



SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN VIET NAM: FROM CHALLENGES TO DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES - A CASE STUDY IN BAN DOI, HUE CITY

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Summary

Community-based tourism (CBT) is considered an approach to promoting sustainable livelihoods and preserving cultural values in Viet Nam's ethnic minority areas. This research employs qualitative analysis of data gathered from one group discussion and key informant interviews with nine representatives from the Department of Tourism, travel agencies, senior experts from the Helvetas organization, and communal cultural departments. The collected data is thematic analysis according to the SRAB framework. The results demonstrate that CBT activity has not yet grown to the extent that it could, despite Ban Doi's potential as well as cultural and ecological advantages. Infrastructure, market connectivity, and governance frameworks are inadequate. This study suggests (i) prioritizing capacity building and empowerment; (ii) improving the effectiveness of the Ban Doi cooperative; (iii) developing unique products; (iv) protecting the environment and improving infrastructure; and (v) establishing environmental regulations and monitoring to prevent pollution and ecosystem damage.

Keywords: Ban Doi, Co Tu ethnic, community-based tourism, sustainable development

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LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Community-based tourism (CBT) is a prioritized approach in remote ethnic minority regions in Viet Nam (Pham Hong Long & Nguyen Thi Thanh Kieu, 2019). Ban Doi is in Hue City and possesses the distinct cultural identity of the Co Tu ethnic community, scenic landscapes, and a hospitable population. To capitalize on these resources, local authorities and NGOs have implemented capacity-building programs focused on tourism services and communication. Ban Doi's CBT, launched in 2018 with support from the WWF, the USAID-funded VFBC project, and local government, aims to establish an ecotourism model intrinsically linked to forest protection and sustainable livelihoods. Its tourism model remains rudimentary, fragmented, and disconnected from broader markets due to a lack of management structures and long-term strategies. Applying the SRAB (Structure-Resource-Agency-Behavior Change) framework, this study focuses on the critical gap between economic development and the conservation of environmental and cultural values. To address this gap, this research answers 2 research questions: (1) What are the challenges of community-based tourism in Ban Doi? (2) How can we support sustainable community-based tourism in this area?

Literature review

The SRAB framework is closely interconnected and forms the foundation for the sustainable development of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) models. Derived from Wisner et al. (2004), it has appeared under the name SRAB in Kien Nguyen-Trung & Le Anh Tuan (2023). Although it is frequently used in risk and vulnerability management, applying SRAB to destination development planning is a novel addition. The framework's strength lies in its capacity to look at the interplay between variables, highlighting human agency, which makes it ideal for qualitative research aimed at identifying behavioral changes.

The success of CBT relies heavily on robust management structures, resource protection, and the enhancement of community capacity. While CBT can effectively enhance livelihoods and preserve local values, the implementation model is critical. Bottom-up initiatives driven by locals demonstrate greater longevity and economic growth. This contrasts with traditional top-down interventions, which are frequently criticized for low economic impact, elite capture, and a tendency to collapse once external funding ceases.

In Thua Thien Hue Province, CBT has struggled to substantially improve local incomes or employment. Progress is hindered by two identified paradoxes:

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excessive private sector control, which leads to inequality and inauthenticity, and the failure to translate village identity and trust into distinctive tourism products. Additionally, behavioral rigidity and limited education persist in ethnic minority areas, such as Ban Doi, despite the presence of adequate resources.

Methodology

Ban Doi, located in the Bach Ma National Park buffer zone, is a pilot site for community-based tourism known for its diverse ecosystems and Co Tu cultural identity. Accessible from Hue and Da Nang, the village utilizes local agriculture and traditional cuisine to attract visitors, generating over VND 200 million from 1,000 visitors in 2023 with NGO and government support. However, despite these initial successes, the area lacks a defined management model and sufficient community participation, highlighting a significant gap between policy and practice that necessitates further research.

