

SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN NORTHERN THAILAND

Abstract

MATEJ BALEN, Dr., Lecturer
Mae Fah Luang University, School of Management
Tourism Business and Events Program
Tourism, Hospitality and Event Research Group
333 Moo1, Thasud, Muang, Chiang Rai 57100, Thailand
Phone: +66 (0)82 883 7708
E-Mail: matej.bal@mfu.ac.th

ATHITAYA PATHAN, Dr., Lecturer
Mae Fah Luang University, School of Management
Tourism Business and Events Program
Tourism, Hospitality and Event Research Group
333 Moo1, Thasud, Muang, Chiang Rai 57100, Thailand
Phone: +66 (0)82 496 7555
E-mail: athitaya.pat@mfu.ac.th

PIYANART JUNKRACHANG, Assistant Professor
Mae Fah Luang University, School of Management
Hospitality Business Management Program
Tourism, Hospitality and Event Research Group
333 Moo1, Thasud, Muang, Chiang Rai 57100, Thailand
Phone: +66 (0)82 496 7555
E-mail: piyanart.jun@mfu.ac.th

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the dynamics of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in Northern Thailand, examining its impact on sustainable development within the region. *Methodology* – Through a qualitative design, this study utilizes an interpretative approach to analyze the principal factors that shape the evolution of CBT from the perspectives of various stakeholders—local communities, government agencies, tourists, industry professionals, and academic experts. Conducted from January to November 2023, the methodology comprises in-depth interviews across the provinces of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, utilizing a set of 20-30 open-ended questions categorized into 15 key areas such as economic impacts, environmental sustainability, social dynamics, and cultural preservation.

Findings – The findings reveal that CBT serves as an additional economic stream complementing traditional agriculture, engages communities in preserving their cultural heritage, and emphasizes environmental conservation. However, it also faces challenges such as financial difficulties, lack of awareness, and conflicts within communities. Notably, the research identifies the significant role of social capital and local leadership in empowering communities to manage CBT initiatives effectively.

Originality of the research – This study's originality lies in its comprehensive examination of CBT's role in fostering sustainable development in a unique socio-cultural and ecological setting, providing valuable insights for other regions implementing similar sustainable tourism models.

Keywords Community-Based Tourism, Sustainable Development, Northern Thailand, Social Capital, Cultural Preservation, Environmental Conservation.

Preliminary Communication
<https://doi.org/10.20867/thi.27.14>

INTRODUCTION

Northern Thailand, with its mountainous landscapes and lush forests, serves as a living museum of cultural heritage and natural beauty. The imprint of the ancient Lanna Buddhism culture is a testament to a history influenced by Thai, Indian, Burmese, and Chinese threads, which manifest in the region's distinctive art, architecture, and culinary traditions (Schedneck, 2017). These elements are not just mere tourist attractions; they are the essence of the region's identity. Yet, the local tribes, guardians of this heritage, have struggled with poverty, inadequate education, and isolation due to their remote habitats (Dearden, 1991).

Historically notorious for opium trading, the area of Northern Thailand and local tribal communities have often been described as main sources of environmental degradation, unlawful activities and political instability. With the disappearance of opium trading, there was a significant need for development strategies to address ecological and social issues while incorporating the welfare of these tribal communities (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2014). Lacking sufficient development funds, the Thai government opted to imitate Japan's sustainable development models, which have been successful in rural Japanese areas. Community-based tourism (CBT) in rural Japan has focused on fostering connections within local communities by offering unique tourism programs that capitalize on genuine rural and food heritage, and it involves local residents as instructors, drawing upon their innate skills and heritage (Theerapappisit, 2011).

When introduced in 1990s, CBT emerged as a beacon of hope for Northern Thailand - a strategy to fuse cultural preservation with economic vitality, that can be summarized as: 'tourism by the local people for the local people'. It is envisioned as an initiative launched by the local communities, operated independently of central government direction. It embodies empowerment and autonomy of local communities, allowing individuals who were once passive characters in their own story to become active architects of their future (Theerapappisit, 2009).

The goal of this paper is to identify and analyze the principal factors that shape the development of CBT in Northern Thailand. The study approaches CBT through the lens of key stakeholders: the local communities, governmental agencies, Thai and international tourists, industry professionals, and academic experts from Northern Thailand. Interviews with all key stakeholders were carried out from January to November 2023 across the northern provinces of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. This primary data sources aims to dissect the current situation with CBT in Northern Thailand. The paper seeks to add to the discourse on sustainable development and provide valuable insights for other regions around the world toward pathways of sustainable growth.

1. SUSTAINABILITY AND COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM (CBT)

In the academic literature, sustainable development typically explores the three-pillar model of sustainability that interconnects the economic, ecological, and social aspects of development, emphasizing material growth's compatibility with resource sustainability and living standards (Mihalic, 2020). Sustainable development within the tourism sector, particularly through CBT, is about addressing these three pillars by fostering an equilibrium among the requirements of visitors, the industry, and host communities. It is about finding economic opportunities that do not compromise ecological integrity or social equity (Dangi & Jamal, 2016).

Historically, local communities now implementing CBT have typically faced economic hardships, and they have found tourism to be a supplemental income stream (Zielinski, Jeong, & Milanés, 2021), often secondary to agriculture. The concept of CBT is understood through various definitions that emphasize its core, goals, or foundational principles that underline its practice. With different practices around the world, the concept of CBT lacks a singular, universally accepted framework (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2020).

Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng (2014) point out consensus on certain essential characteristics of CBT: the sustainable use of environmental resources, active community involvement, fair financial benefit sharing, upliftment and empowerment of local communities, and the local community's significant role in directing, managing, and owning tourism initiatives. As Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng suggest, within these characteristics, the community empowerment is perceived as an essential factor in the development of sustainable tourism within Community-Based Tourism (CBT). High levels of community empowerment can contribute significantly to the success of sustainable tourism initiatives by garnering local support. This support acts as a bridge that links community empowerment to sustainable tourism development in local areas. This implies that for sustainable tourism development to be effective, it should not only yield economic benefits but also enhance the quality of life for the host community, preserve environmental quality, and offer a high-quality experience for visitors, as noted by Khalid et al. (2019). Additionally, it should safeguard cultural and natural heritage to be perceived as sustainable (Dangi & Jamal, 2016).

1.1. Role of Local Communities

Dissanayake and Samarathunga (2015) provide a blueprint for CBT by identifying four essential segments integral to its structure:

1. small tourist offices that may also serve as tourist guides,
2. institutions that work in collaboration with the local tourism industry, such as local public administrations, NGOs, and universities,
3. direct service companies: accommodation providers, food and beverage services, selling local products, and
4. various transport and financial businesses.

This structure paints a picture of a tourism model that is heavily reliant on local community involvement and management. The local community, therefore, bears the greatest responsibility for the successful implementation of CBT initiatives.

The role of local communities in CBT is multifaceted. They serve as tourist guides, often sharing intimate knowledge of the local area that cannot be found in guidebooks. They are integral to direct services, providing authentic experiences in accommodation, food, and beverage services, and selling local products, which ensures that the benefits of tourism circulate within the community. Additionally, they operate various transport and financial services that support the tourism infrastructure. However, this heavy reliance on local communities also reveals a significant vulnerability of CBT: the lack of hierarchical structure and defined mutual responsibilities among stakeholders (Burgos & Mertens, 2017). This can lead to organizational challenges, where responsibilities and benefits may not be evenly distributed. For successful CBT communities, it is essential to establish clear roles and responsibilities, alongside mechanisms for conflict resolution and benefit-sharing. Dissanayake and Samarathunga (2015) list main challenges for a CBT community in Mihintale, Sri Lanka: lack of awareness of tourism, poor leadership in the community, insufficient education and training, lack of motivation, no financial support to engage with CBT. Hall (1999) emphasizes the importance of partnerships and collaborations for sustainable development of local communities, including public-private and community-private partnerships. These partnerships can leverage additional resources and expertise, leading to more innovative and resilient tourism products.

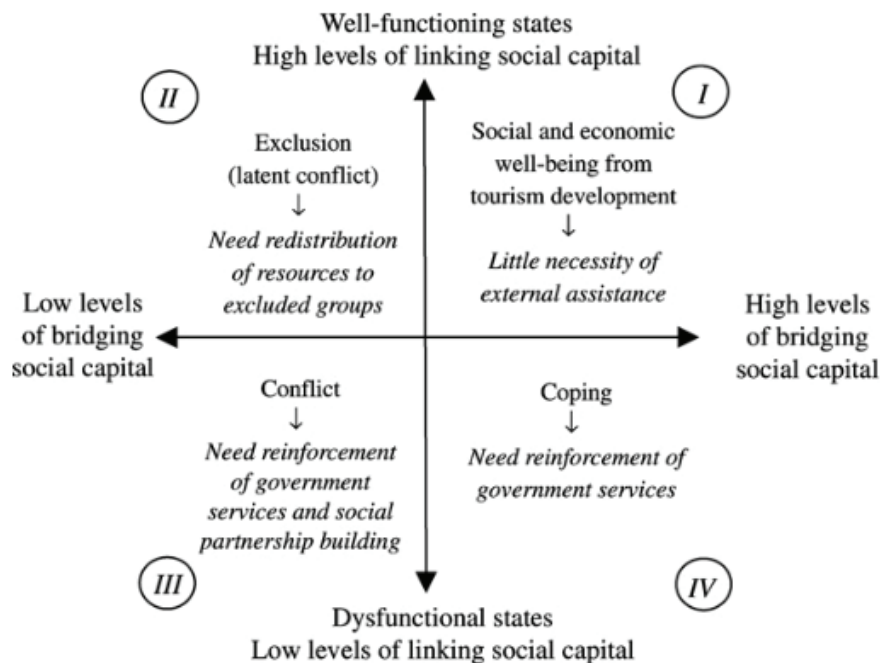
The integration of sustainable tourism and CBT is based on the principle of long-term sustainability and local-level responsibilities. Sustainability in this context goes well beyond environmental preservation, extending to community well-being, equity, justice, and ethical governance (Dangi & Petrick, 2021). A successful CBT initiative needs to be inclusive, ensuring that the community has a significant say in decision-making processes and maintains control over tourism activities, including the fair distribution, use, and conservation of resources (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). The role of local communities in CBT is indispensable, as they are the stewards of their culture, environment, and local lifestyle.

1.2. Significance of Social Capital

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has evolved to not only include the sustainable development of tourism but also the intricate involvement of community participation in its planning and decision-making processes. Social capital, characterized by the norms and networks that enable collective action, is a crucial element in this paradigm.

