Sustainable community based tourism: impact, challenges and opportunities (the case of Huai Nam Guen Village, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand)

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Abstract. This article provides a single-case research study of Huai Nam Guen village in Chiang Rai province, Thailand. Through identifying the important facilitators and possible inhibitors to CBT, this research reveals that CBT operations can conform to the principles of sustainable tourism through participative roles of the community and the different relevant stakeholders, identity creation and maintenance, exploiting the economic, socio-cultural and ecological resources, continuous learning, and taking land ownership in the systematic design of the community landscape and agricultural best practices. Clearly, to influence CBT operations towards sustainability, it is important to influence the community at the behavioural level. In this sense, this research contributes to the fragmented knowledge and publications of CBT in the context of behavioural emphasis.

1 Introduction

In Thailand, tourism has become a major economic force for development of the country. However, buoyed by its own success, tourism in northern region beginning to deteriorate both culturally and environmentally [1].

As a result, Community Based Tourism (CBT) is seen as a solution to the problems. The emphasis placed on CBT is not only on ecological sustainability but also its social and cultural sustainability as well [2]. It is considered to be the alternative most suitable to develop as the country's main form of tourism and to provide an appropriate management system in the future.

However, much of the existing CBT is to a lesser extent based on the experience of nature and culture, rather than any serious attempt at education, which theoretically would have a greater impact on the goal of promoting sustainability. Most management activity, at this level in particular, tends to focus on meeting the demands of tourists rather than preserving the integrity of the resources on which the industry is based, or of its integration within the local and regional economy [3,4].

As a result, while the concept of CBT has attracted a great deal of interests. Thus, the management approaches are varying depending on local context and involved stakeholders.

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This therefore begs the question of whether CBT, as practiced in northern region of Thailand, really is sustainable. One of the country's CBT destinations is the northern province of Chiang Rai, renowned for its natural beauty, cultural heritage, artefacts, religion and tradition. To begin to provide an answer, this paper briefly reviews the concept of sustainable tourism and CBT, and then presents the findings of a case-study on tourism impacts in the CBT destination of Huai Nam Guen village, Chiang Rai province, which questions the authenticity of this concept in practice.

1.1 Objectives of the Research

The objective of the research is to investigate how CBT operations are conforming to the principles of sustainable tourism in the study destination, and to identify the facilitators and inhibitors to CBT development, and the perceived positive and negative impacts of CBT.

This objective skillfully intercepts the normative, instrumental and empirical/descriptive aspects of stakeholder theory [5], in the in-depth single case research, to provide the fundamental implications to suggest a range of effective strategies for the community, the visitors, and other relevant stakeholders.

Through examining the way in which CBT operations conform to the principles of sustainable tourism in the study destination, this research contributes to suggest possible theoretical gaps which future research can focus upon and thus to serve to integrate the fragmented knowledge currently is the landscape of the extant literature.

2 Literature Review

Whether in aspects of consumptions, commerce, competition, or collaborations, factors such as sustainability, ethical and responsible behaviors (i.e. manifested in terms of ethical, responsible and eco-tourism), [6,7], are progressively becoming significantly important, and thus should be directed to use to rethink sustainable community-based tourism (CBT).

The theme of "sustainability", in the first place, recognizes both environmental and socio-cultural limits to the development [8] of CBT, and thus, the process of CBT is a continuous learning process which centralizes on creating, maintaining and sustaining the social, cultural and ecological values of CBT. The continuous process of CBT development involves modifying and educating the socio-psychological states i.e. perceptions, awareness, attitudes and behaviors of the community members through social entrepreneurship innovation [9,10], motivation and community empowerment [11] in contributing to community involvement (i.e. inter-stakeholder group collaboration, participative decision-making, benefits and responsibility sharing, and institutional power structure), and thus sustainability impact [12, 13].

"Sustainability" is not only a means-end or optimization, goal-achieving issue, but also involving systemic mind that is oriented towards participation, learning, process itself, and alongside research method, an application of interpretative (exploratory) method [14]. Other researchers embrace a more creative, abductive approach to the study of sustainable tourism and its CBT variant, such as based on sustainability as principle of purpose [12, 15] and of design and ideas exploration [16], of tradition-centric [17] to inspire businesses, as the root of sustainability and a base for exploratory and interpretive research studies.

A simple rationale is as such: As the environment becomes more complex and uncertain, the only protection we have is our attitude, the process of dealing with complexity and uncertainty i.e. sustainable development, and a given fundamental but sustainable resource, i.e. sustainable ecology. Based on this rationality, this research underpins on exploiting the principle of sustainability for community-based tourism (CBT) development and contributes to better quality of life now and in the future for the

communities, and enacts as a part of the total tourism industry landscape of Thailand [12, 18].

