

Empowering Rural Communities: A Theoretical Approach to Sustainable Tourism through Community-Based Development

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Susana Restrepo Rico

s.restrepo.rico@fb1.fra-uas.de |  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7300-9884>

Michael Peterek

michael.peterek@fb1.fra-uas.de |  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1057-5425>

Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences (Frankfurt UAS),
Global Urbanisation Research Team

Abstract

Sustainable tourism is an important element in the policies of many developing countries today. In contrast to mass tourism, it provides a holistic perspective, recognising the synergies between economic, social, and environmental development and protecting the existing natural, human and organisational resources upon which tourism depends. Community-based tourism (CBT) is a participatory approach to implementing sustainable tourism that also promotes community development from a bottom-up perspective and with a focus on local knowledge and existing resources. Based on comprehensive research and analysis of the existing body of literature, the aim of this paper is to research the transition from sustainable tourism towards community based-tourism, to identify the relevant actors that should be involved in the planning, implementation and management of such projects and to propose a capacity development approach that facilitates community development through a community-based tourism approach.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, community-based tourism development, rural communities, community development, capacity development

1. Introduction

Developing countries are often transitioning towards service-sector economies to the detriment of their cultural and natural sustainability. The former agricultural practices are being replaced by urbanisation and mass tourism, while farmers and younger generations are forced to migrate to nearby cities in search of better economic opportunities. Supporting sustainable rural tourism can increase rural incomes by diversifying the sources and building capacities among the population to meet the needs of the community and the tourists. Rural tourism offers spaces with easy access to natural landscapes and spaces for recreation and relaxation. However, unbalanced development of tourism in rural areas can generate gentrification, pollution and expel residents from farmlands. A balanced approach is needed to ensure the sustainability of rural tourism initiatives.

Sustainable tourism is in the policy formulation processes of many developing countries. The objectives of sustainable tourism projects are mostly aimed at the protection of natural resources. Contrary to mass tourism, sustainable tourism approaches focus not only on the economic development of the population but also recognise the synergies between income generation, social development and environmental protection. Sustainable tourism projects protect the existing capitals of communities, including social structures, cultural heritage, and natural environments.

Planning for sustainable tourism should include participatory practices that take into account the voices and perspectives of the local community. Thus, the emergence of community-based tourism (CBT) empowers the residents and local organisations to plan, implement and manage their tourism initiatives. Empowerment means the promotion of small-scale projects and requires high levels of self-organisation by communities. This bottom-up approach not only addresses the needs of communities but also protects the existing resources by including local knowledge in the planning process.

Within this context, the aim of the paper here presented is to research the linkages and the transition from sustainable tourism towards community based-tourism, to identify the relevant actors that should be involved in the planning, implementation and management of community-based tourism projects and to propose a capacity development approach to facilitate community development through a community-based tourism approach.

2. Methodology

In its methodology, the research is literature-based. By investigating, analyzing and evaluating the existing body of relevant academic publications and international case-studies on rural tourism, sustainable tourism and the related community involvement, a theoretical framework and approach to sustainable tourism through community-based development is built up.

The publication is a first partial result of the wider research project “emplement! Empowering Urban Regions for Implementation and Resilience Strategies Considering the Urban-Rural Nexus”, which is supported by the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) within the funding priority “Sustainable Urban Regions (SURE)”. The project is focused on proposing integrated development strategies in the Da Nang and Quang Nam regions in Vietnam to promote a more resilient and sustainable development.

Within this research context and in collaboration with local authorities on the regional, district and municipal level, one of a series of pilot projects aims at supporting a local tourism concept in Hoa Bac in the Cu De River Valley, close to the city of Da Nang, in a process where the communities take responsibility for their future in their own hands while ensuring sustainable development.

The research results here presented form the theoretical framework and conceptual basis for the next steps of practical implementation of this community-based tourism pilot project.

3. Definition of Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable approaches to tourism are economic activities that protect the existing resources upon which these depend, namely, the social, human, cultural, organisational, built, and natural environment, as well as promoting the collaboration between the stakeholders involved in tourism development processes (Swarbrooke, 1999; McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011; Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2016). While mass tourism is focused on attracting large numbers of tourists, sustainable tourism is used as an instrument to improve the livelihoods of rural populations without neglecting their needs and also facilitating the protection of the natural environment through sustainable management of natural, human and financial resources (Zolfani, Sedaghat, Maknoon & Zavadskas, 2015; An & Alarcón, 2020).