Okazaki (2008) brought an additional understanding regarding CBT, emphasizing an approach that reduces negative impacts and enhances the positive effects of tourism on local communities. This is where social capital becomes instrumental. It involves the community's trust and civic cooperation, which are fundamental to successful CBT initiatives. These relationships form the bedrock upon which communities can engage in meaningful dialogue, decision-making, and action towards sustainable tourism. Okazaki's findings are graphically shown on Figure 1. where Okazaki summarized implications for development assistance from the perspective of state–society relations that can effectively be applied to CBT.

Figure 1: Implications for community-based tourism development



Source: Okazaki (2008), based on the the concepts of Woolcock and Narayan (2000) and Sato (2001)

Figure 1 suggests that societies with strong governance and high levels of bridging social capital tend to effectively coordinate between the state and society, leading to successful tourism development without external assistance. However, in situations where powerful groups control tourism resources, there's a need for redistribution to prevent marginalization and protest. When residents are disadvantaged by tourism development despite existing social networks, government intervention is necessary to address the situation, potentially supplemented by informal networks. In cases where both government and informal networks fail to function adequately, conflicts may arise, necessitating strengthened government functions and partnerships within society.

When examining factors that reinforce social capital within CBT, researchers generally agree on the following elements. Education on the needs of tourists and the business acumen of community members are often limited (Zielinski, Jeong, & Milanés, 2021), indicating a gap in social capital. Additionally, insufficient financial means and conflicting interests within a community can hamper the development of CBT. This is particularly evident when some community members choose to engage only if there is direct financial support from government bodies, which can undermine the self-reliance and sustainability goals of CBT (Dissanayake & Samarathunga, 2015).

On the example of Hong Kong, Mak et al. (2017) analyzed community engagement in tourism development by using of the Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation. By climbing this ladder, communities can shift from mere involvement to genuine empowerment, acquiring not only basic human needs and education but also the skills and power necessary to influence their quality of life positively. Rocha (1997) extends this concept by integrating empowerment into the structure of CBT. Empowerment here is not just about participation; it's about enabling destination communities to take control over tourism development. This ensures that decisions, actions, and control over tourism development are aligned with the long-term sustainability of the community.

One critical aspect of social capital in CBT is the transformative learning processes that raise community awareness. Such education is vital for fostering public participation and empowerment. When communities understand the full spectrum of tourism's impact, they are better equipped to take collective action that preserves their interests and well-being (Walter, 2016) (Sen & Walter, 2020).

The power of the community leader is also paramount in the context of social capital. The leader serves as the main motivator for community involvement by navigating the obligations and benefits that come with participation. A strong community leader will have the vision and strategic planning capabilities to define what aspects of the community to develop and how to foster growth that aligns with the community's values and goals (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2014) (Azwar, Hanafiah, Abd Ghani, Azinuddin, & Shariffuddin, 2023).

Social capital is the lifeblood of CBT. It fortifies trust, fosters cooperation, facilitates the sharing of knowledge and skills, and ultimately, enables the community to leverage its collective strength for sustainable tourism development. A community rich in social capital can effectively negotiate the terms of tourism, ensuring that it serves as a tool for development rather than a force of disruption. It's through the meticulous cultivation of social capital that CBT can fulfill its promise of delivering tangible benefits to the community while preserving the cultural and environmental integrity of the destination.

2. COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM (CBT) IN NORTHERN THAILAND

Northern Thailand, former Kingdom of Lanna (1292–1775) and a part of the infamous Golden Triangle, bordering Burma and Laos, is now one of the country's poorest areas. It possesses vast mountainous terrain, stunning landscapes, and diverse ethnic groups, including hill tribes that rely on agriculture for survival. It is also home to a wealth of cultural and historical sites, with thousands of Buddhist temples rooted in the traditions of the Lanna Kingdom, which could attract tourists looking to experience the area's distinct heritage.

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in Northern Thailand evolved from acknowledging the region's unique cultural, natural, and social resources. Its inception aimed to mitigate conventional tourism's adverse effects and tackle rural poverty, cultural erosion, and environmental harm. For Thailand, Japan has served as an example for successful development of CBT communities, especially in its rural and semi-urban regions. In Japan, CBT has been a means to rejuvenate local economies, safeguard traditional crafts and lifestyles, and confront demographic issues like aging populations and the migration of the youth to cities (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2010). In Japan, community initiatives typically include residents welcoming tourists into their homes, engaging them in local arts, agriculture, and culinary traditions, and leading them through the region's natural and historical sites (Ohe, 2018).

2.1. CBT Pilot Projects

The promotion of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in Northern Thailand has been pivotal in linking the need for sustainable development with the rich cultural tapestry and environmental preservation of the region. Several pilot projects, launched before the year 2000, serve as milestones in this journey:

The "Top-Down" Approach: Had Bai Village Project (1998)

This initiative, steered by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), sought to design and implement tourism activities by introducing infrastructure and services conceived at the national level, with the intention of fostering local economic growth. However, as Theerapappisit (2011) points out, while it succeeded in drawing visitors, the level of community engagement and benefit was varied, sparking debates on the efficacy and inclusivity of top-down interventions in CBT.

