

The Sustainability and Effects of Community Based Tourism: A Comparative Case Study of Thailand and Lao PDR

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Abstract

Flooding number of tourists is coming into Thailand and Lao PDR especially during the period of the establishment of ASEAN Community which borderless links its members. The international tourists come to explore and experience the sightseeing places where cannot find in their homelands. The attractions that brought them are unseen or untouched sites. Most of these sites are in rural areas or villages where uniquely preserves their own natural richness and traditional lifestyle. This research paper is a synthesis of knowledge gathering from related researches in the realm of the effect and sustainability of community-based tourism (CBT) in Thailand and Lao PDR for supporting ASEAN tourism expansion. This study has an objective to find out both pros and cons of the Community based Tourism (CBT) effects and sustainability in three aspects which are socio-culture, economy, and environment in four provinces of Northern Thailand which are Chiang Rai, Phayao, Nan and Uttaradit and four provinces of Northern Lao PDR which are Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha and Bokeo. This research has applied the analytical both qualitative and quantitative approaches and has collected data from field research, an in-depth interview, a focus group, and questionnaires from the local people.

Keywords: community based Tourism, sustainability, effects, Thailand, Lao PDR

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Introduction

In the midst of worldwide fluctuated economic situation nowadays, tourism sector has seemed to be an industry that is less affected. Meanwhile it has generated incomes for many countries. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has stated that international tourist arrivals grew up by 4.4 percents in 2015 to reach a total of 1,184 million in 2015. The UNWTO Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai, mentioned that the robust performance of the sector has contributed to global economic growth and job creation which have effected to each country to promote relevant policies that foster the continued growth of tourism, including travel facilitation, human resources development and sustainability (UNWTO, 2016). In addition, it has expected that there will be more than 1,500 million tourists around the world in 2020 (Sinth, 2002). In this regard, Tourism is an important mechanism for driving economy, nationally and internationally.

Achieving the ASEAN Community by the end of 2015, it makes 10 ASEAN member states which are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam densely integrate one another. To solidify ASEAN Community, the idea of “ASEAN Connectivity (2010)” has adopted and addressed the key elements to support and facilitate the economic, political-security and socio-cultural pillars which include (ASEAN Secretariat, 2011); *Physical Connectivity*: Transport, Information and Communications Technology, Energy; *Institutional Connectivity*: Trade Liberalization and Facilitation, Mutual Recognition Agreements/Arrangements, Investment and Services, Liberalization and Facilitation, Regional Transportation Agreements, Cross-Border Procedures, Capacity Building Programmes; and *People-to-People Connectivity*: Education, Culture, Tourism. Moreover, ASEAN members have already had an agreement relevant to free flow of skilled labour called “ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs)”. With this mechanism, tourism professionals is one of the eight career sectors (aside from tourism professionals they are architectural services, surveying, medical practitioners, dental practitioners, engineer services, nursing, and accounting services). These arrangements expect to facilitate the mobility of tourism skilled labours within ASEAN, based on competence-based tourism qualifications, after the integration of ASEAN Community. Also, it will strengthen mutual tourism professionals’ cooperation among ASEAN member countries. Therefore, it can be said that tourism is one of the key factors to strengthen mutual cooperation among nation members.

Regarding to the trend of tourism in ASEAN countries, it seems that most of the international tourist arrivals are interested in traveling and sightseeing in cultural world heritage sites. (Warach, 2009) For example; The Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns and the Ayutthaya Historical Park of Thailand; Angkor Wat of Cambodia; the Historic Cities of Melaka and George Town of Malaysia; Town of Luang Prabang of Lao PDR.

Thailand is one of the world’s top tourist destinations. In 2015, there were international tourists visiting Thailand almost 30 million (Department of Tourism, 2016: Online). The top ten international tourists came from China, Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, Lao PDR, India, United Kingdom, Singapore, Russia and USA, consecutively. Tourism industry has been set as a national agenda and strategy

especially after Thailand has encountered the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. The government aimed at tourism to be a boosting tool for national economic recovery. As a short term tourism promotion, the slogan of “The Amazing Thailand” has become well-known and successful campaign for encouraging the country’s economy. In 2002, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports has been established. For reaching the ultimate goal of Thailand tourism strategy, it sets the vision which is “Thailand is a prime tourism spot among world class tourism competency that generates and distributes incomes, justly, equally and permanently.” However, the situation of tourism in Thailand has recently faced the flux of tourists which directly affects on the deterioration of natural and historical tourism sites.