To address this gap, this study employs qualitative analysis comprising 1 group discussion and 9 key informant interviews (KIs) using purposive sampling. The participants are identified experts with over two years of experience in the region, ranging from commune-level officers and provincial tourism officials to tour operators and senior consultants from Helvetas. Secondary data were compiled from local government units and Department of Tourism reports, project documents of WWF, VFBC, Helvetas, and related articles. In this way, a multi-perspective view of CBT in Ban Doi is made possible by including a variety of stakeholders. Data was thematically categorized and quantified using a 5-point Likert scale, with average expert scores visualized on a radar chart. In this scoring model, a value of 5 uniformly indicates the highest level of impact across all categories, identifying the greatest strengths, most severe weaknesses, most viable opportunities, and most substantial risks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structure perspective of community-based tourism in Ban Doi

O1. Under-utilized natural resources and cultural heritage.

Ban Doi holds the potential to offer comprehensive tourism experiences ranging from adventure sports to cultural immersion. Leveraging the landscape of Bach Ma National Park, the village can develop guided hiking and nature tours. Simultaneously, it can capitalize on its rich cultural assets by offering hands-on culinary and craft workshops, alongside agritourism and homestays that immerse visitors in the daily life and language of the Co Tu community.

O2. Growing CBT demand.

Demand is moving toward real experiences based on traditional cultural values and natural values, even though tourism and leisure are still the key drivers. According to Le et al. (2022), tourists prefer CBT because they want to experience rather than observe, going beyond traditional

tours to experience a unique local identity. By 2030, according to UNWTO (2011) projections, 54% of international travel will be for leisure or sightseeing, 31% for visiting, health, or religion, and 15% for business. The qualities of culture, nature, creativity, and technology all appeal to adventure-seeking tourists.

O3. Changing local perceptions. Co Tu livelihoods in Ban Doi are dependent on the natural world for survival. Since the Tre Vang guesthouse opened in 2004, signaling the transition from traditional living to tourism services, their perspective has shifted. Through group discussion, a paradigm shift has been highlighted since 2018. Economically, residents have moved from a sole reliance on nature to diversifying their income through tourism. Culturally, what were once seen as mundane daily practices are now valorized as assets for preservation and income. Socially, the community has opened its previously closed networks to welcome visitors, while its relationship with nature has evolved from exploitation to sustainable conservation. Until now, 40 local workers have more stable wages, and improving living conditions and lowering poverty are further evidence of CBT.

O4. Supportive policies from authorities and organizations. Under the guidance of the Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, Ban Doi started CBT in 2004. Infrastructure and tourist destinations have been improved since 2020 due to investments made by the local government. Signage, interpretation, homestays, service development, professional training for 40 participants, acupressure techniques, social media promotion, and cycling routes have all been made possible by policy support and non-government organizations such as Helvetas, WWF, VFBC, etc. (Thua Thien Hue Provincial People's Council, 2019). The restoration of Ban Doi's Guol has increased the area available for cultural activities and made CBT possible.

O5. A bridge within eco-cultural tour circuits. Ban Doi connects cultural exploration and leisure with adventure and ecological discovery within Bach Ma's buffer zone. A standard itinerary can blend the natural beauty and indigenous culture of Ban Doi with the imperial legacy of Hue. Access is improved by the La Son - Tuy Loan expressway. As a link in a wider tourism product chain, Ban Doi can be strategically incorporated into more comprehensive trips, such as Hue - Bach Ma - Ban Doi and Hue - Nam Dong, which combine history, nature, and local culture.

Data reveals a significant fragment in Ban Doi's tourism value chain. Although this area possesses a strong foundation of government support (mean = 4.09) and rich internal resources (means > 3.70), it suffers from inefficient distribution networks. The linkage capacity is notably low (mean = 3.27) because Ban Doi functions as a standalone destination excluded from broader tour circuits. Consequently, locals face challenges in reaching



clients, highlighting the urgent need for better market connections.

Resource perspective of community-based tourism in Ban Doi

S1. Beautiful, captivating natural landscapes. Ban Doi is characterized by a peaceful terrain of mountains, forests, and interspersed paddy fields that possess significant natural assets. Its proximity to the Kazan Waterfall and the Truong Son primary forest ensures high environmental quality and fresh air, making the area highly conducive to ecotourism and wellness activities.