The "Intermediate" Approach: Doi Tung Development Project (1988)

Managed by a private NGO with royal patronage, this project epitomizes an 'intermediate' strategy that blended central planning with local participation. As highlighted by Napathorn (2018), this model was instrumental in rehabilitating the local environment, which was previously degraded by opium cultivation, by introducing sustainable agricultural practices and alternative livelihoods through tourism, thereby aligning with the ethos of CBT.

The "Bottom-Up" Approach: Cha Lae Village's Project (2000)

Initiated directly by the inhabitants of Cha Lae Village and supported by a local NGO, this approach is celebrated for its grassroots origin, with decisions and benefits firmly in the hands of the community, as described by Theerapappisit (2009). The project focused on empowering villagers through ownership and management of tourism activities, leading to enhanced community cohesion and self-determination.

Each of these projects reflects a different face of CBT: from government-led initiatives to community-driven endeavors. The common thread is their contribution to the sustainable development goals of environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and economic enhancement. They underscore the diversity of approaches to integrating communities into tourism development, with varied levels of community control and benefit-sharing, yet all fall under the umbrella of CBT (Boonratana, 2010). These projects laid a foundation for future CBT initiatives in Northern Thailand, but also to other parts of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

2.2. One Tambon One Product (OTOP) and University to Tambon (U2T) projects

Following the successful practice from Japan, the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) initiative was introduced in Thailand in 2002, aimed at stimulating rural economies by promoting unique local products from each ‘tambon’, or sub-district. This program supports the creation and marketing of distinctive products, such as handicrafts, textiles, and food, that reflect the culture and skills of local communities. Although initially successful, OTOP faced challenges related to product quality consistency, prompting reforms to enhance the program (Pholphirul, Kwanyou, Rukumnuaykit, Charoenrat, & Srijamdee, 2023) (Sakkatat & Kruekum, 2018)

In response to low product quality, the University to Tambon (U2T) project was launched in 2020, alongside One Tambon One University (OTOU), to bolster the original OTOP objectives. These newer initiatives involve direct collaboration between universities and tambons, where academic institutions provide expertise and support to develop and improve the quality of local products. The goal is to foster employment, uphold sustainable development, and create products that are not only of high quality but also carry the recognition of authenticity and cultural significance (Suindramedhi, Thepparp, & Engstrom, 2024).

The U2T program is particularly revolutionary in bridging the gap between academia and rural industry, bringing in research, development, and educational resources to assist in product design, quality control, and business acumen (Klaiyoo, Ritwatthanavanich, Makhala, & Kanchanda, 2023). By doing so, it ensures that the unique cultural heritage of each tambon is preserved and celebrated through products that can compete in national and international markets.

3. METHODOLOGY

The objective of this paper is to identify and analyze the key factors influencing the development of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in Northern Thailand. This empirical research is grounded in the collection of primary data through interviews with key stakeholders, including two leading CBT communities in Northern Thailand, three primary government agencies responsible for CBT development in Thailand, nine Thai and three international tourists, a private tourism consultant, and a university scholar from Northern Thailand (for a detailed list, see Table 1). These interviews were conducted from January to November 2023 across the northern provinces of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai.

The open-ended interview questions comprised 20-30 items within 15 coded categories identified as key areas through a literature review. These categories are as follows: *Government and Local Initiatives, Community Benefits and Participation, Economic Impacts, Environmental Impacts, Social Dynamics, Sustainable Development Success Stories, Challenges and Barriers, Evaluation of Success, Long-term Planning, Equity in Benefit Distribution, Local Involvement, Capacity Building, Cultural Preservation, Heritage Protection, and Partnerships* (for details, see Table 2).

The interview questions were tailored to each stakeholder group to uncover specific factors of interest in relation to CBT and to collect their perspectives and direct experiences. The number of questions varied among stakeholders, depending on their particular focus.

Interviews were conducted in the English language when the interviewee was non-Thai and in the Thai language when speaking with Thai citizens. Interviews in Thai were subsequently transcribed from audio recordings and translated into English. Responses were categorized according to the themes outlined in Table 2, with codes manually assigned to relevant sections of the text across all transcripts.

