

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES BY THE INDONESIAN CONSULATE GENERAL IN DAVAO CITY TO STRENGTHEN BILATERAL TOURISM TIES BETWEEN INDONESIA AND THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

Tourism diplomacy plays a vital role in strengthening paradiplomatic ties between regions, particularly in archipelagic and culturally connected nations like Indonesia and the Philippines. However, there remains a significant gap between diplomatic efforts and practical outcomes, especially in the context of enhancing cross-border tourism between North Sulawesi and Mindanao. This study aims to examine the tourism diplomacy techniques (Strategies) employed by the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia (CJRI) in Davao City to foster paradiplomatic cooperation. Utilizing a mixed methods approach with an exploratory sequential design, qualitative data were collected through literature reviews and semi-structured interviews with diplomats at CGRI Davao, while quantitative data were obtained from secondary sources, including the Statistics Bureau (BPS) of North Sulawesi and the Department of Tourism (DOT) of the Philippines. The findings reveal that CGRI Davao has implemented multiple strategies, such as collaborations with travel agencies, participation in international cultural events, and efforts to restore direct air and sea links. These findings serve as a reference for developing more integrated and impactful paradiplomatic tourism strategies in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the crucial industries in both national and regional economic development across Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia and the Philippines. With the increasing recognition of the need for inclusive development, border regions like North Sulawesi and Mindanao are becoming prominent locations within bilateral cooperation frameworks. These locations possess significant natural, cultural, and historical assets, however they remain comparatively underdeveloped in terms of tourism. Their considerable potential remains unfulfilled owing to inadequate promotion, infrastructural deficiencies, and poor interregional connectivity (Rahayu 2021).

Mindanao, situated in the southern Philippines, and North Sulawesi, located in eastern Indonesia, encounter analogous developmental obstacles. Restricted transportation access, unequal regional development, and the impact of social and



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political factors impede tourism expansion. Both places, however, have significant opportunities including marine tourism, cultural and ethnic variety, and avenues for collaboration among local groups. This requires cooperative initiatives and flexible diplomacy to enhance their tourism credibility (KBBRI Yangon 2023)

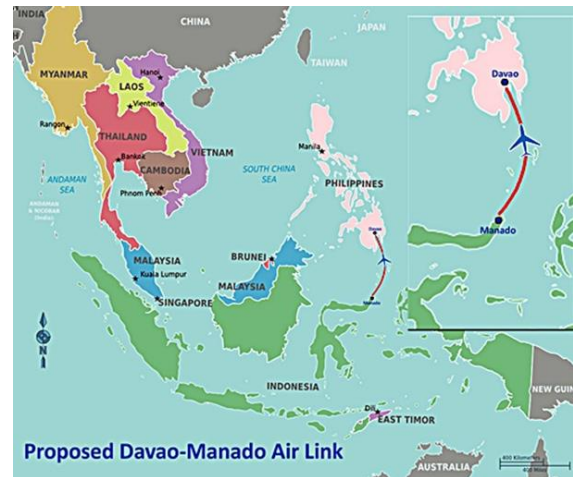


Figure 1 Map of Indonesia and the Philippines

The geographic proximity between Indonesia and the Philippines provides a distinct advantage in promoting cross-border tourism, particularly through paradiplomatic approaches. Davao City in Mindanao has had direct access to North Sulawesi, especially via the Bitung–Davao sea route, which was previously initiated. This positions the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia (CGRI) in Davao as a strategic actor in reinforcing bilateral cooperation particularly in advancing inclusive and sustainable tourism development.

Paradiplomacy is a diplomatic activity carried out by subnational actors such as local governments or special economic zone authorities in establishing international relations, both for economic, cultural and political interests (Lecours 2020). In the context of tourism, paradiplomacy is realized in the form of tourism paradiplomacy, namely destination promotion through cross-country regional cooperation that prioritizes connectivity, shared cultural narratives, and event collaboration (Fathun 2022).

In this framework, cross-border cooperation (Cross-Border Cooperation) according to (Adhitya 2021) becomes relevant. CBC aims to overcome administrative barriers created by national borders by encouraging horizontal integration at the local and regional levels. This cross-border cooperation creates inter-regional interdependencies that encourage subnational actors to engage in sectoral diplomacy, including tourism actively. In Southeast Asia, CBC practices in tourism can be found in the Batam-Johor and Bintan-Singapore regions. The study (Damiani Ngasi and Darmawan 2024) shows how the Bintan-Singapore region applies the “One destination, Two Systems” model, which allows for joint promotion despite different regulations.