In other countries, such as India, sustainable tourism involving community development brings not only positive impacts, i.e. in socio-cultural dimension (tourism to the community positively influences cultural values, local traditions become more important because of tourism, visitors are encouraged to learn about local cultures, tourism is used to support maintenance of local community, tourism promotes restoration of the community, and the active participation of the community) but most importantly changing the attitude and perceptions of the community [19].

For CBT to be operative under the sustainability principle, United Nations Environment Programme and United Nations World Tourism Organization advise: “sustainable tourism is a form of tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” [20: 12], which offers guideline along a long-term future orientation.

While there are other measures which can significantly improve the long-term orientation of sustainability and CBT as a context of application, such as by using “sustainability as progress exploring frontiers, through multiple innovation tracks, creating maximum agility, and uncovering the best sustainability as adventure” [17], the route to sustainable tourism is a long but gradual process which involves building of awareness and continuous community-based learning [12]. Towards this end, numerous researchers aim to suggest feasible solutions to sustainable tourism, which CBT can be inferred. For instance, rooted in the three aspects to the stakeholder theory discussed in [5] namely, the descriptive/empirical, the instrumental, and the normative, [21] suggests stakeholder inclusion and involvement should be incorporated in the basic concept of sustainable tourism development.

The central roles of stakeholders are also recognized in [12] where they embrace socio-psychological theories and apply cybernetic theory in the study of CBT, citing for instance the use of community identity, common understanding, shared leadership, sustainability induced values appreciation, the operative commitment and efforts in CBT development. In a similar front, [22] proposes a need to intercept the balance and reciprocity of the economic, social and ecological aspects of sustainability, by simultaneously targeting on socio-ecological planning efficiency and socio-economic planning efficiency. In short, to be sustainable, [22] and [12] propose balancing the three aspects of resources (economic, social, and ecological) and activities in the planning, development and execution of CBT, in an attempt to provide seamless union of the socio-economic interests of the community and the socio-ecological sustainability of the community.

Towards this end, research objective, stated in the following section, is established which relates to CBT operations. CBT becomes another piece of the systems of sustainable tourism that has not been systematically studied in the extant literature. Although quantitative modeling is useful to reason out the structural integrity of the variables involved [12], interpretively qualitative research is nevertheless significantly important, as it provides the rich and meaning of the research context, which this research aims for. In another front, although tourism industry has been significantly developed which affects every corner of the globe [23].

CBT research and actual practices in the tourism industry have been very fragmented [12], rendering government policymakers not easily able to commit its state capacities for the sustainable development of the communities and their CBT initiatives, such as by means of state capacities in terms of societal resource allocation and distribution, legitimization of sustainability measures, and promotion of economic growth. This research thus provides a fundamental evidential base for helping the state policymakers to

reconfigure national budgets and commitment for CBT initiatives at not only the end level, but most importantly, at the development level.

3 Research Methodology

Since the Brundtland Commission's report [24] on sustainable development, sustainable tourism, in which CBT is one of its variant, has taken rapid evolution. Nevertheless, there exists critical weakness on the paradigmatic basis which relies the sustainable tourism being entrenched in Enlightenment-driven notions of scientific knowledge and thus neglects the consideration for the traditions of the communities and their embedded intrinsic values.

In view of this, [17] suggests researchers to interact and relate with the study participants, being reflexive and present the research outcomes from the views and voices of the researcher and the researched, as an embodied body of views. The use of a single case research study suits the purpose.

As CBT at Huai Nam Guen village is at an early evolution, established since 2013, the boundaries between the phenomenon of research objective and the context of sustainable tourism are not clearly evident, then, according to [25] the case study method is an acceptable system of inquiry.

An in-depth case research method is employed which studies the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of the community towards CBT development – that is, this research aims to study the possible impacts and solutions to sustainable CBT.

CBT is not only a tourism planned, developed, owned and managed by the community for the community but is seen as a new approach to stakeholder involvement and participation in tourism initiatives [26].

As the case unit involves community and its members, stakeholder theory of [5] can be used as a guideline in the process of the research which aims to yield reliable and valid research findings. While descriptive/empirical aspect of stakeholder grounds the theory and discovery of sustainability from the actual dynamics of the community towards CBT development and the socio-psychological perceptions of the community members, normative aspect of stakeholder theory guides the observations and data analysis through the normative “sustainability” principles.