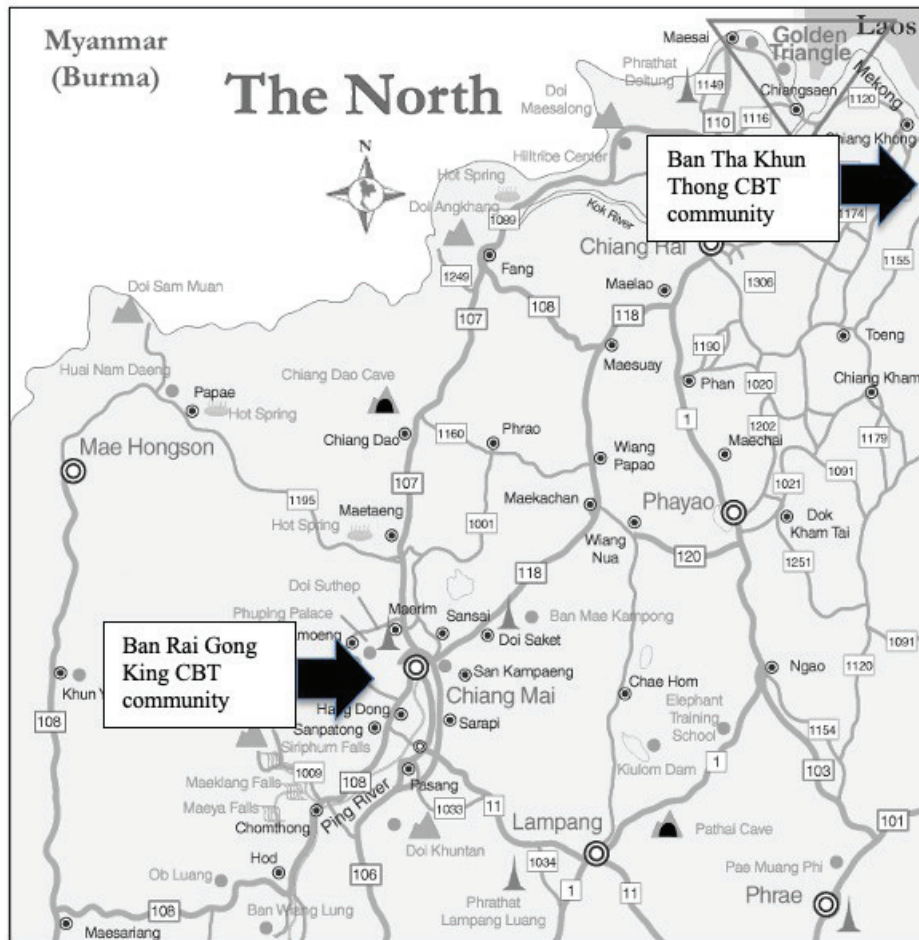
Table 1: List of interviews with key stakeholders

Stakeholder Category	Name	Details
Local Communities	Ban Tha Khun Thong	CBT community in the border area of Chiang Rai, on the Mekong river, interview with the community leader and 5 villagers (Feb 2023)
	Ban Rai Gong King	CBT community in the rural area of Chiang Mai, interview with the community leader and 3 villagers (Feb 2023)
Government Institutions	DASTA	Thailand’s Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA), Bangkok headquarters, (Feb 2023)
	Ministry of Tourism & Sports of Thailand	Ministry of Tourism & Sports of Thailand, Chiang Mai branch responsible for Northern Thailand region (Feb 2023)
	Provincial Community Development Office	Provincial Community Development Office in Chiang Mai, responsible for community and development in northern Thailand, promotion of OTOP products from northern Thailand (Feb 2023)

Tourists	Domestic Tourists	4 domestic tourists visiting CBT community in Chiang Mai, 5 domestic tourists visiting CBT community in Chiang Rai (all Oct 2023)
	International Tourists	3 international tourists visiting CBT community in Chiang Rai rural area (Aug 2023)
Private Consultant	Tourism and Destination Consultant	International Tourism Professional and Consultant, living in Northern Thailand over 20 years (Mar 2023)
University Scholar	CBT development Research scholar	Tourism professor specializing in CBT communities, retired professor from Chiang Mai (Feb 2023)

Source: Compiled by authors (2023)

Picture 1: Map of Northern Thailand



Source: <https://maps-thailand.com/map-northern-thailand.html>

Table 2: Interview Question Categories

Code	Category	Details
C1	Government and Local Initiatives	Inquiries about the existence and description of tourism-focused initiatives by the government and at the local level.
C2	Community Benefits and Participation	Asks how the community profits from and participates in tourism development.
C3	Economic Impacts	Looks at the effects of tourism on various economic factors within the community, including revenue, unemployment, business development, job creation, and poverty.
C4	Environmental Impacts	Examines changes in waste generation, resource consumption, emissions, and damage to natural or cultural sites due to tourism.
C5	Social Dynamics	Assesses how tourism has influenced social aspects such as involvement in tourism, education, skills, social conflicts, and satisfaction levels of tourists and locals.

C6	Sustainable Development Success Stories	Requests examples of successful sustainable tourism initiatives.
C7	Challenges and Barriers	Identifies and describes obstacles to sustainable tourism development and how they are addressed.
C8	Evaluation of Success	Investigates how the community measures the success of tourism initiatives.
C9	Long-term Planning	Considers how the community plans for ongoing sustainability in tourism.
C10	Equity in Benefit Distribution	Queries about the fair distribution of tourism benefits among residents.
C11	Local Involvement	Explores involvement of local businesses and educational institutions in tourism initiatives.
C12	Capacity Building	Asks about training or skill-development programs related to tourism.
C13	Cultural Preservation	Investigates how the community preserves culture and traditional knowledge in the face of tourism development.
C14	Heritage Protection	Looks at the protection of heritage sites amid tourism development.
C15	Partnerships	Inquiries about partnerships with government or other organizations, including international collaborations for tourism development and their effectiveness.

Source: Compiled by authors (2023)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. CBT as an Instrument for Poverty Alleviation

With the development of community-based tourism (CBT) in northern Thailand, one of the primary goals was to alleviate poverty for members of the CBT community as a means of achieving sustainability in the region. Previous studies have indicated that CBT communities regard tourism as merely a supplementary source of income (Zielinski, Jeong, & Milanés, 2021). Our study supports these findings, with CBT community members reporting that their primary income is derived from agricultural activities and selling products at local markets. Supported by the interview with one of the interviewed villagers: “The revenue from tourism serves as supplemental income for us. We primarily rely on agriculture, cultivating crops like corn, rice, and rubber trees. More tourist arrivals have led to the growth of our local markets and souvenir shops. Currently, we have about 9-10 homestays in the community. For those of us who can’t provide accommodations, they help out in other activities, like offering local car tours with our E-Tok vehicles and running cooking stations.”