However, statistical data shows that the level of tourist visits between Mindanao and North Sulawesi is still relatively low when compared to other border areas such as Riau Islands-Singapore. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a drastic decline in the number of foreign tourists, with a drop of up to 72% in North Sulawesi in 2020. Meanwhile, Davao City is still one of the top destinations in Mindanao, although not as competitive as other

major cities in the Philippines. This fact points to the need for more focused promotion and diplomacy strategies, including strengthening connectivity and creating cross-border tourism narratives.

As the global economy recovers post-pandemic, the tourism sector is again showing a positive trend. According to (Badan Pusat Statistika Provinsi Sulawesi Utara 2024), Indonesia's tourism sector is projected to grow by more than 7% in 2025, while the Philippines has also recorded a target of increasing tourists in the Mindanao region by 8% (Tourism 2024). This momentum is a great opportunity for both countries to strengthen cross-border cooperation through joint promotions, cultural exchanges, and transportation connectivity. Therefore, the role of the Consulate General in Davao City according to the Economic Intelligence Book of the Consulate General in Davao City (KBBRI Yangon 2023) as the spearhead of Indonesia's diplomacy in the Southern Philippines has become increasingly crucial. The Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia Davao not only carries out consular and citizen protection functions, but also actively promotes the tourism sector targeting the Mindanao and North Sulawesi markets. Through cultural activities, tourism business forums, and public diplomacy, the Consulate becomes an important link between local governments, tourism industry players, and local communities in both countries. This approach aims to introduce new tourism destinations, expand market reach, and create mutually beneficial socio-economic relationships.

Various studies have highlighted the state of tourism in North Sulawesi and Mindanao, as well as case studies of Johor-Tanjung Pinang and Bintan-Singapore tourism cooperation. However, there are still research gaps in a number of aspects. First, there are not many studies that specifically examine the role of the Consulate General in Davao within the framework of paradiplomacy and subnational economic diplomacy. Second, studies that integrate statistical data from the two countries with policy analysis and institutional diplomacy are limited. Third, the link between the strategy of the Indonesian Consulate General in Davao and the BIMP-EAGA framework in facilitating cross-border tourism connectivity has not been discussed in depth. Fourth, cross-case comparisons between paradiplomacy practices in the Indonesia-Philippines region and the Indonesia-Malaysia or Indonesia-Singapore regions are still rare.

As a result, this study endeavors to evaluate the efficacy of paradiplomacy conducted by CGRI Davao in promoting tourism and to develop recommendations that can facilitate regional economic development through cross-border tourism strategies, as a result of the aforementioned explanations and theories.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods sequentially to gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Nasarudin Nasarudin 2024). This approach was chosen for its ability to combine the exploratory depth of qualitative data with the generalizability of quantitative data, thereby offering a more comprehensive picture of the tourism diplomacy strategies implemented by the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia (CGRI) in Davao City. The type of research is descriptive-exploratory, using an Exploratory Sequential Design, where the research process begins with the collection and analysis of qualitative data, followed by the quantitative phase. This approach is used to identify initial qualitative findings, which are then reinforced or confirmed through statistical data (University 2025).



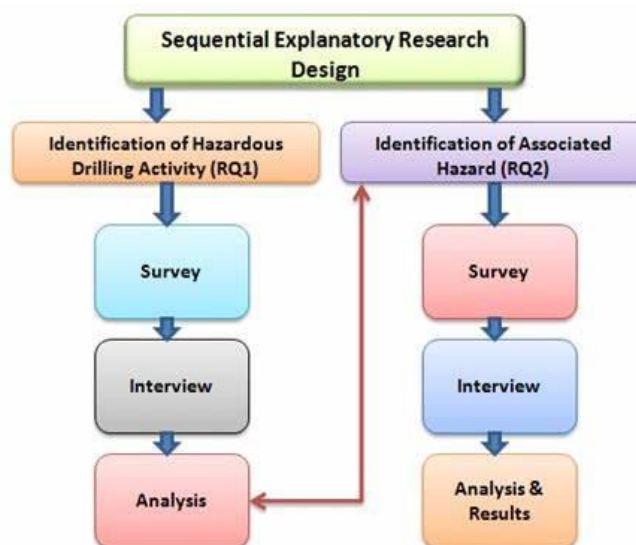


Figure 2: Exploratory Sequential Design

Qualitative data was collected through a literature review of books, scholarly articles, journals, official reports, and relevant policy documents particularly those related to paradiplomacy, tourism diplomacy, and Indonesia–Philippines relations in the North Sulawesi and Mindanao regions. Additional qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with a key informant, Mrs. Umi Yanti Febriana Silalahi, a diplomat at CGRI Davao in charge of the Information, Social, and Cultural Affairs function. These interviews were conducted periodically during the author's internship at CGRI Davao to gain in-depth insights into the tourism diplomacy strategies employed, challenges faced on the ground, and the forms of cross-border cooperation undertaken.

