

**SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RESIDENTS' PARTICIPATION TO RURAL COMMUNITY-BASED
TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: AN INITIAL EXPLORATORY STUDY IN
NORTH CENTRAL COASTAL VIETNAM**

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Abstract

Research on regional tourism development has traditionally focused on economic factors and resource values. Less is known about the social capital, community needs, and this may not be fully explored in order to be a successful regional development tool. This paper examines how community participation has been structured in the context of rural areas. Based on data and information derived from surveys conducted with 104 households that have participated and collaborated in community-based rural tourism initiatives in the rural areas in North Central Coastal Vietnam's provinces. The results indicated that residents' perceptions of environmental and economic impacts of tourism influenced community support and satisfaction with their resident community. Additionally, perceptions of their social capital were also found to be attached to the levels and forms of tourism and was sensitive to rural tourism development. The study suggests that residents' participation and social capital can be instrumental for the good governance of rural tourism provided that its potential negative consequences are recognized and dealt with appropriately.

Keywords: Social capital, residents' participation, rural tourism development, North Central Coastal Vietnam

Introduction

Rural tourism has been widely promoted as a supplementary support for the local rural economies in Vietnam, and indeed may well become a significant force for change in the restructuring of Vietnam's economy. The mainstay of employment for much of the North Central Coastal Vietnam's rural areas is agriculture, and this significantly effects patterns of life and local culture. The core, and attractiveness of rural tourism in Vietnam lies in its forms of agricultural production and the resultant rural lifestyles, values and culinary arts arising from community participation in those practices. Additionally, in Vietnam under current policies, rural community-based tourism is often linked to both sustainable development and environmental conservation. The government perceives tourism as a viable means for developing traditional rural industries because it can provide economic benefits to local residents and offset the decline of traditional industries in rural Vietnam. Consequently, some rural communities have begun exploring the ways in which they can strengthen their economic resources for rural community development through rural village tourism based on traditional culture, arts, crafts, and cuisine, through introducing tourists to traditional farming and fishing, and encouraging ethnic minority peoples to also participate in festivals and displays of local culture and heritage.

One example of this lies within the framework of the Vietnam-Japan cooperation agreement of 2013, by which the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) collaborated with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to edit and publish the *Handbook practical development of rural tourism in Vietnam* on the basis of an examination of existing projects designed to support the development of tourism in the Vietnamese rural countryside. However, while much was written about capital and infrastructure development the role of residents and local community involvement was, to a large degree, not addressed in the envisaged tourism

development process. Equally, other market-oriented research has also been done relating to tourist demand and behaviours (Bui Thi Lan Huong, 2014), tourist satisfaction or the determinants of tourist decisions to rural destinations (Đào Duy Tuấn; 2011), but which have not always addressed the role of communities in the supply chain.

While the notion of rural community-based tourism is not new in tourism studies, it continues to evolve and take forms not previously examined. Numerous research studies on tourism development in rural areas have confirmed the belief that community participation is an essential requirement for ensuring sustainability. An important lesson for tourism researchers and practitioners is that social capital can also be a useful basis for fostering positive attitudes but may also act as an impediment to tourism development if not well managed (Park, Nunkoo & Yoon, 2015). Key research questions have been debated regarding community participation for sustainable rural development such as “what degree of participation or involvement of community is required at a given destination to ensure rural tourism development is socially sustainable? Are there ways in which a rural tourism community can be satisfied, and social capital enhanced while permitting economic improvement but not diminishing the quality of every-day life?

This paper therefore describes community attitudes and the role of social capital in shaping residents’ participation and reactions to rural tourism development. For such individuals, neighborly collaboration acts as a basis for social capital, and soc development but and trust is often central for rural community-based tourism development and an enhancement of community satisfaction. The purpose of this paper is to examine these relationships because the patterns through which community participation and social capital are formed are often context specific and vary across cultures and countries (Zhao et al., 2011). In that sense, the paper is exploratory, description and tends to the pragmatic in seeking to identify potential determinants and is a report of a process that will lead to the authorities better understanding the process that underlies tourism development in the villages. It is a small-scale piece of research for the case study village is relatively small, and the value of the study lies in a modest aim of identifying resident attitudes that will influence subsequent policy formation by the authorities in the context of Communist State of Vietnam. It is suggested that this has value in itself, while the paper also provides a comparative case study for other researchers studying how residents of small agricultural communities perceive the impacts of tourism.