The UNEP & WTO (2005) define sustainable tourism by a set of characteristics that policymakers should take into account when formulating policies for promoting sustainable tourism practices. These policy implications are here summarised:

- ▶ **Social equity, community well-being and prosperity:** Social equity seeks a widespread and fair distribution of economic and social benefits across the hosting community.
- ▶ **Local employment:** A sustainable form of tourism should enhance not only the number of jobs generated directly or indirectly but also the quality of working conditions, capacities and training opportunities.
- ▶ **Touristic fulfilment:** Ensuring the safety of the visitors and satisfying their expectations through a sufficient range of services and activities.
- ▶ **Stakeholder engagement:** Involving and empowering the local community in the decision-making, planning and implementation of tourism is crucial to ensure the sustainability of the development measures.
- ▶ **Local culture and identity:** Bringing the visitors closer to the authentic culture and traditions of the hosting community and promoting local identities and heritage.
- ▶ **Physical and environmental integrity:** Preserving and enhancing the quality of landscapes in both rural and urban settings and avoiding the physical and visual degradation of the built and natural environments.
- ▶ **Resource efficiency:** Trying to reach the maximum output possible from a minimum use of the capital assets of the local community, especially in cases of scarce and non-renewable resources.

Sustainable tourism development in rural areas is a collective endeavour that requires coordination among community members as well as well-defined principles for the development and coordination of tourism activities and offers to visitors. Community-based organisations (CBOs) can help the residents to organise themselves, coordinate and manage sustainable tourism activities.

4. The Role of Community Participation in Tourism Development

Many development and planning strategies are introducing participatory approaches into their planning framework to increase the feasibility of project sustainability in the long-term perspective. Participation can be present in many different forms, including community-based organisations (CBOs), women's organisations, marginalised groups, low-income communities, and

other vulnerable populations. Participation and engagement of a diversity of community groups in the decision-making process of development strategies can empower communities and foster the initiation of community-based initiatives (Arnstein, 1969; Moser, 1983; Paul, 2009; White, 1996).

Community development is a solidarity-based process where the members of a community work together to improve their socio-economic condition and ensure the welfare of future generations (Swisher, Rezola & Sterns, 2014; Aquino, Lück & Schänzel, 2018). Some of the factors that can promote sustainable community development are social justice, economic security, environmental protection, alleviating poverty, education and skills training, gender equality, reducing hunger, etc. (Mnisi & Ramoroka, 2020; Swisher, Rezola & Sterns, 2014).



Fig. 1. Local Community-Based Tourism Festival in Hoa Bac, Vietnam. May 2022 (by © Frankfurt UAS)

Community participation in sustainable tourism development focuses on formulating locally-based strategies for the introduction of sustainable tourism into communities, consequent with the local traditions and in consensus with the residents (Hwang, Stewart & Ko, 2012). Participation can also result in an effective identification of the threats, challenges and obstacles posed by the implementation of tourism development projects among vulnerable populations. Moreover, the inclusion of residents and the use of their local experiential knowledge can promote empowerment, capacity-building, and social cohesion for rural communities, as well as guide them on the identification of needs and definition of a collective vision for the future (Hwang, Stewart & Ko, 2012). Participation and open discussion about potentials and opportunities for tourism development can strengthen existing community-based organisations and foster self-initiated projects, as well as individual investments by legitimising identity visions and creating a sense of place. Prakoso, Pradipto, Roychansyah & Nugraha (2020: 98) define community-based tourism as “a form of participatory planning in tourism development”, where, if power relations among stakeholders are well managed, the economic and social benefits for the community are maximised.

5. The Concept of a Community-Based Tourism Approach

Current approaches to the inclusion of local populations in decision-making for tourism development have given rise to the concept of community-based tourism (CBT) as an approach that aims at empowering residents to become small-scale tourism entrepreneurs based on their existing resources, knowledge and collective vision. The main characteristics of a CBT approach are focused on the involvement of the local population in the planning, implementation, management and maintenance of sustainable tourism projects (Spenceley, 2008; Prakoso, Pradipto, Roychansyah & Nugraha, 2020).