Quantitative data was sourced from secondary data provided by the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) of North Sulawesi Province, the Economic Intelligence Book published by CGRI Davao, and reports from the Department of Tourism (DOT) of the Philippines. The quantitative data reviewed includes trends in tourist visits between Indonesia and the Philippines from 2020 to 2024, tourism growth rates, the sector's contribution to the economy, and interregional connectivity indicators. Data analysis was conducted through two approaches. Qualitative analysis involved data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, focusing on describing the narrative of the tourism diplomacy strategies carried out by CGRI Davao City and the collaboration among local actors in both regions. Quantitative analysis was carried out using descriptive statistical methods to support and validate the findings from the qualitative data. The results of this analysis were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies and programs implemented. This research was conducted at CGRI Davao City, Philippines, with data collection taking place during the author's internship from November 2024 to January 2025.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the Indonesian Consulate General in Davao City and Its Jurisdiction

The Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Davao City is an official diplomatic mission founded in 1994. The primary functions are to offer protection and services to Indonesian citizens within its jurisdiction and to strengthen bilateral relations between Indonesia and the Philippines across multiple sectors, including political diplomacy, economy, socio-cultural affairs, and tourism (KBBRI Yangon 2023).

CGRI Davao functions under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, tasked with fostering collaboration between eastern Indonesia, notably North Sulawesi, and the southern Philippines, particularly Mindanao and the Visayas. CGRI Davao actively participates in paradiplomacy by fostering inter-regional collaboration and advancing economic diplomacy grounded in local potential, particularly in tourism and cross-border trade.

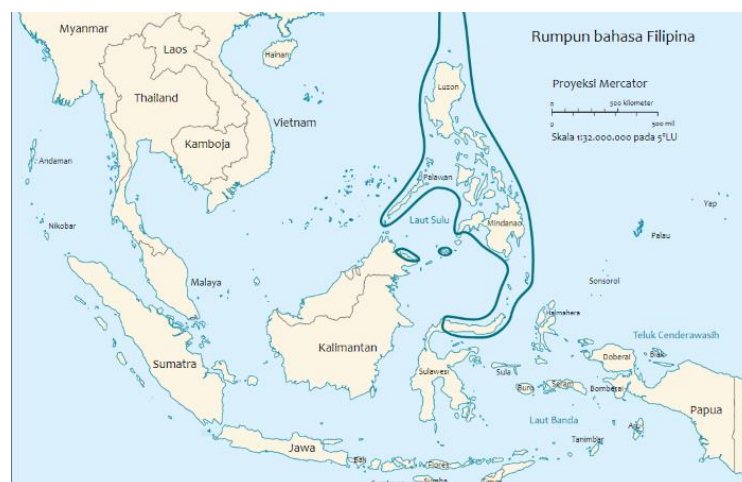


Figure 3 Cross-Border Map of Indonesia-Philippine

Geographically, CGRI Davao's area of responsibility covers Mindanao and its surrounding regions, which are strategically located near North Sulawesi. This geographic proximity makes inter-regional connectivity a crucial aspect of bilateral cooperation, particularly in the tourism sector. Mindanao is the second-largest island in the Philippines, characterized by its ethnic and religious diversity, as well as its rich natural tourism potential, including beaches, mountains, and cultural heritage sites. On the other hand, North Sulawesi is known as one of Indonesia's eastern gateways, with an international seaport, a regionally connected airport, and top tourist destinations such as Bunaken, Likupang, and Tomohon. The social characteristics of both regions reflect a shared maritime culture and a history of coastal community interactions, which serve as vital social capital in strengthening cross-border collaboration (KBBRI Yangon 2023).

