions risk fostering public distrust and the commodification of spiritual values. Therefore, the quantitative results of this study support the need for a religious tourism development approach that is oriented not only toward technology but also toward the social, economic, and cultural sustainability of local communities (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Gintulangi & Arsana, 2022) (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015).

The low score for inter-stakeholder coordination is the strongest indicator that the main challenge to religious tourism development in Gorontalo is collaborative governance. The local government, destination managers, MSMEs, local communities, and religious leaders are not yet fully connected through a clear collaborative working pattern. This situation indicates that relations between actors remain weak, both in the division of roles, setting priorities, and in the implementation of destination development. However, within the framework of collaborative governance, the success of public issue management depends heavily on the ability to build collaborative forums, build trust, shared commitment, and facilitative leadership among the actors involved (Ansell & Gash, 2018).

Findings regarding the poor quality of facilities can also be interpreted as a governance issue, not simply a technical issue at the destination. Inadequate facilities indicate that religious tourism management has not been fully positioned as part of local public services, requiring ongoing planning, financing, maintenance, and oversight. In this context, digital-based religious tourism governance should not stop at building a destination's image through digital media, but should also ensure that actual conditions on the ground align with the service promises promoted to the public. A gap between digital imagery and tourists' actual experiences can undermine public trust and hinder the destination's sustainability.

At the same time, the high local wisdom score compared to other indicators indicates that Gorontalo possesses strong social and cultural capital as a foundation for governance. Local wisdom not only serves as a symbolic destination identity but can also serve as a source of social legitimacy in building more participatory governance. Local religious and cultural traditions can serve as a foundation for strengthening community engagement, expanding a sense of ownership of the destination, and ensuring that digitalization does not erode sacred values and cultural identity. In this context, local wisdom should not be positioned as a promotional complement, but rather as a normative pillar in formulating the direction of religious tourism management.

The findings regarding limited support for the creative economy also demonstrate that religious tourism governance has not fully distributed economic benefits to the community. While MSMEs have been involved, the link between visitor flows, digital promotion, and local economic growth has not yet been firmly established. This indicates that existing governance mechanisms are ineffective in connecting destinations with the local economic ecosystem. Therefore, the creative economy issue in this study cannot be understood solely as

a market issue, but also as a policy and governance issue concerning the distribution of benefits. Good governance should ensure that religious tourism development not only increases the visibility of destinations but also extends economic benefits equitably to surrounding communities.

Based on these findings, the integration model developed in this study should be understood as an integrative governance model. In this model, smart tourism serves as an instrument for digitalizing services and promotion, the creative economy as a channel for distributing local economic benefits, and local wisdom as a socio-cultural foundation that maintains destination legitimacy. However, these three elements can only work effectively if connected by strong governance. Governance in this context encompasses local government leadership, cross-sector coordination, community involvement, synergy with local businesses, and recognition of the moral and cultural authority of religious leaders and local communities. Therefore, the model proposed in this study confirms that the success of digital-based religious tourism is largely determined by the ability to build adaptive, participatory, and sustainable multi-stakeholder governance.

More critically, the results of this study demonstrate that digitalization without strengthened governance will only generate exposure, but not necessarily sustainability. Conversely, when governance is strengthened, technology can be instrumental in improving service quality, expanding participation, strengthening the local economy, and maintaining cultural values in a more balanced manner. Therefore, the development of digital-based religious tourism in Gorontalo Regency needs to be directed not only at technological advancement and promotion, but also at establishing a governance system capable of connecting public interests, cultural potential, and community economic needs within an inclusive regional development framework.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This research shows that the development of digital-based religious tourism in Gorontalo Regency faces major governance challenges. Despite its strong cultural, religious, and social potential, smart tourism implementation has not been fully integrated due to weak digital promotion, the quality of destination facilities, stakeholder coordination, and institutional capacity. Therefore, the primary challenge lies not in the lack of tourism potential, but rather in the suboptimal governance mechanisms capable of sustainably connecting technology, actors, local resources, and local wisdom values.

The research findings also confirm that local wisdom is a crucial foundation for developing religious tourism in Gorontalo. However, these cultural and spiritual values have not yet been fully translated into a participatory, effective management system that directly impacts the local economy. The involvement of the community, MSMEs, destination managers, and religious leaders still needs to be strengthened through collaborative governance that positions all actors as part of the digital-based religious tourism development ecosystem.

The main contribution of this research lies in the formulation of a digital-based religious tourism governance model that integrates smart tourism, the creative economy, and local wisdom. This model emphasizes that technology cannot be a stand-alone solution but must be supported by strong, collaborative governance that is sensitive to the local context. Therefore, religious tourism development in Gorontalo Regency needs to be directed at strengthening basic infrastructure, improving the quality of destination services, developing the digital capacity of the community and MSMEs, and utilizing integrated digital platforms. Digitalization should also be directed at strengthening, rather than obscuring, the spiritual values and cultural identity of the region.

In practice, sustainable religious tourism can only be achieved if governance simultaneously bridges digital modernization, community economic empowerment, and cultural preservation. For future research, this integration model can be tested in other regions with different characteristics and developed through the use of more advanced technologies, such as augmented reality, data analytics, and integrated tourism platforms, to enrich the tourist experience and expand the economic impact on local communities.

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