Literature Review

Community participation refers to a form of voluntary action in which individuals confront opportunities and responsibilities of citizenship. In particular, these opportunities for such participation include joining in a process of self-governance, responding to authoritative decisions that impact on one's life, and working co-operatively with others on issues of mutual concern (Tosun; C; 2000). Community participation is a bottom-up approach by which communities are actively involved in rural tourism projects to solve their own problems. As such it has been touted by various stakeholders as a potent approach to sustainable tourism development because it is assumed to ensure a greater conservation of natural, rural, and cultural resources, empowers host communities, and improves their socio-economic well-being. It is often regarded as not solely being a function of government alone, nor something a single powerful rural tourism organisation can develop, but rather it is recognised that the tourism destination planning, decision-making and management is a consequent of collaborative action involving local community groups, indigenous people's groups, and local residents (Saito & Ruhanen, 2017).

Community based tourism, and especially rural based community tourism is perceived as a grassroots movement wherein the local community is the majority stakeholder, and the primary beneficiary that is involved in the planning, development, and management of the tourism destination areas (Pawson, D'Arcy, & Richardson, 2017). As such, it is always important to

understand the context of the tourism initiatives to understand if (a) tourism is being introduced to diversify the national or local economy, (b) to learn if specific efforts to make are being made to benefit the local community participation within which it develops, (c) if any diversification of the tourism product is meant to primarily expand the profitability of the corporate sector of the tourism industry with local communities simply engaged as a secondary party; or (d) whether tourism diversification aims to meaningfully engage the local communities for their own benefit ahead of the interests of the wider tourism industry and national economy (Mensah, & Ernest, 2013).

Nonetheless, a number of legitimate constraints on community participation in tourism development, particularly in developing countries, may well exist, these include the following. It is anticipated that social capital could facilitate community participation in tourism development but may be limited. According to Bourdieu (1986, p.248), social capital is: "The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. For Putnam (2000, p.19), social capital refers to: "Connections among individuals, and the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them". Over the past decade, social capital has gained much significance in a number of academic disciplines. The concept was introduced in response to the notion that market failures are the rule rather than the exception and that governments are not sufficiently informed and accountable to correct market failures (Bowles & Gintis, 2002).

Economic behaviour based on rationality and self-interest often fails to consider aspects of social capital such as shared knowledge, values, norms, traits, and social network that are socially determined (Dhesi, 2000). Bowles and Gintis (2002) argue that communities are essential parts of good governance because they can address problems that cannot be handled by an individual acting alone, or by the market and government. Yet, while strong social networks among community members bind them together, they can effectively bar others from access. Waldinger's (1995) study clearly demonstrates that control by certain ethnic groups over the construction and trade business led to the marginalization of other groups. He notes that while trust and solidarity bounded members of the key group, "... the same social relations that enhance the ease and efficiency of economic exchanges among community members implicitly restrict outsiders" (p. 557). Therefore, social planning models which emphasize development of social capital have been widely criticized for failure to address issues of power (Fisher & Minklee, 1997). Consequently, several implications arise. First, in tourism, strong social networks and bonding among stakeholders can create power imbalances in favour of some groups over others in policy decisions, adversely influencing the attitudes of marginalized actors to tourism development. Secondly, such considerations imply a need for external intervention (generally governmental) to monitor situations to (a) enhance the social capital capabilities of local communities to address deficiencies in skill sets etc, and (b) to ensure as far as is possible, and equitable distribution of benefits between all members of the community.

Methodology and Results

With a long coastline and many border gates adjacent to Laos, The North Central Coast area comprises six provinces: Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh, Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên-Huế. The region has a particularly important position in the economic and tourism development between Vietnam and other countries in the region on the East-West corridor. In addition, the North Central Coast is home to 25 different ethnic groups with rich and diverse folklore treasures, including prominent river dances in Thanh Hoa, Nghe Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Hue, and valuable historical, cultural, and architectural relics including the Hue citadel, the Ho Chi Minh trail or Vinh Moc tunnel, the Truong Son cemetery, the Con Tien base, and Quang Tri ancient citadel. The region is also the home of many unique festivals such as the Lam Kinh festival (Thanh Hoa), Cuong temple festival (Nghe An), and the Hon Chen temple festival (Thua Thien-Hue). In

particular, the Hue Festival held every two years has become an international cultural event that attracts many domestic and foreign tourists.