Considering these geographical, social, and economic potentials, CGRI Davao plays a pivotal diplomatic role in connecting the two regions with the goal of enhancing connectivity in the southern ASEAN area. Consequently, the tourism diplomacy strategy implemented by CGRI Davao is not only institutional and formal in nature but also relies on multi-stakeholder cooperation, including local governments, business actors, and cultural communities in both regions.



Tourism Diplomacy Strategy of the Indonesian Consulate General in Davao City

In its efforts to strengthen bilateral relations between Indonesia and the Philippines through tourism diplomacy, the Indonesian Consulate General in Davao City (CGRI Davao) has implemented a number of strategies involving cross-sectoral collaboration, active participation in international events, and paradiplomacy approaches at the local level. These strategies are focused on enhancing connectivity and promoting key tourism destinations in North Sulawesi and Southern Mindanao.

1. Forms of Tourism Promotion Cooperation

Based on an interview with Ms. Umi Yanti Febriana Silalahi, the diplomat overseeing the Information, Social, and Cultural Affairs) function at CGRI Davao, it is clear that the Consulate is firmly committed to facilitating tourism promotion cooperation between travel agencies from Indonesia and the Philippines. One of the key initiatives being developed is the creation of premium travel packages connecting top destinations in North Sulawesi and Southern Mindanao. This program aims to establish a more structured, competitive, and attractive tourism network for travelers from both countries.

These premium packages are designed to integrate natural beauty, culture, and culinary experiences as main attractions. For example, tourists can enjoy the underwater beauty of Bunaken Marine Park, explore Minahasa's local culture, and visit top nature and beach destinations in Mindanao, such as Samal Island, known for its exotic beaches. Additionally, General Santos Mindanao's major port city known for its tuna industry and local culture will also be promoted as a new premium destination in the travel circuit (Yoanita Hastryka Djohan 2025)

To support the development of these packages, CGRI Davao actively acts as a facilitator, bridging meetings between tourism industry stakeholders such as travel agents, hotels, tour operators, and local governments. These meetings aim to build a stronger cross-country promotional network, identify concrete cooperation opportunities, and coordinate joint marketing strategies. The Consulate also encourages enhanced promotional synergy through digital platforms and participation in international events to increase the visibility of North Sulawesi and Mindanao destinations in regional and global markets.

Furthermore, according to Ms. Silalahi, the tourism promotion diplomacy conducted by CGRI Davao adopts the TTI approach (Trade, Tourism, and Investment). This approach is considered essential for presenting Indonesia's potential from a foreign perspective, as promotion from a sending-country standpoint tends to be subjective. Therefore, the success of tourism promotion should be measured objectively using external indicators such as trust levels, increased interest in tourism visits, and growth in investment cooperation within the tourism sector. In this context, Indonesia has gained a reputation as a "trusted country" capable of fostering intangible partnerships, particularly in tourism and culture.

This initiative also aligns with Indonesia's paradiplomacy strategy in the ASEAN region, especially within the sub-regional BIMP-EAGA (Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area) framework. BIMP-EAGA aims to accelerate the development of border and marginalized areas through enhanced collaboration in trade, tourism, and



connectivity, including efforts to open direct sea and air routes between Mindanao and North Sulawesi (PEREKONOMIAN 2023)

2. CGRI Davao's Active Participation through Public Diplomacy

As part of its strategy, the Indonesian Consulate General in Davao City actively engages in various international and local activities to promote Indonesian culture and tourism. Key events include the "Indonesia Parade" and the "Dabawenyo Celebration," where the Consulate showcases national cultural heritage through art performances, creative product bazaars, and promotions of leading tourism destinations, especially from Eastern Indonesia. Through these efforts, CGRI aims to build a positive image of Indonesia among Filipinos while introducing North Sulawesi's natural and cultural richness as a potential tourist destination.

To broaden the reach of its promotional efforts, CGRI Davao also involves local media practitioners in Mindanao. Media engagement is a strategic element in spreading positive information about Indonesian tourism. Coverage by local media has proven effective in raising public interest in Indonesian destinations, enhancing public awareness about Indonesia's tourism diversity, and strengthening Indonesia's positive image in the Mindanao region. As such, local media serve as key partners in the Consulate's cultural and economic diplomacy initiatives.

