

Community-based Tourism Governance towards Sustainable Development in the Northern Mountainous Region of Vietnam: A Case Study of Hoa Binh Province

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Abstract: Community-Based Tourism (CBT) stands as a pivotal approach for sustainable tourism and poverty alleviation in marginalized Northern Vietnamese rural communities. In Hoa Binh province, a region rich in ethnic diversity engaged in CBT, a research gap exists concerning CBT governance. This study addresses this gap by exploring how CBT governance is organized in five villages of Mai Chau and Da Bac district, Hoa Binh province, by identifying relevant actors, institutions, and resources, and how it addresses the challenge of sustainable (tourism) development. To this end, a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observation were used. The results showed the complexity of CBT governance in Hoa Binh, and the many different manifestations of CBT in the different villages. The paper also analyzed factors that explain these differences, such as the historical or ethnic composition of the local community, biophysical conditions, community rules, and attributes of external factors. It also presents the complexity of the relationship between the development of CBT and sustainable development challenges.

Keywords: CBT; Hoa Binh Province; Governance; Sustainable Tourism Development; Participatory Action Research (PAR).

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1. Problem Statement

Since the 1980s, a new tourism concept has gained in popularity as a response to the search for more sustainable and equitable forms of tourism: Community-Based Tourism (CBT). CBT was then seen as an alternative for rural populations in the South and as a viable instrument for poverty reduction, offering opportunities for conservation and rural economic development (Zielinski et al. 2020).

Recognized as a poverty alleviation strategy, particularly in marginalized regions of Northern Vietnam (Ngo and Creutz 2022), CBT has expanded in Vietnamese villages. Pham Hong Long et al. (2021) and Duong Thi Hien & Tran Duc Thanh (2022) explored various aspects, from opportunities to challenges of CBT sustainability in their studies. Specifically, local communities face several challenges in the rural areas where CBT is developed and these include a lack of governance skills, tourism skills, lack of capital, limited resources, and unequal benefit distribution, among others (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli 2019, Pham Hong Long, Ngo Thi Huong and Pham Thi Lam 2021).

Hoa Binh province is one of the tourism destinations in Vietnam located in the Northwest region of Vietnam. Hoa Binh holds a distinguished reputation as the birthplace of the renowned "Hoa Binh culture," serving as the ancient cradle of Vietnamese civilization. Hoa Binh boasts a rich and diverse array of tourist attractions and cultural resources. Hoa Binh reservoir and the dams have allowed the province to become a highly developed tourist destination with a rich history, scenic landscapes, and diverse indigenous cultures. Hoa Binh is one of the first provinces to offer CBT in Vietnam. In

recent years, Mai Chau and Da Bac are two districts that are currently developing their tourism industry. The local governments are making efforts to make tourism a key sector in the districts mainly through implementing a community-based model.

While the concept of CBT has been introduced in the region for some time, its knowledge and implementation have not been widely disseminated. Our literature review revealed a gap in the research, as the existing framework, theories, and concepts have not been explicitly applied to the study of CBT in Hoa Binh province before. While there is a growing interest in the study of CBT as a pathway towards sustainable development in Vietnam and Hoa Binh more specifically, the governance aspects of CBT and the influence of power relations have received limited attention, particularly in the context of sustainable development. Therefore, a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the organization and governance dynamics of CBT is needed to address the challenges and opportunities related to sustainable development in the province.

This research aims to address this gap by a two-fold approach. First, the study aims to identify and analyze the key stakeholders involved in the governance of CBT in the villages. This is studied through the lens of the 'Institutional Analysis and Development Framework' (IAD), allowing an understanding of the contextual factors that contribute to the formation of governing rules. Second, on-field data is collected to verify and expand the existing analysis.

To explore these aspects comprehensively, the research addresses the following research questions:

1. How is community-based tourism governance organized and what are the

different actors, institutions, and resources involved in Hoa Binh?