Lao PDR is currently one of the Asia’s countries which have high potentials in tourism because it has plentifully and variously natural, historical and cultural tourism sites. Also, it has political stability and cordial people. In 2013, it was named the world’s best tourist destination by the European Council on Tourism and Trade (ECTT). (Bangkok Post, 2013: Online) In 2014, the overall number of international tourists was 4.15 million. (Department of Tourism Development, Vientiane: 2014) The top ten international tourists came from Thailand (almost a half of total amount of tourist arrivals), Vietnam, China, South Korea, USA, France, Australia, Japan, United Kingdom and Germany, respectively. Lao PDR government has strongly supported tourism industry as a key factor for national incomes and development. Tourism sector has been the second largest national revenues placing behind mine industry. Lao government has launched the national tourism strategy (2012-2020) for supporting and developing tourism spots and products. The government has also invested in public infrastructures such as nationwide connected highways for facilitating tourists and attracting foreign investment from outsiders especially accommodations, entertainment venues, casinos and golf clubs. Lao PDR looks at itself as “a land linked country” which not only intimately connects other ASEAN mainland members but also non-ASEAN member like China. (Department of Tourism Marketing, Vientiane: 2011) Even though Laos has the fruitfulness of tourism resources, an inefficient and unprofessional tourism management still needs to enhance.

What is Community Based Tourism?

The concept of community based tourism (hereinafter referred to “CBT”) is one of the alternative tourism which supports community to participate in tourism development process. (Hatton: 1999) The CBT is a kind of tourism which based on the idea that everyone in the community or village is the owner and stakeholder of natural, traditional and cultural resources. These resources and original lifestyles of each community are become the tourism capitals which can effect to sustainably economic and social development. (Sinth, 2002) The CBT is a tourism which concerns about social and environmental sustainability which is guided by community, managed by community, and owned by community. Therefore, community needs to make people feel proud and cherish on their identity. The CBT is a part of community development by supporting community participation to develop tourism activities based on local wisdom and environmental conservation. The examples of pattern of CBT are ecological tourism, cultural tourism, agricultural tourism, health tourism and so on. No matter what type of CBT, the purpose aims at develop and strengthen community by people in community. (Yot: 2001)

The principles of community-based tourism (Thailand Community-based Tourism Institute, 2013: Online) are (1) the ownership of community (2) participating of community in the right of decision (3) promoting community pride (4) enhancing quality of life (5) environmental sustainability (6) sustaining local culture and identity (7) knowledge engagement between different communities (8) valuing different culture and human prestige (9) fair yielding for locals in community and (10) income distributing for community's public benefits. When community is prompt for CBT site, it should have four matters to concern which are tourism activities, tourism services, tourism facilities, and managing mechanism. (Thailand Research Fund: 2004)

Regarding to Community-based tourism effectiveness evaluation, there are six indicators. (Pimrawee: 2010) Firstly, the successful CBT derives from genuine participation of community. The community willingly aggregates for obvious tourism management. Secondly, the interests from CBT must be fairly distributed to community. Major interests are in socio-economic dimension such as revenues, enhancing living standard, poverty reduction, and increasing local employment. Thirdly, CBT management system must be carried out with good governance. Tourism management should gradually and cautiously develop for community adaptation. Fourthly, there should be collaboration from stakeholders both in and out community. Community can get assistance and support from business sectors, political and economic institutions. Fifthly, Community must have its own distinctive point of tourism resources for sustainable tourism development. For example; culture and traditions, man-made tourism site, historical tourism site etc. Lastly, CBT must be concerned about environment as well. Some communities may support natural tourism sites as a knowledge center for environmental conservation learning.

After the CBT is set up in the community, their effects can divide into three parts which are (1) Socio-Culture: mutual exchange between the host and the visitor, knowledge and skill development and the locals' opportunities in participatory process; (2) Environment: environmental preserving realization of the host and the visitor, sustainable tourism resources management and administration by community; (3) Economy: additional income, formation of community fund, creating jobs and related tourism activities. (Responsible Ecological Social Tour Project: 2003) Therefore, nowadays the community-based tourism is an alternative choice of tourism. It creates the understanding of people in community by promoting tourism management participation. Villagers will not only directly receive interests from CBT but also take into consideration about the effects of tourism for utmost sustainability of their own CBT resources.

The Objectives

- 1) To describe the effects of CBT in Thailand and Lao PDR.
- 2) To consider the sustainability of CBT in Thailand and Lao PDR.

Framework and Methodology

This research paper was an analysis of the effects and sustainability of CBT in Thailand and Lao PDR. It was carried on CBT in four provinces of northern Thailand which are Chiang Rai, Phayao, Nan and Uttaradit and four provinces of Lao PDR

which are Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha and Bokeo. This research was collected data from field research, an in-depth interview, a focus group, and questionnaires. Samplings were Thai/Lao CBT stakeholders who were locals, tourism entrepreneurs in community, and related governmental sectors.