For a CBT approach to be successful and sustainable, the projects have to fulfil certain criteria: community participation, benefit-sharing, resources conservation, partnerships and external support, project ownership by communities, good local management and leadership, collaboration among stakeholders, improvement in quality of life, evolution of tourism services, and tourist satisfaction (Vajirakachorn, 2011). Many of these criteria are covered by participatory planning practices, where communities are included in decision-making processes that involve other private, public and non-governmental stakeholders and require communication, collaboration and benefit-sharing among all stakeholders (Restrepo Rico, 2017). Moreover, the adoption of CBT practices results in the protection of the local cultural traditions and the natural environment, while promoting the planning and implementation of small-scale sustainable tourism projects that support community development processes and improve the socio-economic condition of the residents. The benefits of participation, collaboration and self-organisation could be observed in community development, capacity-building, entrepreneurship and the improvement of livelihoods (Dangi & Jamal, 2016).



Fig. 2. Craft traditions of the cultural Co Tu minority in the Cu De River Valley, Vietnam (by © Frankfurt UAS)

Spenceley (2008: 288) defines CBT as “a project or program, or collective action of a group of people that belong to a community that decided to participate in or develop together a small to medium scale local tourism industry”. This participation brings a myriad of impacts and learning processes for the community, including the emergence of grass-roots initiatives to offer services or to address local problems. Participation generates an

environment of collaboration while demanding self-organisation from the community. The sustainability of CBT initiatives depends on these self-organisation processes and their learning ability since it is by the evolution and understanding of their environment and the potential to offer sustainable touristic services that the CBT approach will result in income generation.

Harris (2009: 126) highlights the attractiveness of CBT for rural residents connecting tourism development with agriculture and the innate entrepreneurial capacity of farmers that can facilitate the transition towards services and tourism. CBT supports sustainability and cultural diversity by identifying and utilising the potentials within the community and the environment, along with local knowledge, capacities and resources. CBT can preserve local customs, traditions and the natural environment through a comprehensive understanding of the community's potential, their available resources and the skills to self-manage tourism facilities (Han, Wu, Huang & Yang 2014; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli 2016; Matiku, Zuwarimwe & Tshipala 2020; Zielinski, Kim, Botero & Yanes 2020).

The CBT approach requires intensive bottom-up and grass-roots work with communities to define needs, resources and potentials. Workshops, meetings, self-analysis and self-organisation are crucial for defining a development vision and guidelines for the formulation of tourism initiatives. Communities are creative and can easily identify their strengths, but it is through the participation of diverse actors that different kinds of knowledge, e.g. technical, legal, financial, organisational, etc., can generate a process of CBT development that is sustainable in the long run. The emergence of sustainable local initiatives is the ultimate goal of a CBT approach, however, the integration of these initiatives into strategies and a development concept requires a common understanding of the direction of development for all relevant stakeholders as well as the definition of the scope and limitations for implementing future initiatives and projects.

6. Identification of Actors Involved in Community-Based Tourism

The proposal of CBT should mobilise diverse stakeholders in the involved region and bring them together to plan initiatives and share information, knowledge and skills. As Moswete, Thapa & Child (2012) mention, the support of the government towards CBT projects, along with the dissemination of information among the stakeholders is vital for the projects' emergence, implementation, and long-term sustainability. The identification of all relevant stakeholders in the development of sustainable tourism in the region is essential for the formulation of realistic and feasible projects that address properly the needs of the community while promoting effective communication among the stakeholders. There are four main typologies of stakeholders who should be involved in development projects for low-income communities, namely public, private, civil, and external actors (Restrepo Rico, 2017). The roles of these actors change with the political and social context and should be defined in a collective participatory process where inputs, interests and potential benefits for each stakeholder are clearly defined and openly discussed. However, there are general characteristics to each typology that remain constant in most developing countries:

- **Public actors:** The role of local and regional administrations in formulating legal frameworks to support community-based policies is crucial for the long-term sustainability of projects, as well as for facilitating access to financing to address the basic needs present among the population. Moreover, the involvement of public officials in participatory planning practices can increase the ability of the government to work with communities and legitimise projects, thus

enhancing the possibilities for acceptance among the community and promoting the emergence of other community-based initiatives within the context of the legal framework (Restrepo Rico, 2017).