S2. Unique cultural identity of the Co Tu. Ban Doi preserves and promotes Co Tu culture through both tangible and intangible heritage. Architecturally, the village is defined by the Guol, the community's tallest and most exquisite communal house used for gatherings, surrounded by traditional stilt houses inhabited by extended families. Local livelihoods are supported by traditional craftsmanship, particularly basketry and brocade weaving, utilizing natural materials like rattan and bamboo to create both utilitarian items and souvenirs. Culturally, identity is reinforced through traditional performing arts, including the "tung tung da dá" dance and gong performances. Spiritual life is maintained through rituals such as mountain-spirit worship and grave-house ceremonies. Furthermore, the diverse culinary heritage, featuring bamboo-tube grilled meats and Ta Vac wine, not only attracts tourists but also strengthens community cohesion.

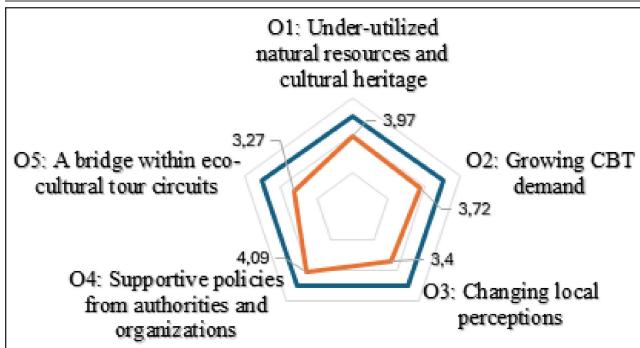
S3. Subsistence for residents. While CBT has successfully diversified livelihoods beyond traditional farming and foraging, its economic sustainability remains a challenge. On the positive side, tourism has generated new revenue streams through guiding, performing arts, and craft production, with households earning VND 300,000-500,000 per group. This shift has also strengthened social cohesion and motivated the revival of the "unique Co Tu cultural identity," which respondents rated as the site's most prominent strength (mean = 4.16). However, despite these cultural and employment gains, tourism income is perceived as unstable (mean = 3.12). This financial unpredictability suggests that CBT has not yet significantly improved sustainable livelihoods, thereby limiting the residents' motivation to invest further in the sector.

Agency and local behavior perspective of community-based tourism in Ban Doi

W1. Low community knowledge. A segment of the community has a limited understanding of tourism, leading to spontaneous development and substandard service quality. Most residents lack formal tourism and foreign-language training; independent foreign travelers mostly self-explore. Cultural performances risk losing authenticity if not well managed.

W2. Insufficient infrastructure and facilities. Despite improvements in general road access, internal

FIGURE 1: EXPERTS' ASSESSMENT OF BAN DOI'S CBT OPPORTUNITIES



Source: KIIs, 2025

mobility remains constrained. The village entrance is narrow, conventional parking is insufficient, and unfinished internal trails make reaching key attractions like Kazan Waterfall difficult. With government and project assistance, traditional Co Tu homestays have been established to welcome guests. However, the sector is underdeveloped, comprising only 12 units, significantly fewer than the 33 units found in A Luoi. Due to basic services and uneven amenities, the village struggles to retain overnight guests. Consequently, most visitors are day-trippers, limiting the potential for lodging revenue.

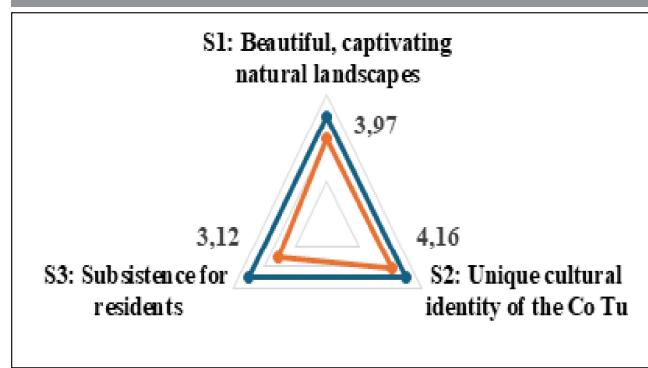
W3. Lack of skills, experience, and professional personnel. CBT development and service quality are severely hampered by skill and staff shortages, which also reduce competitiveness. Despite the provision of training, advancement is challenging due to the 100% ethnic composition, lack of professional experience, insufficient tour management, activity design, and incident handling expertise, as well as language problems. Although the CBT cooperative controls operations, it is nonetheless inefficient; most employees are seasonal or part-time, earning their primary income elsewhere; competent people frequently choose not to join because of the low returns.