In addition to festivals and cultural celebrations, CGRI Davao implements ongoing promotional approaches. Based on an interview with Ms. Silalahi, these include participation in trade fairs, tourism expos, and cultural exhibitions aimed at directly introducing Indonesia's tourism opportunities to Filipinos and the international community in Mindanao. Furthermore, the Consulate supports continuous promotion through event organization, media campaigns, and collaboration with travel agencies from both countries to create more attractive and integrated travel packages (Haryono Willy 2023)

CGRI Davao also initiates journalistic visit programs, inviting local media from Mindanao to experience Indonesian tourism firsthand (Yoanita Hastyka Djohan 2025). These visits allow journalists to produce authentic coverage, thereby enhancing the credibility of promotions and increasing broader interest among the Filipino public. This strategy is further strengthened by utilizing social media platforms and digital campaigns to reach younger, tech-savvy audiences in Mindanao, who hold significant potential as a tourism market segment.

These efforts demonstrate that tourism promotion is no longer limited to traditional methods but involves adapting to modern communication dynamics, strengthening local networks, and fostering cross-sectoral collaboration. All these strategies form an integral part of Indonesia's economic, social, and cultural diplomacy in the Mindanao region, in line with paradiplomacy principles and the enhancement of Indonesia-Philippines bilateral relations.



3. The Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Davao City synergizes with local actors and private sector actors.
- 4.



Figure 4: Re-opening of the Manado-Davao Route

In addition to promoting culture and tourism, CGRI Davao also plays a strategic role in connecting local governments and businesses in initiating cross-border connectivity between Indonesia and the Philippines. A key initiative is the reactivation of direct air routes between Mindanao and Manado, as well as the sea route between Bitung and Mindanao. These efforts are part of the BIMP-EAGA framework, which aims to strengthen border region ties through cooperation in trade, tourism, and connectivity.

On January 4, 2024, a delegation of business and tourism stakeholders from Davao City, led by the Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA), conducted a business exploration visit to Manado. This visit served as an important opportunity to discuss the reopening of the Davao–Manado flight route, with tourism identified as a key pillar to support the sustainability of the route (Ian Ray Garcia 2024). During the meeting, stakeholders, including the Davao Tourism Association highlighted major tourism potentials such as dive tourism, cultural and festival tourism, medical education tourism, and Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE). Davao offers well-developed tourism infrastructure and broader international connectivity, such as direct flights to Doha a major hub for Europe and the Middle East.

From the Indonesian side, Moh. Dino Gobel, tourism and investment consultant to the Governor of North Sulawesi, emphasized the importance of revitalizing this cooperation. He noted the shared tourism potential of Davao and Manado such as farm tourism, wellness, highland tourism, diving, and culinary experiences. Gobel proposed developing “tourism circuits” like golf tourism packages connecting courses in Davao and Manado to attract niche markets like South Korean tourists. Additionally, Mindanao’s entertainment, nightlife, and recreation sectors can attract North Sulawesi travelers, enriching the socio-economic exchange between the two regions.

The Bitung–Mindanao sea route is being prioritized to enhance the movement of commodities and individuals. This program encompasses local stakeholders, including the North Sulawesi Provincial Government,

Davao City Government, shipping enterprises, and other trade associations. The Mindanao Development Authority asserts that enhancing this maritime route might elevate commerce and logistics connectivity inside the BIMP-EAGA region, fortify cross-border economic relations, and provide new prospects for tourism and import-export expansion (Mamahit, Tulung, and Rengkung 2021).

In practice, the Consulate General in Davao applies an adaptive and collaborative diplomacy approach. By utilizing local and international networks, the Consulate General plays a role not only in formal diplomacy, but also as a facilitator in building people-to-people contact between Indonesians and Filipinos.



Figure 5: Association of the Indonesian Tours and Travel Agent

An example is the organization of the Davao-Manado Tourism Business Meeting and Tour Package in Davao, which brought together dozens of tour agents from both countries. This activity was mediated by the Indonesian Consulate General in Davao as a concrete part of economic diplomacy efforts through tourism, with active support from the Association of the Indonesian Tours and Travel Agent (ASITA) (Muhammad, Irawati, and Halimah 2022).

According to Heru Dian Setiawan, Indonesia and the Philippines have great potential in tourism cooperation, which has been formalized through the MoU on Tourism on November 12, 2001. The cooperation intensified after the 2012 ASEAN Tourism Forum in Manado, which became the initial momentum for the systematic integration of bilateral promotion strategies in the tourism sector. In this context, the opening of air and sea routes between Davao and Manado is a concrete step in strengthening connectivity and realizing sustainable cross-border tourism cooperation (Setiawan 2022).