The Thai government agency DASTA has been recognized for helping to define the community’s tourism concept, conducting training, and connecting communities to markets. All interviewed stakeholders agree that the nature of government support towards CBT communities is helpful, but relatively inconsistent. Due to limited resources and the large number of CBT communities across the country, government agencies can only conduct visits and activities at specific CBT communities periodically: “I would say the government used to come at the same time. They may come with different benefits, but at the same time. This was not convenient for our people. The training took 3 days, all at the same time. We had to divide our villagers to join their events. I think this may be useless sometimes. Also, the policy is normally set by the central government. If we change the government, then the policy will change to a new one. That’s why the development is not continued as it should be.” (from the interview with one of the interviewed village leaders).

While numerous studies mention conflicts within CBT communities (Curcija, Breakey, & Driml, 2019) (Gan, 2020) (Zielinski, Jeong, & Milanés, 2021) the nature and reasons for conflicts are not always clear. In our study, CBT communities mention the existence of separate groups within local communities. Some groups within CBT will only participate in CBT activities if government subsidies are attractive: “Some groups within our community will only participate in CBT activities if government subsidies are attractive. This has created divisions within the community, as certain groups are motivated by financial incentives rather than communal goals. Once, one group even hid and damaged the river boat that we take tourists in, because of the disagreements during one CBT activity.” (from the interview with the CBT community villagers).

Previous research mentions occurrences of conflicts in between CBT communities (Curcija, Breakey, & Driml, 2019) and we have examined the reasons in the interviews with community leaders: “The success of CBT community depends on the leader of the community, management knowledge, and the identity of the community. Some communities cannot succeed because they copy from others and don’t have their own identity. The big problem is marketing. The community doesn’t know how to sell their products.”

While CBT community leadership emphasizes fair profit distribution based on working hours and contributions, it is unclear whether all community members consider the distribution fair: “We don’t pay directly to our villagers. They must collect working hours. Then the profit, we will divide for different groups such as buying equipment, paying community clubs. The rest will be calculated by the cost per working hour and then returned to the member as per their working hours. We have fair profit distribution back to our members” (details from the interview with one community leader). However, government agencies and village leaders report a high percentage of participation in the CBT activities from the whole village. From the interview with a villager: “I would say 80% of villagers joined the tourism activities.”, supported by one interviewed government official: “We usually get big majority of the village participating in CBT activities.”

In regard to income from tourism, CBT communities report that tourism revenue supports the growth of local markets and social welfare but emphasize ongoing financial difficulties. CBT communities have limited abilities to adapt to changing trends and the needs of tourists, such as the lack of sanitary facilities and other infrastructure. Details from the interview with a university scholar: “The problem then becomes investing in making tables and chairs, but the important thing is that the toilet facilities are inadequate, foreigners can’t use them properly. Some communities would make new toilets, buy air-conditioning, but then no tourists would come... So other communities don’t want to invest.” Tourists, particularly domestic ones, recognize local initiatives for authentic and natural tourist experiences: “We heard about the community because they got some reward, I saw it on social media. And this is the second time we came here. I can always stay in a resort or good hotel, but they are so nice here, prepare everything for us and you enjoy different experience.” (one interviewed domestic tourist)

In terms of long-term sustainability, community leaders and villagers have expressed concern regarding younger generations who mainly leave local communities to study in bigger towns and cities, showing little interest in returning: “The challenge is we need to have next generation to carry our tourism activities. The teenagers spend their time on formal education. And they have their activities during weekend such as studying with tutors, spending time with their friends. They have no time to help community.” (from the interview with villagers). “The children of today, we can see that they are given quite a bit. They do not think like their parents or grandparents, right? If you have anything, share it. Think of sharing it. But the new generation, they buy something and, if they can’t eat it all, puts it in the refrigerator to keep it. This is not in accordance with traditional (community) values.” (university scholar on changing habits and new generations).

4.2. CBT as an Instrument for Community Empowerment

Even though there were different models used for initiating CBT activities in northern Thailand (Theerappisit, 2009) (Theerappisit, 2011) (Napathorn, 2018) with various level of involvement by the government, all the interviewed communities in this study began their CBT activities through internal cooperative efforts with the aim of generating additional financial resources. Initially, they relied solely on available resources such as agricultural products, unspoiled nature, local crafts, and existing local accommodation, without any external assistance. Details from the interviews with community leaders: “We started as a sufficiency village before we received support from the government. In 1999, we established a savings cooperative group because we wanted to help people affected by the Tom Yam Kung Crisis. We could not wait for outside assistance. We had asked for government support, but they denied helping.”

Over time, help from government institutions and universities became available, providing communities with various workshops to help them define their products, market effectively, and improve product quality: “We have had support from DASTA, Tourism Authority of Thailand and CMU to help with tourism development in our community. DASTA mainly helped by developing our human resources. They trained us to serve tourists and organized Fam trips to our community. Then, we won the ‘Beautiful and Happiness Community’ award from Chiang Mai province. This marked the beginning of study tours from other government organizations to our community. They asked for lunch, dinner, and overnight stays, so we started offering homestays.”