Research Findings

The Effects of CBT in Thailand and Lao PDR

Analyzing the CBT effects, they were divided into three aspects which were socio-cultural, economic, and environmental effects. For provinces of Northern Thailand, they are as follows. First of all, *Thakhunthong village, Chiang Saen district of Chiang Rai*, one of the best practices of CBT sites in Thailand. It has been awarded the Thailand Tourism Award for the Sufficiency Economy Village in 2013. The prominences of this village are the variety of tourism activities which relevant to the locals' way of life such as cotton weaving lady's group, cricket farming, and tea plant. It also has a historical tour for natural and historical sightseeing alongside of Mekong River between Thai-Lao borderlines which run by local entrepreneur. About the effects of CBT, most of the locals mentioned that CBT did not numerous effect to their society. The CBT increases their income aside from main professionals which are agricultural sector. In addition, it does not destroy their tradition and culture whereas CBT has brought back their endeavor to protect their cultural identities. For environmental effect, there is well-managed environmental system by cooperating of the locals and tourists. However, they are still concerned about local teenagers will not be interested in their valued culture because of external social changes. From the area survey, it was noticed that the local administration officers have played an important role to support the community development through CBT. Secondly, *Ban Huak Checkpoint, Phu Sang district of Phayao*, is named "the Valley of Two Lands One Heart" because of the border connection with Xayaboury province of Lao PDR. It is a strategic point of Phayao and Xayaboury for economic exchange and tourism and a part of GMS strategic cooperation which links Northern Vietnam to Mawlamyine and Dawei of Myanmar. (Kannika and Adisorn: 2013) The locals agree that due to its location and CBT sites' development, there are better changes in society which can evidence from infrastructure development for supporting the linkage to Lao PDR. and community meeting for CBT development. For CBT effects, people in community mentioned that CBT has not negative effects to their cultures meanwhile their authentic traditions; local food, crafts and rites, are attractive for visitors. Also, they earn additional income from CBT though it is not a big amount of it. However, during the high season of tourist, the community has been affected from the lack of consuming water and electricity. Also, there are noise and air pollution from visitors' vehicles. Thirdly, *Huay Kon, Chalerm Prakiet of Nan*, is the international checkpoint between Thailand and Lao PDR. where most of tourists and logistic transportation use this border immigration for reaching Luang Prabang and Dien Bien Phu of Vietnam. At this village, there are Thai-Lao border market, waterfalls, and communist base camp historical site as the interesting tourist sites. However, it found that Huay Kon community has not yet established active CBT because of lack of local participation and local government support. Interviewees mentioned that CBT creates interests only port of entry not a whole part. Also, tourist entrepreneurs are non-locals that make the community do not get benefits from CBT. In addition, the expansion of border trade cause to environmental problems such as

noise and air pollution, waste management. Finally, *Phu Doo village, Ban Khok district of Uttaradit*, is also the permanent international point of entry between Thailand and Lao PDR. It has Thai-Lao border market where main products are household stuffs made in Thailand meanwhile Lao products are wild products which do not meet the demand of tourists. As a connected point between two countries, it makes outsiders coming and settling down, peaceful and secured community becomes at risk. Like Huay Kon village of Nan province, it has not yet perfectly been CBT because main areas are national preserved sites and locals do not have clear understanding about CBT. There also faces the environmental effects from destroying forest and using agrichemicals in maize farmland.