Challenges and Obstacles

The Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Davao City has implemented various strategies to strengthen tourism diplomacy between North Sulawesi and Mindanao. However, the implementation still faces several structural and operational challenges that hinder the achievement of optimal results. In this context, stronger



synergy under the subregional framework such as BIMP-EAGA (Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area) becomes crucial. The tourism diplomacy strategies carried out by CGRI Davao can be categorized into several main pillars, namely:

a. Limited Direct Connectivity

One of the main barriers to cross-border tourism development between North Sulawesi and Mindanao is the absence of consistent direct transportation routes, both by air and sea. Flights between Manado and Davao, which once operated, have been discontinued, and the sea route between Bitung and General Santos has yet to run regularly. As a result, travelers from both regions are forced to make long transits through major cities such as Manila or Jakarta lengthening travel times and reducing the attractiveness of direct inter-regional visits.

As of now, there are no direct flights between Davao and Manado. Indonesian travelers, for instance, must transit via Manila or even Singapore to reach Davao. This inefficient travel route significantly hinders the mobility of tourists and weakens people-to-people contact between the two areas. To overcome this, several initiatives are being developed, including the “BMP Niaga by Sea and Air” program, which focuses on opening the Bitung–Davao/General Santos sea route and reopening the direct Davao–Manado air route currently still under intensive discussion (Ian Ray Garcia 2024).

Air connectivity is considered crucial in efforts to boost tourism growth between Mindanao and Indonesia. Without direct flights, the tourism potential between the regions will be difficult to develop optimally. From the perspective of the aviation industry, the sustainability of a new route heavily depends on a minimum seat occupancy rate of 50%. If the occupancy rate is low, airlines will struggle to maintain operations due to high operational costs (David Ezra M. Francisquete 2024).

Efforts to open a direct flight route between Indonesia and Mindanao are not new. There was once a flight in 2019, but it was later discontinued. Since then, various approaches have been made to revive air connectivity. Several airlines, such as Garuda Indonesia, Cebu Pacific, Philippine Airlines (PAL), and ACDI, have been approached to open this route. However, so far, these efforts have not yielded concrete results, with indications that most of the airlines have chosen to withdraw due to various considerations, including route profitability analysis (Mindanao Development Authority 2023).

Currently, the Indonesian airline TransNusa is in the assessment phase to explore the possibility of opening a flight route from Indonesia to Mindanao. The initial approach being considered is through chartered flights. If the route shows promising prospects, particularly in terms of seat occupancy and market demand, it is possible that it could develop into a regular commercial flight (Che Palicte 2024).

This need for connectivity becomes even more relevant in the context of BIMP-EAGA sub-regional cooperation, where the development of cross-border transportation and tourism infrastructure is a central priority. Integrated sea and air routes are expected to open new tourist flows, stimulate local economic growth, and accelerate cultural exchange between Indonesia and the Philippines particularly between North Sulawesi and Mindanao. Through intensive collaboration between local governments, business actors, and the active facilitation of CGRI Davao, the realization of sustainable Davao–Manado and Bitung–Mindanao connectivity is expected to lay a strong foundation for a dynamic future of cross-border tourism and trade cooperation (PEREKONOMIAN and INDONESIA 2020).



b. Inadequate Infrastructure and Limited Cross-Border Promotion

Field observations and interviews indicate that a significant difficulty is the absence of infrastructure that supports tourism. Service standards at numerous critical locations such as tourism ports, local transportation hubs, and internet access in tourist regions continue to inadequately meet international tourist expectations. The infrastructural deficiencies immediately affect the ease and mobility of tourists in both North Sulawesi and Mindanao.

Moreover, tourism advertising is inconsistent and predominantly localized. The absence of a collaborative promotional platform between the Indonesian and Philippine tourism agencies results in inadequate information transmission regarding premier tourist locations across borders (ILO 2025). However, with attractions like diving in Bunaken and Lembeh Island, as well as cultural and wellness tourism in Davao, the potential for synergistic promotional initiatives is significant if managed in an integrated cross-national approach. In the absence of coordinated promotional collaboration, these attractions may stay recognized solely inside their national markets, so failing to draw wider regional tourism.

c. Lack of Cross-Regional Tourism Data and Information

Another equally significant challenge is the lack of accurate and detailed data on tourist movements between North Sulawesi and Mindanao. Most available tourism data are aggregated at the national level, with little disaggregation to capture specific city-to-city or province-to-province flows. This lack of granular data hampers evidence-based policymaking and obstructs the evaluation of tourism cooperation programs already in place.