- ▶ **Civil actors:** This typology refers to communities located in the area of implementation that would benefit directly from the development projects. The participation of communities in the decision-making process brings local experiences and knowledge to the discussion and can help tailor projects and strategies to the strengths, needs and visions of the residents. Context-specific projects combined with planning and management by communities increase the potential for sustainability of the CBT approach (Prakoso, Pradipto, Roychansyah & Nugraha, 2020). Communities provide insights into the spatial characteristics of the area, along with first-hand knowledge about the potentials and challenges for the implementation of projects.
Individual participation in decision-making for development can pose a risk in the participatory process if hindered by individual interests and manipulation. The inclusion of communities is better carried out through representative democracy, including the existing local CBOs and residents' associations or groups as forms of representative participation. These community-based structures, e.g. associations, cooperatives and local action boards, can connect the administration and other actors directly with the social structures in the area (Moser, 1983; Guaraldo Choquill, 1996; Imparato & Ruster, 2003; Restrepo Rico, 2017).
- ▶ **Private actors:** Entrepreneurialism is a common characteristic among low-income communities. Their possibilities to access the formal labour market are limited by the access to higher education, skills training and connections to employment opportunities. However, low-income communities are resilient and creative to generate income for themselves. The identification of entrepreneurs within the civil actors is important to promote employment opportunities in the implementation area. Likewise, it is important to connect the residents to private companies and the existing formal private sector. Partnerships and corporate responsibility for formalised private actors are important factors in capacity-building strategies for self-management, business support and diversification of incomes (Imparato & Ruster, 2003; Restrepo Rico, 2017).
- ▶ **External actors:** The involvement and support from NGOs, educational institutions, and non-profit organisations can strengthen the legitimacy of projects and programmes since these could act as mediators between governments and communities; representatives of vulnerable groups or advisory bodies can support the formulation of projects and strategies. In some cases, these actors could also bring financing options from aid agencies or international organisations that could increase the accountability of the other stakeholders and the possibilities for the sustainability of projects in the long term (Imparato & Ruster, 2003; Restrepo Rico, 2017).

The introduction of tourism in a community changes the relationship among the residents (Hwang, Stewart & Ko, 2012). On the one hand, the community can accept tourism and increase social cohesion based on the development of tourism projects; on the other hand, reluctant residents can produce a solidarity movement that might hinder the legitimacy of projects. Furthermore, participation and power relations among the stakeholders can promote or hinder the development of CBT initiatives (Zielinski, Kim, Botero & Yanes, 2020). Therefore, participation is an important component of tourism development, especially in low-income communities since it allows the residents to influence the decision-making process while empowering communities and building capacities for self-organisation.

7. Implementing a Community-Based Tourism Approach

Community-based tourism approaches are a socially responsible way to harness the benefits of tourism while preserving natural ecosystems and empowering local communities. The collaboration between local residents and diverse stakeholders to plan, implement and manage sustainable tourism activities usually results in a learning process for all actors involved (Thomas, Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024). However, the benefits for the community extend beyond the financial aspects, improving the condition of the built environment and raising awareness about the preservation of local identity and protection of the local natural resources.

A CBT approach for rural communities requires a strategic development concept formulated through a participatory planning process that considers the specific context, capacities and needs of the community. The implementation of a CBT approach is a complex and ever-evolving process that involves a collaboration between local communities, government agencies, and NGOs, among other actors. Key steps in the implementation process usually include community mobilisation and empowerment, resource assessment and management planning, infrastructure development, capacity-building, and marketing strategies tailored to the unique characteristics of the area. The process can be summarised in nine steps that could be merged or adjusted depending on the strategies or the objectives of the community:

- ▶ **Stakeholder engagement and community empowerment:** Mobilising diverse stakeholders relevant to the planning and implementation process, i.e. local communities, government and administrations, academia, and relevant private companies is a crucial first step. It initiates processes of meaningful communication between these stakeholders; each stakeholder has a role to play and diverse interests along with resources that should be presented clearly and realistically. As presented in former sections, individual participation constitutes a higher risk of conflict in the decision-making process; thus, representative democracy is the recommended participatory method for planning and implementing a CBT approach, where the residents have to go through a process of self-organisation and consensus-building to define the priorities and vision for development. Active participation should be encouraged and opportunities provided for local communities to have a voice in planning and decision-making (Scheyvens, 1999).
- ▶ **Resource assessment:** To protect the cultural, natural and intrinsic identities of communities, an assessment of the natural, human, social, financial and cultural resources within the community should be performed, identifying their strengths and unique potential for sustainable tourism development (Hall, 2007).
- ▶ **Stakeholder collaboration:** The process of planning and implementing a CBT should focus on promoting collaboration and communication among diverse stakeholders, including local communities, governments, NGOs, tour operators, etc. Collaboration facilitates knowledge exchange, efficient use of resources, and shared responsibilities (Beeton, 2006).
- ▶ **Capacity-building and capacity development:** Investments in capacity-building programs enhance the skills and knowledge of residents, empower communities, enable self-organisation, and foster the emergence of community-based initiatives that generate income and promote learning-by-doing from tourism projects (Sofield & Li, 1998).
- ▶ **Infrastructure development:** The role of the government in CBT implementation is strongly linked to investments in public infrastructure, such as roads, visitor centres, and water, sanitation,

energy and waste management systems, to ensure the safety and satisfaction of tourists while minimising environmental impacts of CBT projects (Weaver, 2006).