W4. Monotonous tourism products. Basic cultural-ecological experiences are already available, such as nature adventures, lodging, traditional food and performances, Guol visits and exchanges, basketry and weaving activities, and Kazan Waterfall. Due to their seasonality and lack of unique, in-depth material to prolong stays, these are less competitive because their items have not been updated to promote return visits.

W5. Ineffective promotion and weak linkages with tour operators. There is little amateur digital promotion on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and not many individuals are aware of Ban Doi. Local events and project support are essential for promotion; once projects conclude, promotion stops. Due to poor connections with tour operators, Ban Doi is more of a stopover than a primary destination.



FIGURE 2: EXPERTS' ASSESSMENT OF BAN DOI'S CBT STRENGTHS



Source: KII, 2025

W6. Dependence on external support. While development projects aim to empower locals as proactive market subjects, a paradox of dependency has emerged. According to the Helvetas Project Senior Advisor, rather than achieving autonomy, a segment of the population has become passive, expecting subsidies before taking action. This hesitation is evident in the refusal to invest in necessary upgrades, such as swimming pools, without direct financial support. Survey data corroborates this, identifying limited local awareness (W1 mean = 4.36) and high reliance on external assistance (W6 mean = 4.42) as the primary restrictions. Consequently, tourism activities often cease once project durations end, highlighting that psychological barriers are the critical hurdles to sustainability.

Sustainability community-based tourism strategy in Ban Doi

T1. Climate change pressures on the environment and landscape. Landslides, extensive rains, flash floods, debris flows, erosion, and other climate change-related phenomena harm landscapes and hiking routes, posing serious problems for CBT (Luyen, 2024), particularly in areas like Ban Doi where livelihoods rely on the natural environment. Storms, floods, and landslides have a significant impact on Ban Doi and Hue (Thi Hoa Sen et al., 2020), causing damage to transportation infrastructure, interfering with tourism, and changing the natural landscapes. Forest habitats and waterfalls are important resources for CBT that may be harmed by rising temperatures and droughts.

T2. Seasonality and unstable visitor flows. Seasonality is common in tourism (Corluka, 2019). The tropical monsoon climate with two distinct seasons is a result of Ban Doi's highland location in Nam Dong. The gloomy season, which lasts from March to September, is perfect for travel because it is cooler due to the altitude. Extreme weather during the rainy season, which typically lasts from October to February, disrupts trips, increases safety hazards, results in widespread cancellations, and lowers revenue.

T3. Conflict between cultural authenticity and consumption. Local pride in crafts and festivals can be strengthened by tourism, but quick development can

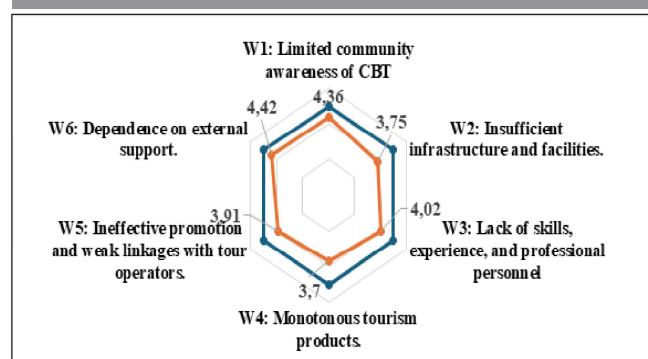
commercialize culture and undermine its depth and authenticity. Rituals or festivals may be held to suit the preferences of the guests. If lifestyle changes are not well managed, they might lead to conflict and disturbance. Additionally, locals believe that tourism is changing family dynamics and traditional institutions, which leads to conflict between locals and tourists (Le et al., 2024).

T4. Competition from other destinations. This research conducts a comparative analysis of three distinct Co Tu settlements: Ban Doi, A Luoi, and Dong Giang Heaven's Gate. Ban Doi is located approximately 50 km from Hue; this site offers authentic community-based tourism focused on Co Tu culture, crafts, and the Kazan waterfall. Infrastructure is currently basic, with only 12 homestays, and daily tour costs range from 495,000 to 680,000 VND. A Luoi is situated about 60 km from Hue; this established destination offers diverse activities, including trekking, A Roang hot springs, and historical tours. It boasts a more developed infrastructure with 33 accommodation options (guesthouses and homestays), with tour costs ranging from VND 750,000 to 1.5 million. Dong Giang Heaven's Gate is located 70-75 km from Da Nang; this is a large-scale, resort-style ecotourism complex featuring man-made attractions like a glass bridge. Unlike the CBT models, it relies on hotels and resorts, charging an entrance fee of VND 250,000-350,000.