This information gap also limits understanding of tourist preferences, popular travel routes, and the unique needs of cross-border travelers compared to domestic ones. Without a solid data foundation, the development of tourism connectivity, promotion, and investment programs risks being misaligned and ineffective.

In this context, the BIMP-EAGA sub-regional cooperation framework should serve as an effective platform for addressing these challenges. Paradiplomacy, through direct cooperation between local governments, policy harmonization in promotion efforts, and the development of cross-national data repositories, is essential. However, to date, the active involvement of each region and alignment of policy agendas among member countries still need to be strengthened. Only through stronger and more coordinated collaboration can cross-border connectivity and tourism promotion between North Sulawesi and Mindanao evolve sustainably and mutually beneficially.

A very important challenge is the dearth of precise and comprehensive statistics regarding visitor journeys between North Sulawesi and Mindanao. The predominant tourism data available is aggregated at the national level, with limited breakdowns to illustrate unique intercity or interprovincial movements. The lack of comprehensive data obstructs evidence-based decisions and complicates the evaluation of current tourism cooperation initiatives.

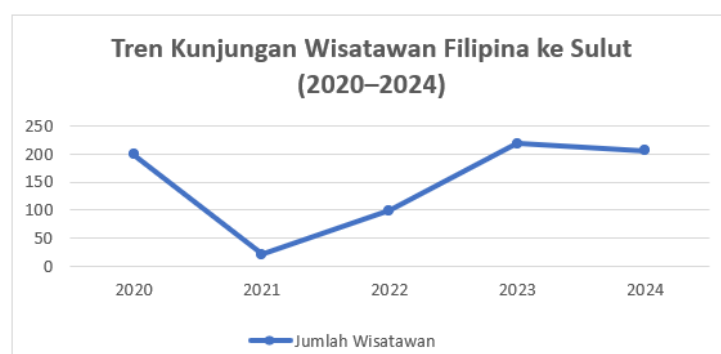


The Impact of Consulate General Davao City's Strategy on Paradiplomacy in North Sulawesi and Mindanao

The tourism diplomacy strategies executed by the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Davao City have significantly enhanced paradiplomatic relations between North Sulawesi and Mindanao, notwithstanding persistent structural challenges. CGRI Davao has effectively elevated the region's visibility at the regional level through diverse initiatives, including fostering collaboration among travel agencies, engaging in international events such as the "Indonesia Parade" and "Dabawenyo Celebration," and promoting premier tourist destinations from eastern Indonesia.

The beneficial effects of these initiatives are evident in the substantial rise in foreign tourist arrivals to North Sulawesi. Data from Immigration and Angkasa Pura I at Sam Ratulangi Airport in Manado, as well as from the Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association (PHRI) of North Sulawesi, show that in 2024, international visitor visits to the province climbed by 320 percent compared to the previous year. The average length of stay for tourists varied from two to three nights, showing North Sulawesi's growing popularity as a prime tourism destination in eastern Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistika Provinsi Sulawesi Utara 2024).

However, when examined more closely, the contribution of tourists from the Philippines particularly from Mindanao remains relatively low compared to visitors from countries such as China, Germany, and Singapore. The following section highlights recent trends in tourist arrivals from the Philippines to North Sulawesi:



Source 1 Badan Pusat Statistik Sulawesi Utara

Figure 6 Tourism Statistic

In 2020, the count of Filipino tourists to North Sulawesi was documented at 199 individuals, reflecting a considerable interest among Filipino travelers in the region (Badan Pusat Statistika Provinsi Sulawesi Utara 2020). In 2021, there was a significant decrease, with merely 21 tourists arriving (Statistik 2022). The decline resulted from the global COVID-19 pandemic, which imposed stringent international travel restrictions, border closures, and pervasive health apprehensions. The pandemic compelled the tourism sector to adjust to severely restricted circumstances, resulting in a notable decline in visitor numbers at numerous tourist destinations, including North Sulawesi.

In 2022, the tourism sector began to enter a recovery phase post-COVID-19. With the gradual reopening of international travel and the implementation of more relaxed health protocols, the number of Filipino tourists visiting North Sulawesi rose to 99. Although this figure is still far below pre-pandemic levels, it reflects signs of recovery.



This increase indicates efforts by the government and tourism authorities to restore travelers' confidence, even though the challenges of the pandemic had not completely disappeared (Amalia 2022).