A significant factor in the success or failure of a CBT community is its local leadership (Witchayakawin, Aziz, Mahomed, & Abdullah, 2022) (Mokgalo & Musikavanhu, 2019). A strong leader has the ability to unite and motivate the entire local community (Zielinski, Jeong, & Milanés, 2021). Coming from a tribal background, community leaders in northern Thailand are naturally accepted by the village community, and any government interference in their selection could jeopardize their support (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2014). The wisdom, experience, ambition and knowledge of the local leader are crucial to the overall success of the CBT initiative, as shown in the interviews with community leaders: “The key to the success of CBT is the leader of the community, management knowledge, and the identity of the community. Some communities cannot succeed because they copy from others and don’t have their own identity. ... We need to create attractions and make a lasting impression on tourists, so they want to return to our community.” Also showing long-term ambition: “Now, I want to form our team - northern CBT group. This team can help to work with the government group directly. If they have any new policy, we can contact them. We will have to adjust the management rules to work easier with the government. The northern CBT group is combined with each northern province and authorized by the provincial governor.”

While government agencies and academic institutions play important roles in empowering communities by providing training, organizing study tours, and guiding CBT communities in developing and marketing their tourism products, these activities were not always successful: “The Community Development Department provides funding for projects, but it is not consistent

throughout the years, resulting in limited success. This inconsistency in government support is a significant challenge.” One of the main reasons would be the lack of a hierarchical structure and clearly defined mutual responsibilities within the community (Burgos & Mertens, 2017). In addition to that, a successful CBT initiative must be inclusive, ensuring that the community has a significant say in decision-making processes and maintains control over tourism activities, including the fair distribution, use, and conservation of resources (Dangi & Jamal, 2016): In 2014, DASTA trained the community and guided them in defining their concept, emphasizing village identity and culture. However, we had problems following the instructions from them, and due to financial difficulties, the project did not succeed, and the community split into two groups.”

And while insufficient financial resources and conflicting interests within a community can hinder the development of CBT, undermining the self-reliance and sustainability goals of CBT (Dissanayake & Samarathunga, 2015), CBT model offers many benefits in terms of preserving heritage and traditional culture. All communities have shown strong religious and traditional cultural values.

CONCLUSION

The development of community-based tourism (CBT) in northern Thailand aims to alleviate poverty and promote sustainability. While tourism provides supplementary income, primary earnings come from agriculture. Government agencies like DASTA and academic institutions contribute to training and market connections, but their support is inconsistent. Effective leadership is crucial for uniting communities, though government interference can undermine it. Challenges include fair profit distribution, inadequate infrastructure, and youth migration to urban areas. Despite high participation, financial difficulties persist, and communities sometimes struggle to adapt to tourist needs. Success depends on strong leadership, community cohesion, and inclusive decision-making. Long-term sustainability requires consistent external support and engagement of younger generations.

Limitations to the Study

The study’s conclusions are drawn from a limited number of CBT communities and stakeholders in Northern Thailand. The results may not encapsulate the full diversity and range of experiences found across other CBT initiatives within the country or in different cultural contexts. Although interviews were conducted in both English and Thai, potential nuances may have been lost in translation, and certain cultural subtleties may not have been fully expressed or understood. The evaluation of CBT success is largely based on subjective criteria, such as self-ratings and qualitative feedback, which may not provide an objective measure of sustainable tourism practices. The research also lacks a detailed financial analysis of CBT operations, which would be necessary to fully understand the economic impact and viability of CBT for local communities. Local communities were, however, unwilling to share those data.

REFERENCES

- Azwar, H., Hanafiah, M. H., Abd Ghani, A., Azinuddin, M., & Shariffuddin, N. S. (2023). Community-Based Tourism (CBT) moving forward: Penta helix development strategy through community local wisdom empowerment. *Planning Malaysia*, 21., <https://doi.org/10.21837/pm.v21i25.1225>.
- Boonratana, R. (2010). “Community-based tourism in Thailand: The need and justification for an operational definition.” *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 31(2), 280-289. <https://www.thaiscience.info/Journals/Article/TKJS/10604097.pdf>.
- Burgos, A., & Mertens, F. (2017). Participatory management of community-based tourism: A network perspective. *Community Development*, 48(4), 546-565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2017.1344996>.
- Curcija, M., Breakey, N., & Driml, S. (2019). Development of a conflict management model as a tool for improved project outcomes in community based tourism. *Tourism Management*, 70, 341-354.
- Dangi, T. B., & Jamal, T. (2016). “An integrated approach to ‘sustainable community-based tourism’.” *Sustainability*, 8(5), 475, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su8050475>.
- Dangi, T. B., & Petrick, J. F. (2021). “Augmenting the role of tourism governance in addressing destination justice, ethics, and equity for sustainable community-based tourism.” *Tourism and Hospitality*, 2(1), 15-42. <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp2010002>.
- Dearden, P. (1991). “Tourism and sustainable development in northern Thailand”. *Geographical Review*, 81(4), 81(4), 400-413, <https://doi.org/10.2307/215607>.
- Dissanayake, D. M., & Samarathunga, W. H. (2015). International Research Symposium Rajarata University of Sri Lanka. Prospects and Challenges of Community Based Tourism Promotion in Mihintale Area., (pp. <http://repository.rjt.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/123456789/745/620-628.pdf?sequence=1>). Rajarata University, Sri Lanka.
- Gan, J. E. (2020). Uncovering the environmental and social conflicts behind residents’ perception of CBT: a case of Perak, Malaysia. *Tourism Planning & Development*, 17(6), 674-692.
- Hall, C. M. (1999). “Rethinking collaboration and partnership: A public policy perspective.” *Journal of sustainable tourism*, 7(3-4), 274-289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669589908667340>.
- Hashimoto, A., & Telfer, D. J. (2010). “Developing sustainable partnerships in rural tourism: The case of Oita, Japan.” *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 2(2), 165-183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2010.482276>.
- Khalid, S., Ahmad, M. S., Ramayah, T., Hwang, J., & Kim, I. (2019). “Community empowerment and sustainable tourism development: The mediating role of community support for tourism.” *Sustainability*, 11(22), 6248.
- Klaiyoo, Y., Ritwatthanavanich, N., Makhala, S., & Kanchanda, K. (2023). Academic Services to the Community of U2T for BCG and Regional Development in Nang Buat, Suphan Buri). *Journal of Interdisciplinary Research: Graduate Studies*, 12(1), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4546602.
- Kontogeorgopoulos, N., Churyen, A., & Duangsaeng, V. (2014). “Success factors in community-based tourism in Thailand: The role of luck, external support, and local leadership.” *Tourism planning & development*, 11(1), 106-124, doi:10.1080/21568316.2013.852991.