Regarding the methodology to do research on “Social capital”, it is indicated that, this concept is a complex issue that benefits from the coherent integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Dudwick, N., Kuehnast, K., Jones, V. N., & Woolcock, M; 2006). This combination is to enable clarify issues adequately and develop robust basis in the light of policy recommendations (Bamberger; M; 2000; Rao and Woolcock 2005). Researchers in the field of tourism development are strongly encouraged to adopt the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods that best correspond to the specific nature of the issues under investigation. Initial in-depth interviews were thus conducted to explore the attitudes of community participation in tourism and how social capital was shaping residents’ participation and reactions to rural tourism development before conducting a formal survey.

The selection of case studies for this research was based on a purposeful sampling strategy. In particular this approach initially focused on selecting information-rich cases for initial study according to the purpose and rationale of the total research project in order to understand the role of social capital in rural community – based tourism development and their participation. Then, the survey was conducted with 104 households that have participated and collaborated in community-based rural tourism initiatives in the rural areas in North Central Coastal Vietnam’s provinces. Before the formal fieldwork was conducted, the research proposal was presented and then it was approved and supported by 5 provinces and local committees of tourism development to proceed the research process. In this paper, the perceptions of their social capital were explored to be attached to the levels and forms of tourism, the residents’ perceptions of environmental and economic impacts of tourism with their satisfaction were also recognized and dealt with appropriately. Consequently, two tourism destination communities that experienced rural community participation in tourism development were selected and in this study area, six rural villages in Quang Binh and Nghe An rural areas were involved as shown in Figures One. The initial findings are discussed below.

Figure 1
Advertising tourism activities offered Quang Binh and Nghe An rural areas



The concepts of “bridging” and “bonding” social capital, e.g., inclusive, and exclusive types of social capital, are fruitful concepts to apply in an anthropological fieldwork setting. A mixed methods approach is being used to explore and describe the involvement of local citizens in developing community-based rural tourism (CBRT), and the study is emphasizing relationships between villages and social capital with patterns of local governance. The key question centered on understanding how local communities participated in the tourism industry and how barriers and/or deficiencies social capital (if any) influenced their participation in the sector. In effect these factors were seen important as to the role of tourism as a strategy of growth development and poverty reduction.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Number of respondents (N=104)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	45	43.2
Female	59	56.7
Age		
Under 20 years	0	0
21-30 years	9	8.6
31-40 years	32	30.7
41-50 years	23	22.1
50 years above	22	21.1
Income (million VND)		
<2.0	9	8.6
2.1-4.0	30	28.8
4.1-5.0	19	18.2
5.1-6.0	14	13.5
6.1-10.0	15	14.4
>10.1	8	7.7

Table 1 illustrates the demographic profile of respondents. There were 59 female respondents (46%), and 45 male respondents (46%); hence making a total of 104 respondents. In terms of age, a majority of the respondents were middle-aged from 31 to 40 years of age (30.7%) and 42 to 50 years (22.1%, while the younger age group (21-30 years of age) made up 8.6% of the respondents. With respect to the income levels, the highest percentage was 35.0% for those earning a monthly income between RM 2001 and RM 3000, whereas the smallest percentage was those with a monthly income of more than 10 million VND with only 7.7%.

Factors and barriers facilitating or hindering participation tourism activities were classified in the light of responses and are identified in Table Two. The classifications used were based upon past literature, observation, interviews with respondents and finally used as questions in such interviews using a five-point scale of agreement where “5” represented the strongest degree of agreement and “1” the strongest level of disagreement.