The instrumental aspect of stakeholder theory provides an internal or interpretive validity to the phenomena or research issues explored and examined. In addition, instrumental, normative and descriptive aspects of the stakeholders are also the aspects of motivations that have been proposed to influence positive community involvement [11].

To achieve the objectives of the study, a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) were carried out with residents in Huai Nam Guen village and other stakeholders in both public and private sector in 2017.

To study these local perceptions, the heads of households in 50 out of 170 homes in the village were interviewed that comprised a series of questions covering socio-demographic variables and the individual's relationship with the industry; personal attitudes and opinions as to the costs and benefits of CBT in the community. The collected data were assessed on descriptive analysis.

4 Case Study of Huai Nam Guen Village

While CBT has been developed and is promoted in most regions of Thailand, one of the key destination areas is the northern province of Chiang Rai. The province is renowned for its jungle trekking, hill tribes and remote villages, river rafting and elephant safaris, and has

been the focus of much academic research as well. One local example reflecting these activities and CBT is located at Huai Nam Guen village, about 145 km. from town centre of Chiang Rai.

The village is situated near Doi Mod that is approximately 1,700 meters above sea level. Temperature is mild during the tropical summer because of the relatively high elevation. Since Thailand is located in the Tropics, rainfall can be heavy at times (especially during the months of May to August). During the winter months (November to February), daytime temperatures can be very cool to cold.

CBT at Huai Nam Guen village was established in 2013 by supporting of Highland Agricultural Extension Center and the Royal project Chiang Rai as a pilot CBT model village.

The objectives were to strengthen the community organization, distribute income from tourism activities to villagers and preserve endangered Forest tea plantation (Assam Tea) and local cultures. To achieve these aims, efforts were made to adopt key issues of CBT that include: the management of CBT, the involvement of the villagers, the contribution of tourist activities and the attitude of the villagers towards the development of homestay and its tourism.

Thus, the village received the Thailand Homestay Standard certified by Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Sport in 2014.

The people in Huai Nam Guen belong to the Muang ethnic group, the villagers were Buddhist. At present there are about 311 (154 males and 157 females) inhabitants in the village, represented as 170 households. They practice upland agriculture and migrated to the area from Chiang Mai province, living in relative cultural isolation and with distinctive linguistic and cultural background.

Survey respondents were predominantly female, married, lived as a single-family unit comprising 3-4 persons, of 19-50 years of age, had attained a relatively basic level of formal education (generally only primary school), and were predominantly involved in tourism development in the village. In general, the majority of household 'heads' in Huai Nam Guen preferred tourism and wish to engage in the CBT business if possible.

4.1 Case Research Data Analysis

This section presents the findings and the analysis of the data collected in the actual fields which aim to address the research objective. Based on the data analysis, CBT management, participation or involvement of stakeholders in CBT, and resident attitudes toward CBT are three important contextual scopes from which the research objective can be addressed. For instance, CBT management through CBT and Homestay Club, established by the village, has demonstrated its capacity for making CBT as a sustainability-oriented economic feasibility for the village. In addition, the participation or involvement of different stakeholders discusses many facilitators and restraining variables to CBT.

4.2 CBT Management

In addition to being under the supervision of Highland Agricultural Extension Center, the villagers organized themselves into the 'CBT and Homestay club' to manage tourism through a co-operation among shareholders in the community. The CBT and Homestay club's committees were elected by members. The villagers own and manage the enterprise. A rotation system is employed to ensure the members receive fair and equal opportunity to engage and benefit from tourism.

Huai nam Guen village is renowned as two days one-night visit destination; the accommodation fee costs 250 Baht per person per night, the meal cost 150 Baht per person

in addition to 500 Baht per group for activities of tea production process. 1500 Baht per group for local performance in the evening. The 10-percents of obtained fees are used for development costs, maintenance and operating expenses. In exchange for this fee, visitors will be treated to a full tour of the community with villagers demonstrating activities normally done in their village but rarely seen unless tourist live in the community for a long period of time.

Thai language-capable village chaperones will accompany tour groups to act as resource interpretation. So far, the CBT committee recognize that the input and involvement of the whole community is essential for success. This has been evident through the process of tourism development that has been taken place since 2013.

Visitor management is in the hands both of business entrepreneurs in Chiang Rai as transport providers and of tour operators but equally important, in the hands of the local community as well. The entrepreneurs control the access and transport to the site but the locals manage the visitors on the site.