- ▶ **Marketing and promotion:** The development of effective targeted marketing and promotional strategies that highlight the community's unique offer and emphasise the principles of community-based tourism (Wearing & Neil, 2009) is essential for the economic sustainability of the CBT approach, bringing the desired amounts and typologies of tourists to the area for the communities to receive a steady income.
- ▶ **Sharing benefits:** Ensuring that the economic benefits generated by CBT are distributed equitably among community members fosters a sense of place and ownership, as well as motivation for CBT initiatives (Ashley, Boyd & Goodwin, 2000).
- ▶ **Legal and policy support:** Advocating for the formulation of supporting policies for CBT or the adjustment of existing legal frameworks at the local and regional level would protect the rights and interests of rural communities engaged in CBT and foster the implementation of community-based initiatives (Mbaiwa, 2003).
- ▶ **Monitoring and evaluation:** Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the social, environmental, and economic impacts of CBT activities allow for adjustment of CBT structures, processes and objectives (Duffus & Dearden, 1990).

By following these CBT implementation steps, rural communities can promote cultural conservation, environmental protection, generate incomes, and improve the livelihoods of the residents while preserving their unique natural and cultural identities and heritage.



Fig. 3. The traditional community house in Ta Lang village in Vietnam as cultural capital (by © Frankfurt UAS)

8. The Transition from Capacity-Building to Community Capacity Development

Capacity-building is crucial for sustainable development as it highlights the need for knowledge-building in a diversity of fields involving different actors. The UNDP defines capacity-building as “(...) the process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time” (UNDP, 2009: 5).

A study financed by the UNDP in the Philippines proposes a participatory strategy composed of three main objectives as “a political strategy for poverty eradication”: capacity-building for communities for self-organisation and collective action to influence decision-making; the creation of networks and agreements with all actors to ensure human development; offer of spaces for democratic discussion, promoting public-private partnerships (COTRAIN & UNDP-Philippines, 1997: 94). Thus, participatory processes extend to all areas of human development, however, it is through capacity-building of communities and local actors that self-organisation, collective action, multi-stakeholder agreements and public-private partnerships can overcome the challenges posed by long-term development projects (Restrepo Rico, 2017).

In this sense, community-based tourism can be understood as a community development process aiming to build up the necessary capacities among the population to implement sustainable, environmentally and socially responsible tourism projects. The economic benefits become then a consequence of the capacity-building and the community development process (Prakoso, Pradipto, Roychansyah & Nugraha, 2020). The UN states that capacity-building includes, among others, “human, scientific, technological, organisational, institutional and resource capabilities” (United Nations Sustainable Development, 1992: 329). And Atkinson & Willis (2006: 2) define community capacity-building as a grassroots process that involves:

- ▶ communities organising and planning together development projects
- ▶ developing healthy lifestyles
- ▶ empowering themselves
- ▶ reducing poverty and suffering
- ▶ creating employment and economic opportunities
- ▶ achieving social economic, cultural and environmental goals

The existing skills and knowledge shape the development of a future vision for the community. It is essential to map these existing community assets, e.g. natural, financial, human, social, physical, etc. (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2016), as well as the capacities, talents, skills and specific knowledge, along with the existing community-based organisations, clubs and cooperatives that facilitate communication and knowledge exchange among the population (Atkinson & Willis, 2006).

Previous research performed by the Global Urbanisation Team at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences proposes the transition from capacity-building to capacity development. Capacity-building aims at creating abilities and skills but may overlook existing capacities, social structures and institutions while capacity development acknowledges these existing capacities and strengthens local institutions through the identification and creation of the capacities necessary for achieving the collective goals of the community (Peterek, Hebbo, Restrepo Rico & Reichhardt, 2020: 20).

Therefore, the creation of the required new capacities will expand the understanding of the community about their future and generate new community capacity development processes, transforming capacity-building into a grounded iterative learning and knowledge-sharing process that fosters overall community development. Community capacity development allows communities to identify their needs, vision and objectives for development based on the existing individual and collective abilities and define localised

development processes to achieve the objectives set up by the community. All communities have a set of existing capacities that would then become their basis for development.