For the CBT effects to four provinces of Lao PDR are as follows. Firstly, *Luang Prabang* is well-known as the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site since 1995. It is the second ranking for national highest number of international visitor arrivals. Luang Prabang has many attractive tourism sites such as the Royal Palace, Wat Xieng Thong temple, colonial styled architecture buildings, handicraft village and night market. In addition, there are various kinds of accommodation, cafés, restaurants which can support tourist needs. Regarding to the CBT effects, locals agree that CBT increase their incomes. However, booming tourism brings non-local Laotians and foreigners (especially Chinese) to reside and run tourism services. Also, the villagers are concerned about the acceptance of international currencies (US Dollar, Chinese Yuan or Thai Baht) more than Lao Kip. This reflects that CBT may not thoroughly distribute its benefits to locals. Besides, it effects to the living cost which is relatively high. For the socio-cultural effects, because of a number of international visitors, there have some illegal issues such as drugs, crimes and prostitutions. The local community has an extensive campaign for foreigners about suitable manner and behavior when staying in Lao PDR. Luang Prabang also faces with environmental issue such as air and noise pollutions, waste management, and disorderliness of landscapes. Secondly, *Oudomxay* is known as “the Heart of Northern Laos” because of its location which connects to Southern China, Northern Vietnam and Northern Thailand. From the research sites visit, It seems that provincial tourism office is active to support CBT in villages of the province whether how to develop tourism skills and management for the locals and how to improve CBT sites. The CBT has generated more incomes for locals and they set the village tourism fund from that earning to build up and improve facilities for tourists. The province has trained local tour leaders in community and created network among villages where well-managed on their CBT products. Thirdly, *Luang Namtha* has well-known about “Eco-Trekking Destination” where the province is situated in mountainous area of the Nam Ha National Park. There are homestays and trekking tour guides by locals. Luang Namtha has borderline with China by Boten International Custom Checkpoint and R3A Road which becomes a crossroad and stopover for Chinese tourists to travel along Laos and Vietnam, contrarily international tourists comfortably visit China. For the socio-cultural effects from CBT, because of active participation and strong community, they have concredited plan and action to preserve their local wisdom for CBT. The locals earn additional income from CBT and construct necessary infrastructure for visitors’ convenience by non-destruction of environment. Lastly, *Bokeo* is labeled in both natural and cultural CBT resources. It is border on Chiang Rai province of Thailand where is divided by Mekong river. Bokeo is now attractive for international investors especially from China and South Korea. There is a casino named King Roman which is a part of Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone where is occupied by China. This issue leads

community to handle with traditional protection through preaching especially for young people. Bokeo province has been supported by local government for CBT sites such as information center, handicraft distribution center, standard homestays, and CBT training and workshop for the locals. The CBT generates incomes though they are not main profession. For environmental effect, the interviewees have mentioned that there are still problem on hygienic management and many vehicles in community, which is caused by the official opening of 4th Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (Chiang Khong-Huay Xai).

How to make CBT sustainably in Thailand and Lao PDR

It is obvious that tourism is not only generates incomes but also an important mechanism for poverty reduction and growing community economy. Thailand and Lao PDR have set CBT as a key strategy for national sustainable development. In 1992, there was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, generally called Rio Summit, which main theme was about sustainable development. Based on this idea, sustainable tourism has become the trend which concentrates on environmental and natural resources conservation, human development and local participation. (Thailand Community-based Tourism Institute, 2013: Online) The CBT is one of the endeavors of tourism development to strengthen the role of participation of local communities. For Thailand, it could be evident in the 8th national economic and social development plan (1997-2001) which “human is the center of development” was a goal. In addition, holistically socio-economic and environmental integration was set as a tool to reach the target. In this regard, Tourism Authority of Thailand and related NGOs have adopted the plan and supported ecological tourism which has four main components; nature based tourism, sustainable managed tourism, environmental education based tourism, and community participation based tourism. (Potjana, 2014) In 2006, Thailand Community Based Tourism (CBT-I) has been established. It has supported nationwide CBT by conducting community as a research site and applying the research outcome for development. Comparing to Thailand, it seems that CBT in Lao PDR is not yet well established. However, the current national tourism strategy has shown government intention to strengthen CBT. Furthermore, after research sites survey, Lao PDR abounds with cultural and natural tourism resources, and local communities actively participate in CBT so it is worth to keep the eyes on. For the mutual CBT sustainability of Thailand and Lao PDR among the Aseanization trend, there are four recommendations which are (1) supporting self-determination and skilled-human resources development of the locals in community, (2) supporting (not directing) from central/local government and external international organizations, (3) supporting the coordination among villages in community, and (4) supporting CBT transborder network between Thailand and Lao PDR.

Conclusion

There are few challenged questions about CBT. For example; “who does control CBT?” and “How the interests from CBT can fairly distribute to everyone in community?” In fact, we cannot deny that CBT has been controlled by outsiders such as government, interest and political groups, and entrepreneurs. However, for using CBT as a mechanism for sustainable community development, it should be concerned about (1) self-sufficiency of community (2) participation process in decision making (3) managing and bargaining power (4) role setting in mainstream tourism (5)

sustainability of community ecology (6) community capacity for management (7) interests and individual response (8) strength of community culture and (9) CBT destination. (Sinth, 2013) Another question is “Are the success of CBT from whether it generates more incomes or a number of tourists?” It can describe that ultimate goal of CBT are not above reasons but happiness of people in community on their own self-decision and resources. CBT is a tourism system which tourism activities are occurred by locals, controlled and managed by locals which those activities expressed authentic culture and identity of community. (Hinch and Butler: 1996) Therefore, CBT management is to restore community, ecologically and culturally. Also, it restores wisdom of locals to cautiously develop and sustain their community along with rapid socio-economical change.

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