Table 2: Local participation in rural community-based tourism development and implementation

Statement	N	Of no interest	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
Willing to participate in local meetings on rural tourism development	104	2.9	1.0	2.9	37.5	56.7	4.45	.811

Willing to link with neighboring villages to develop rural community tourism	104	2.9	1.0	3.8	35.6	57.7	4.45	.822
Willing to help neighbors participate in rural community tourism development	104	2.9	1.9	5.8	40.4	51.0	4.36	.836
Willing to call and persuade other neighbours to participate in activities of local rural community tourism	104	2.9	1.0	3.8	47.1	45.2	4.30	.836
Regularly keep good contacts with local authorities and tourism businesses	104	1.9	1.9	3.8	49.0	43.3	4.29	.799
Regularly participate in meeting with local officials in organizing and developing tourism	104	10.6	1.9	11.5	45.2	30.8	4.16	.935
Be informed and consulted about developing plan of local tourism	104	3.8	1.9	9.6	49.0	35.6	4.09	.929
Being consulted by local officials how to do tourism business	104	10.6	1.9	11.5	45.2	30.8	3.80	1.20

The greater engagement of local community and stakeholders in the decision-making process is a critical element for tourism to become sustainable (Graci & Dodds, 2010). The survey explored the likelihood of respondents to be included in decision-making process and the result was presented in Table 02. Regarding the social capital values and residents' participation in rural community-based tourism development, the research has indicated the willingness to help neighbours participate in rural community tourism development and the willingness to persuade, motivate other neighbours to participate in activities of local rural community tourism. Results showed that more than 90 percent of participants agreed and supported the tourism development. A majority of respondents felt that the likelihood of their being included in the decision-making process is improving (78%). However, 5% believed that the likelihood of their participation was declining, while the other 17% remained unsure. The greater engagement of local community and local stakeholders, then it also seems the more is governance collaboration in the participation, and the more that process becomes a critical element for tourism to become sustainable (Graci & Dodds, 2010). That findings are consistent with the notion identified above that for community participation in tourism development to be successful, the greater is the need for external monitoring and support for social capital development. That would, it is suggested, is important in the development stage until the community reaches a stage of maturity where it can handle its own affairs entirely.

The study also revealed that 44% of the total respondents agreed that they have been involved actively in the implementation and uses of the tourism attractions and are enjoying the benefits of tourism. The participation activities include in informing tourists about historical buildings, mangrove swamps, seaweed, coral reefs, and lagoons. While other businesses that contribute to the positive improvement in social capital are participated by providing consultancy services to the tourism attractions and were actively involved in forming associations to coordinate and operate tourism ventures. In addition, other activities like providing for or investing in the renting of land and buildings for tourist hotels through joint ownership and operations of tourist hotels and tour companies need to collaborate with others. However, this form of collaboration in these forms of business seems to be weaker. In particular, the respondents argued that they had been actively involved in some way in the implementation and operationalization of the tourism attractions found in the case study area. More than 80% of respondents would like to be informed and consulted about developing plan of local tourism. In general, the area of implementation and operationalization of tourism attractions has a great implication in the improvement of the livelihood of the villagers since it provides greatest opportunities for the various stakeholders and villagers in particular to obtain jobs and hence generate additional income.

Discussion and Conclusion

Residents possessing high social capital are likely to be very sensitive to the impacts of tourism development, and negative impacts may adversely affect their satisfaction with the community and their support for tourism development. Greater engagement and collaboration is a part of the local community's social capital, and collaborative decision making process is a critical element for tourism to become sustainable (Graci & Dodds, 2010). The survey also explored the likelihood of respondents to be included in decision-making process and the results were presented in Table 2. The research paper highlighted that the rural community-based tourism development seems to be not fully explored and slow in the Central Viet Nam compared to other forms of tourism. This paper must also be affirmed that rural community participation is unlikely to survive and develop based solely on agriculture and vice versa, this form of tourism cannot exist if it is separated from community collaboration, the level of trust in social capital, especially from the support of agricultural communities. The combination of a diverse range of rural tourism products and the marketing of rural community products would be in the light of community perspectives and also with the needs of tourists that are diverse, including a combination of entertaining activities such as horse riding, golf, rural activities such as walking and cycling, community craft villages, farm visits, gardening, and relaxation while the rural infrastructure and community's capabilities are limited. As such, researching and applying certain level/ models of community participation and social capital can ensure the success of a sustainable rural tourism development. Additionally, further research on community participation should be considered well within the tourism life cycle and development stages in term of Exploration, Involvement, Development, Consolidation, Stagnation, Rejuvenation, Decline.

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