It is important to have in mind that community-based development can be promoted through community capacity development; however, the involvement of public stakeholders is also crucial for the sustainable development of a community since communities alone cannot solve large human basic needs issues such as access to public services, mobility or basic social services. The involvement of public bodies facilitates the prevention of structural poverty and creates awareness among government departments about the infrastructural needs of the community.

9. Design of the Community Capacity Development Methods

Once the community capacity needs for the implementation of sustainable tourism have been identified, it is important to design a capacity development approach to support individual and collective learning processes, empowerment, self-organisation and self-development. In the specific field of CBT, such needs include learning about a wide range of topics such as general tourism organisation and services, homestay management, sustainable agriculture and forestry, small-scale decentralised sanitation and waste management, hygiene and safety issues, but also promotion and marketing skills, business know-how and entrepreneurship.

All these capacity development needs should be addressed through a combination of learning methods that include technical workshops, practical skill training, consultancies and educational courses. Different methods for knowledge transfer can be combined and implemented in parallel to reinforce the learning focus. The main capacity development methods used in community-based tourism are:

- ▶ **Technical training:** Effective and target-oriented learning focusing on creating and developing skills and specific knowledge. It has a predefined goal and content, and it offers a detailed list of steps to learn the required skills in a defined amount of time. It requires appropriate pedagogical tools and frameworks as well as the transfer of learning to practice. Adaptation to the context can be achieved with the help of a precise previous formal assessment and diagnosis of the specific requirements.
- ▶ **Workshops:** Approach to learning and knowledge-sharing that can be combined with training, field trips and courses. The target of a workshop is to foster a creative process of common problem-solving in a very short time. Several actors are invited to combine their knowledge and points of view, which often leads to new outcomes and relevant improvements. Different perspectives can be shared and discussed, promoting a process of dialogue and reflection.
- ▶ **Field trips:** Activity with educational intent, in which participants interact with a fresh environment and thereby gain experiential learning. It is conducted for different purposes, e.g. providing first-hand experiences, stimulating interest and motivation for new practices, strengthening observation and perception skills, promoting personal development, etc. Above all, a primary aim of field trips is to expand learning through outside formal education arrangements, giving participants a new way of knowing and experiencing a situation, an object, a concept or an operation.
- ▶ **Courses:** Active educational process, where the attendees build and expand their knowledge with the guidance of the course organisers. The participants are responsible for their own knowledge gain, while the role of the organisers is to lead the course, make sure it follows

a good direction, and give a stimulus for discussion. The approach of teaching and learning by dialogue promotes the development of individual ideas and the exchange and consideration of different points of view.

- **Consultancy:** Provision of independent professional knowledge and specialist skills. It is used to identify and solve organisational problems, analyse specific circumstances, recommend actions and/or assist in the implementation of solutions.



Fig. 4. First participatory community workshop for a regional sustainable tourism network in Nam Yen, Cu De River Valley, Vietnam. October 2022 (by © Frankfurt UAS)

10. Conclusions

The ample literature research here done has shown that community-based tourism (CBT) is a participatory approach to implement a sustainable tourism concept which also promotes community development from a bottom-up perspective. The innate characteristic of CBT is its focus on local knowledge and existing resources. Capacity-building and capacity development processes can enhance the existing capitals by generating an environment of interactive learning and collaboration, self-organisation and knowledge sharing. The methods can differ, converge and evolve, but in the end, capacity development within a participatory framework of cooperation and collaboration among diverse stakeholders results in empowered communities improving their socio-economic condition.

While sustainable tourism protects the environment and local communities, CBT relies on the empowerment of residents and the support of diverse stakeholders to develop localised sustainable tourism projects. This collaboration among different stakeholders and focus on the assets of communities results in the promotion of local cultural traditions and the preservation of traditional livelihoods.

Sustainable tourism without the participation of local communities could still lead to the displacement of local populations from their rural areas due to the introduction of investments or activities not suited to the area, while a participatory approach to sustainable tourism can ensure environmental protection, cultural preservation and community development.

In the next research phase, the results, theoretical framework and conceptual approaches developed so far are now being applied and tested in the aforementioned pilot project in the Cu De River Valley, specifically supporting the “Hoa Bac Ecological Agriculture and Community Tourism Cooperative” as a relevant organisational and management structure, which evolved since 2020 in collaboration with local stakeholders and has finally been legalised in 2023. Already recently, the cooperative leaders have been invited to several communities in the neighbouring regions as well as the Mekong Delta to share their experiences, the lessons learnt and guide other communities in the process of initiating CBT projects in central and southern Vietnam.

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