By 2023, the number of Filipino tourists rose significantly again to 219, indicating that North Sulawesi's tourism sector was steadily recovering and attracting more foreign visitors (Badan Pusat Statistika Provinsi Sulawesi Utara 2024). This increase reflects the effectiveness of promotional programs carried out by the Indonesian Consulate General in Davao and efforts by local governments to position North Sulawesi as a leading tourist destination. However, in 2024, although Filipino tourists remained the second largest group after Chinese tourists as reported by manadopost.id (Pratama Karamoy 2025) the number slightly decreased to 206. This suggests that the previous year's surge was not yet stable. It indicates that North Sulawesi's tourism sector remains vulnerable to external factors, such as limited direct flight connectivity between Mindanao and Manado and promotion efforts that are not yet optimal or focused on family or cultural visits.

Nonetheless, the ranking of Filipino tourists as the second largest group is a commendable accomplishment, signifying a substantial opportunity to enhance visitation by advancing connectivity infrastructure, bolstering cultural and historical promotions, and optimizing subregional collaboration within the BIMP-EAGA framework. The constraints in connectivity encompassing both aerial and maritime routes and global instability impacting travel interest are essential variables driving variations in tourist arrivals. Despite the significant potential for an increase in Filipino tourist visits, these obstacles necessitate greater focus to guarantee the sustainable and stable growth of the tourism sector in the long future (PEREKONOMIAN 2023).

Despite the trend in visits indicating recovery and growth potential, external factors such as inadequate transport connectivity and the absence of cohesive cross-country promotion continue to present challenges that must be resolved to enhance the influx of Filipino tourists to North Sulawesi.

Based on the data analysis above, Paradiplomacy cooperation between North Sulawesi and Mindanao is showing positive impacts, especially in improving connectivity and tourist mobility. Efforts such as the reactivation of the Davao-Manado flight and the Bitung-Mindanao sea route are expected to reduce travel costs and time, thereby encouraging tourist visits. This increase has the potential to drive growth in the hospitality, transportation, and local creative economy sectors (Mumu, Rotinsulu, and Engka 2020).

The success of this strategy could draw on the Bintan-Singapore model, where strong connectivity, coordinated cross-border promotion, and ease of access made Bintan a top destination for Singaporean tourists. If similar strategies are applied consistently with a focus on connectivity, promotion of shared culture, and cross-border cooperation within the BIMP-EAGA framework, North Sulawesi and Mindanao have the potential to become successful cross-border tourism regions like Bintan-Singapore (Muzwardi and Simbolon 2024).

On the other hand, the cultural and historical closeness between North Sulawesi and Mindanao also creates opportunities to strengthen social and cultural relations between the two regions. Cultural promotion programs, such as festivals, art exchanges, and family visits, can deepen social ties and enhance mutual understanding. Moreover, cooperation within the BIMP-EAGA (Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area) framework provides opportunities for both regions to support cross-border economic growth, with synergy between local governments, the private



sector, and communities to overcome structural challenges and accelerate infrastructure development for improved connectivity (PEREKONOMIAN and INDONESIA 2020).

One potential that remains underutilized is family visits between Mindanao and North Sulawesi, considering the large diaspora with family ties in both regions (Disertasi and Wiratri 2024). Special promotion for family-oriented tourism, supported by improved transport connectivity, could be a solution to increase visit numbers. However, despite this significant potential, data shows that Filipino tourist visits to North Sulawesi remain low, with only 206 Filipino tourists visiting in 2024. Therefore, strengthening connectivity, more intensive cultural promotion, and easy access to transportation are important steps to boost the number of tourist arrivals and enhance ties between the two regions (Mamahit et al. 2021).

CONCLUSION

Based on the trend of Filipino tourist visits to North Sulawesi for the period 2020-2024, the tourism promotion strategy implemented by the Consulate General in Davao and the local government has shown a positive impact, but has yet to achieve stability and sustainable growth. The significant increase in 2023 to 219 people reflects the success of tourism diplomacy through cultural festivals and travel agent cooperation, although this figure declined slightly to 206 people in 2024. This fluctuation indicates that the sustainability of the strategy is still heavily influenced by the limitations of transportation connectivity and the need for promotion that touches more on emotional aspects such as family relationships and cross-border culture.

If this strategy is successfully strengthened, particularly through the reopening of flight and sea routes and intensive cultural promotion, then the potential for North Sulawesi-Mindanao tourism cooperation could develop into a stable and productive cross-border tourism crossing area, similar to the successful paradiplomacy model between Bintan and Singapore.

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