Moreover, the general views of villagers and local government indicated that the CBT at Huai Nam Guen faces problems of being dependent on Highland Agricultural Extension Center in terms of marketing. This is because the villagers do not have knowledge or skills in marketing tourism in their area:

The interviews suggested that CBT in Huai Nam Guen village cannot be a success destination without support from Highland Agricultural Extension Centre, local authority, educational institute, private entrepreneurs in Chiang Rai and other provinces, especially in marketing aspect.

Moreover, the study also indicated that although women in the village tend to have much lower control of assets and decision-making powers than men, they embraced the CBT implementation. They played a vital role in the transition from trying to meet tourism demand to proactively developing sustainable management and visitor service in addition to coordinate a cultural revival.

Craft cooperatives, traditional dancing and singing are now generating income for the women and school children of the community and promoting pride in their local culture.

4.3 Residents Attitudes toward CBT

The majority of villagers perceive CBT development as a strategy and a type of tourism that not only contributes to the local economy but also contributes to community development, natural resource conservation and preservation, which is the most important issue to them. Most of them believe that tourism in the community at the time of writing is the way to achieve sustainability.

They tend to agree with the decisions made by local consensus that it is a good thing for their community and an opportunity to control over their community's future. Moreover, the villagers perceive the success of CBT comes from the cooperation among stakeholders in the community and support from outsiders especially the educational institute.

They expect that CBT would not only continue to provide stable income to the local economy but also contribute to the natural and cultural resources conservation. Overall expectation from CBT development is that they and their family members don't have to evacuate to elsewhere for any employment and are able to have control over their land and its surrounding environment and their community's future.

4.4 CBT Impacts

The general views of villagers at Huai Nam Guen on the consequences of CBT are demonstrated as the followings.

4.4.1 Impacts on the Physical Environment

The development of CBT has been so far perceived as a contribution to the conservation and preservation of natural resources in the area. Some percentage of the profits are allocated to community development and conservation initiatives (Figure 1), such as renovation of the natural trails and waste management and providing loans for women to invest in homestay business. The villagers do not perceive any negative impact on the natural environment in the area, except waste problem that may occur in the future. This has been evident in the villagers' interviews:

4.4.2 Impacts on the Society and Culture

CBT in Huai Nam Guen destination appears to have had both positive and negative consequences. The CBT development has contributed to the social and cultural conservation and preservation in the community. On one hand, since CBT has been introduced, there are better collaboration on variety of tea products development, homestay business in addition to better recreation and leisure facilities for villagers... because the villagers and other stakeholders help to support them for serving tourist. Visitors do not interfere with local peoples' use of entertainment, leisure and recreation facilities in the community. It has also caused positive impacts in the community in terms of standard of living, family life, improvement of housing condition, good relationships among the villagers and improvement in foreign language ability as some visitors are foreigners. This has been evident in the villagers' interviews:

On the other hand, it has influenced the loss of interest among youth in land stewardship while some older members prefer to maintain their traditional lifestyles of farming and increasing commercialisation of local cultural products. This has been suggested by the villagers' interview:

Nevertheless, CBT does not seem to have had negative impacts on changes in other social relationships in the community. In contrast, through CBT management and meetings, the relationships between locals have improved.

For example, the relationship between the older people and young people is well developed as young people work together with their elders to teach visitors about traditional way of life.

Thus, conflict of interests between them in terms of having different attitudes to life, is mitigated as well as amongst local tea entrepreneurs. At the same time, co-operation between the rests of villagers also increases.

4.4.3 Impacts on the Economy and Employment

The tourism development has contributed to positive impacts on the local economy in terms of income generation and distribution and employment opportunities. The direct income to the villagers is generated through the homestay provider, food and refreshment, tourist activities, souvenirs and through employment as local guides. Profits are mostly allocated to the villagers (90 % of total income each time) and the rest is allocated to the CBT and Homestay Club (10%) (Figure 1).

The study suggested that the villagers were satisfied with the income obtained as daily payment. The amount of payment would be dependent on the degree of involvement in the business, and it is considered to be well-paid and the best kind of job available in the community.

Fig. 1. Income Distributions in Huai Nam Guen Village.

5 Conclusion

CBT development in Huai Nam Guen is under the supervision of Highland Agricultural Extension Centre. It is perceived as a tool for community development, local income generation and contribution of local natural resources, which involves a process of community participation and perceptions alternation.

This research identifies few important facilitators to CBT development:

‘CBT and Homestay club’, under a co-operative assistance with community shareholders and being financially supported from the local authority ‘TAO’, has proven to be an effective thrust for the creation and the successful implementation of CBT.