While all three share a common ethnic heritage across Quang Nam and Thua Thien Hue provinces, their development strategies differ significantly. Dong Giang and A Luoi have adopted advanced, diverse tourism models; the former functions as a well-invested ecotourism park complete with cable cars and caves, while the latter capitalizes on wellness and adventure with hot springs and waterfall trekking. In sharp contrast, Ban Doi operates as a fledgling, unplanned model, highlighting a significant gap in investment and strategic planning.

In addition to general sector risks, Ban Doi faces four specific challenges centering on the tension between tourism development and preservation. There is a palpable concern regarding cultural hybridization (mean = 3.40); while this score indicates local awareness, it has

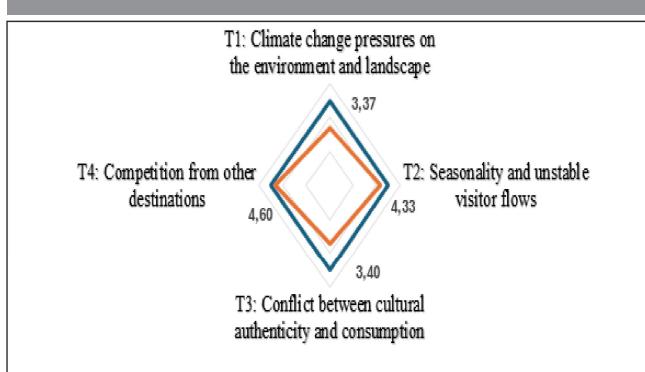
FIGURE 3: EXPERTS' ASSESSMENT OF BAN DOI'S CBT WEAKNESSES



Source: KII, 2025



FIGURE 4: EXPERTS' ASSESSMENT OF BAN DOI'S CBT THREATS



Source: KIIs, 2025

not yet translated into effective protective action. A critical conflict exists between maintaining authenticity and satisfying visitor demands. This is exemplified by the massage service dilemma: tourists expect such amenities, but locals refuse to provide them due to customary taboos against physical contact. This refusal to compromise identity for financial gain, while principled, results in a gap between supply and demand. Consequently, despite the Department of Tourism's efforts to connect businesses, the destination suffers from unmet visitor needs and unequal, unprofessional development.

Survey data highlights substantial barriers to development, specifically seasonality (mean = 4.33) and intense competition (mean = 4.60). Ban Doi struggles to compete not only with the direct rival of A Luoi but also with established destinations near the city center, such as Tam Giang Lagoon and Phuoc Tich Ancient Village. These challenges place Ban Doi at a decisive juncture. The community must choose between implementing a rigorous strategy to achieve sustainable CBT or risking the trajectory of "chaotic and fragmentary growth," a scenario often cited as a cause of cultural erosion in tourism development

(Duong Thi Hien & Tran Duc Thanh, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By using the SRAB framework, this study identifies that Ban Doi has the potential for sustainable community-based tourism development. The key challenges are not merely infrastructure deficits or routine promotion but also the conflict between cultural authenticity and consumption. Key elements in the growth of community tourism are that we should let the Co Tu people be at the center, respect cultural values, and conserve natural resources. By building authentic tourism products, strengthening internal capacity, and driving a coordinated promotion and tour operator linkage strategy, Ban Doi can achieve sustainability economically, culturally, and socially, ensuring that traditional values are preserved and passed to future generations.

It is necessary to combine government support policies, active community participation, and changing the behavior of the community and visitors. This research suggests (i) giving priority to capacity building and empowerment; (ii) improving the effectiveness of the Ban Doi CBT cooperative; (iii) developing unique products from the most authentic elements; (iv) jointly protecting the environment and improving infrastructure; and (v) establishing environmental regulations and monitoring to prevent pollution and ecosystem damage.

The small sample size of this study restricts its generalizability to Hue City's community-based tourism. Future studies must incorporate in-depth interviews with locals and expert opinions from a range of tourist destinations in various locations to provide a comprehensive assessment of this activity.

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