- Mak, B. K., Cheung, L. T., & Hui, D. L. (2017). "Community participation in the decision-making process for sustainable tourism development in rural areas of Hong Kong, China." *Sustainability*, 9(10), 1695-1712.
- Mihalic, T. (2020). "Conceptualising overtourism: A sustainability approach." *Annals of Tourism Research*, 84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.103025>.
- Mokgalo, L. L., & Musikavanhu, G. M. (2019). A responsible CBT approach. In *Community-Based Tourism in the Developing World* (pp. 37-53). Routledge.
- Mtapuri, O., & Giampiccoli, A. (2020). "Beyond rural contexts: Community-based tourism for a better life in the city." *Advances in Hospitality and Tourism Research (AHTR)*, 8(2), 419-439.
- Napathorn, C. (2018). "Which HR bundles are utilized in social enterprises? The case of social enterprises in Thailand." *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 9(2), 110-131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2018.1452282>.
- Ohe, Y. (2018). "Community-based tourism in rural Japan: The case of a network-making non-profit organization." *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment*, 227, 11-19. doi:10.2495/ST180021.
- Okazaki, E. (2008). "A community-based tourism model: Its conception and use." *Journal of sustainable tourism*, 16(5), 511-529. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669580802159594>.
- Pholphirul, P., Kwanyou, A., Rukumnuaykit, P., Charoenrat, T., & Srijamdee, K. (2023). "Social network analysis and network centrality in community enterprises: evidence from One Tambon One Product entrepreneurship program in border Thailand." *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEEE-03-2022-0106>.
- Rocha, E. M. (1997). "A ladder of empowerment". *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 17(1), 31-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X9701700104>.
- Sakkatath, P., & Kruekum, P. (2018). "Factors affecting on success of One Tambon One Product (OTOP) in Chiang Mai." *Journal of Agricultural Research and Extension*, 35 (1), 73-82. <https://www.cabdigitalibrary.org/doi/full/10.5555/20193172389>.
- Sato, H. (2001). *Enjo-to-Shakai-kankei-shihon: Social Capital-ron-no-kanousei (Aid and Social Capital: Potential of Social Capital Theories)*. Chiba, Japan: Institute of Developing Economies.
- Schedneck, B. (2017). "Presenting 'Lanna' Buddhism to domestic and international tourists in Chiang Mai." *Asian Journal of Tourism Research*, 2(3), 102-122, <https://doi.org/10.12982/AJTR.2017.0019>.
- Sen, V., & Walter, P. (2020). "Community-based ecotourism and the transformative learning of homestay hosts in Cambodia." *Tourism Recreation Research*, 45(3), 323-336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2019.1692171>.
- Suindramedhi, S., Thepparp, R., & Engstrom, D. (2024). "University to Tambon (U2T) program and sustainable community development during COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand." *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, 34(1), 66-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185385.2023.2206787>.
- Theerapappisit, P. (2009). "Pro-poor Ethnic Tourism in the Mekong: A Study of Three Approaches in Northern Thailand". *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 14(2), 14(2), 201-221, doi: 10.1080/10941660902847245.
- Theerapappisit, P. (2011). *The mekong tourism dilemma: Converging forces, contesting values*. In D. Dredge, & J. Jenkins, *Stories of practice: Tourism policy and planning* (pp. 199-226.). London: Routledge.
- Walter, P. G. (2016). "Catalysts for transformative learning in community-based ecotourism." *Current Issues in Tourism*, 19(13), 1356-1371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2013.850063>.
- Witchayakawin, P., Aziz, Y. A., Mahomed, A. S., & Abdullah, N. H. (2022). Comparing stakeholder participation in community-based tourism (CBT), examples from Thailand. *Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites*, 41(2), 531-540.
- Woolcock, M., & Narayan, D. (2000). "Social capital: Implications for development theory, research, and policy." *The world bank research observer*, 15(2), 225-249. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/15.2.225>.
- Zielinski, S., Jeong, Y., & Milanés, C. B. (2021). "Factors that influence community-based tourism (CBT) in developing and developed countries." *Tourism Geographies*, 23(5-6), 1040-1072, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1786156>.