The involvement of the whole community in the CBT project, the cooperation among stakeholders in the community and support from the outsiders.

A gradual awareness-enabling and ownership/stewardship development process which serves to shift passiveness of attitudes of the community members to a more proactive stance, by engaging in actual operations of CBT.

Value co-creation partnership and commitment involving the communities taking the ownership, with the supports of the Highland Agricultural Extension centre, local authority, and educational institutes, private entrepreneurs such as in areas of marketing, services and visitor management.

Perception and reality of CBT as quick cash supplementing the agricultural livelihood.

Within-community relationship can be improved and facilitated through the community participating in the CBT management and development. The strengthening of inter-generational relationship base, between the young generations and the elders, provide a human-capital base to sustain the “sustainability” principle.

Community relationship establishes the co-activity sharing platform for the continuous improvement of CBT.

The key inhibitors to CBT are:

- The villagers face problems of lack of knowledge or skill in marketing the CBT products in the area so that the marketing is relying on Highland Agricultural Extension Centre and other travel agencies.

- Competence to reach out to the markets, including marketing knowledge.

- Waste problem when more and more visitors visit the community.

Towards this end, [12] propose an identity-based differentiator to unite the communities in the development of a sense of solidarity and responsibility for the sustainable development of CBT.

Thus, it is concluded that CBT operations can conform to the principles of sustainable tourism through participative roles of the community and the different relevant stakeholders, identity creation and maintenance, exploiting the economic, socio-cultural and ecological resources, continuous learning, and taking land ownership in the systematic design of the community landscape and agricultural best practices.

Clearly, to influence CBT operations towards sustainability, it is important to influence the community at the behavioural level, which shares the similar finding of [12]. In this sense, this research contributes to the fragmented knowledge and publications of CBT in the context of behavioural emphasis.

6 Discussions and Suggestions

Although the study demonstrates that CBT as practice in Huai Nam Guen village can be seen as a potential force for community development and conservation of socio-cultural and natural resources of the host destination, whether CBT in Huai Nam Guen would contribute to sustainability of the destination in the long term is a subject of some debate. Further more systematic research efforts are demanded, such as by adapting concepts of customer value, brand equity management and socio-psychological knowledge towards sustainability [12].

One of the most issues in concerns is about the capability of the local people in CBT planning and its operation. Thus, fully participation of the local community in the development process is vital.

Based on [27] it is important that the locals must involve with the process of decision making as they are the one who receive direct affects from the initiative.

Therefore, they should have an opportunity to express their concerns. The project plans were implemented based on the decision made. Following this, the project plan requires auditing and evaluation to minimize potential problems. To get through the whole process of development is not easy due to the lack of required knowledge and skills among the locals.

Therefore, supports from the experts or superior authority are essential for the whole process of initiative development. The supports could be done through the programme of training, work shop and study tour. Further, the economic benefits among the locals is an essential issue that need to be addressed as when communities are earning from their natural resources to gain income through the initiative, the quality of life of its members will be improved. It is assumed that when residents receive benefits, they are more likely to support conservation as well as promotion of cooperation among the members. These could be a path to sustainability [27].

This study suggested that CBT as practice in Huai Nam Guen village can be seen as a potential force for peace, cross-cultural understanding, wealth, community development and conservation of socio-culture and natural resources of the host destination.

This is because an operation of the enterprise engaged with four essential components of sustainability including:

1) Conservation. This involves a contribution to the conservation or preservation of natural environment, social and cultural characteristics of the local community;

2) Local employment and income generation and distribution. This has implications for a range of new business and employment opportunities;

3) Educational experiences and appreciation about natural environment and local culture of tea production that resulting in increasing environmental and cultural awareness among stakeholders and;

4) Local participation and empowerment of host community. This includes involvement of the local residents in participation at all stages of the development process as well as applies to both direct and indirect participants and beneficiaries, and collaboration between stakeholders such as the government sector, private sector and local residents.

In contrast, the study demonstrated that the weakness of CBT operation is in aspect of marketing due to lack of skills and knowledge among local residents of how to market their destination so that most benefits will be rather in the community than in the hand of outside-private entrepreneurs.

Moreover, this paper high lights that alongside with support from local authority ‘Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO)’ in terms of funding, and educational institute in terms of strengthen the knowledge and skills of the locals in tourism and hospitality operation and its marketing as well as enhance marketing networks, public participation in all levels of tourism development and collaboration among stakeholders are essential issues for the development of sustainable tourism in the region as success in micro development level does provide to macro solution.

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