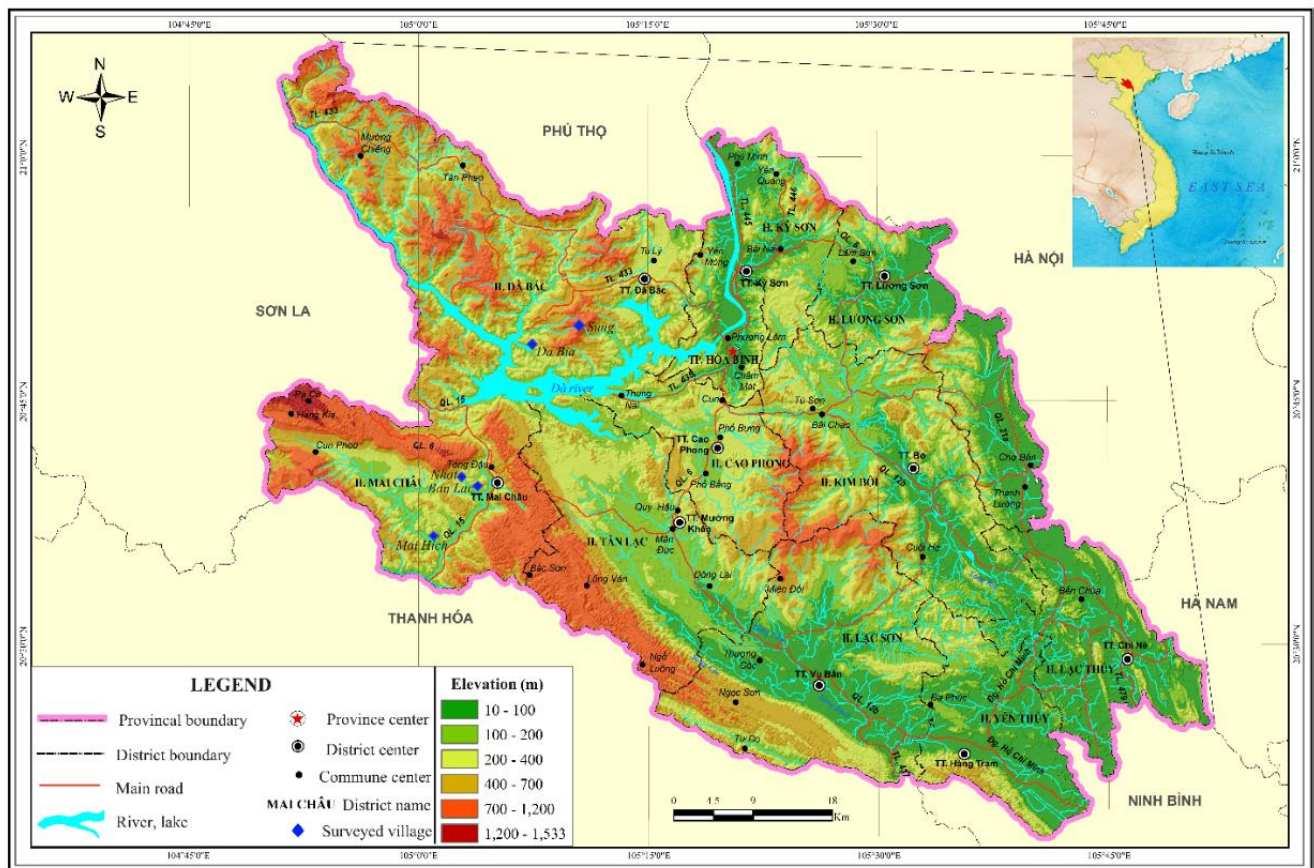
2. How does community-based tourism governance in Hoa Binh address the sustainable (tourism) development challenge?

This paper is organized as follows: Section 1 is the problem statement, section 2 describes the study area, section 3 is about the conceptual framework, section 4 is about methodology, Section 5 is about results and discussion, and Section 6 provides a conclusion and mentions limitations of the research.

2. Study area

The case studies of this research are the Thai community in Nhot, Ban Lac, and Mai Hich villages within Mai Chau district, along with the Dao and Muong communities in Da Bia and Sung village villages in Da Bac (Figure 1). These two districts have very distinctive economic-geographical contexts, and ethnic communities, as well as popularity and economic success from tourism. On one hand, Mai Chau district - a tourism hotspot since the 1980s - presents a stark economic

contrast to Da Bac district, which is historically one of the province's poorest despite its proximity to Hoa Binh City. This economic disparity is evident not only in average income and gross production value but also in the dynamics and investment trends across different sectors. Mai Chau district demonstrates a balanced distribution of production value and investments in agriculture-forestry-aquaculture, industry-construction, and commerce-services. Conversely, Da Bac district heavily relies on agriculture-forestry-aquaculture (43.7% of gross production value) (Hoa Binh Provincial Department of Internal Affairs 2021). It was not until 2017 that the CBT model started to be implemented in Da Bac district, a secluded mountainous region compared to Mai Chau (Nguyen Van Ha et al. 2022) when a non-governmental organization - Action On Poverty - collaborated with the People's Committee of Da Bac district. This collaboration aimed to implement a CBT model since July 2014, focusing on creating new livelihood opportunities in the impoverished communities of the district (Hoang T. T. Huong and Pham T. T. Minh 2021).

Figure 1: Location of case study sites

(Source: Nguyen Thi Linh Giang 2020)

On the other hand, despite being the predominant ethnicity in Hoa Binh province, the Muong community constitutes a minority in Mai Chau and Da Bac districts, exhibiting the lowest density among Hoa Binh province's districts (Binh Giang 2022). Over 60% of the population in Mai Chau district is Thai (Thu Thuy 2018), while the Dao and Muong communities account for 20% and 33% of the population of Da Bac district, respectively (Binh Giang 2022, Thu Thuy and The Anh 2023). The Hoa Binh Hydroelectric Project was initiated to construct the Hoa Binh dam, which is located in the center of Hoa Binh city. At the time of its construction, this project was the largest hydroelectric power project in Southeast Asia as well as Vietnam (Dao 2010, Hirsch

and Sinh 1992). The project displaced about 58,000 people across two provinces (Hoa Binh and Son La), 20% of whom resided in Da Bac district, making Da Bac one of the most extensively displaced by the project (Hirsch and Sinh 1992, Thanh Hai 2022). As a result, half of the total water rice field area of Da Bac was inundated. However, at that time, the National Land Law was not issued yet and the national resettlement policy at the time was in early development. Due to this incomplete legal foundation, the compensation for the displaced families was improperly implemented (Dao 2010, Hirsch and Sinh 1992). As a consequence, the displaced family re-settled in the steeper, more mountainous, and less fertile land of the district, potentially leading to conflicts over

land and resources with native communities (Hirsch and Sinh 1992).

3. Conceptual framework

3.1. Community-based tourism (CBT)

CBT has gained recognition as an effective method of boosting local businesses and economies, reducing poverty, and sustaining local traditions (Lee and Jan 2019). Therefore, it is recognized as a valuable alternative to forms of mass-tourism, and related problems (George 2007). Despite this increasing recognition, there is little consensus on its definition (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli 2013). Okazaki's widely cited and used model (2008), for example, puts forward the following four interrelated elements as crucial for CBT: local community participation, redistribution of power, partnership and cooperation, and social capital. The current research also focuses more on ownership, the benefits for the local community, and sustainability. Therefore, Manyara and Jones' (2007) conceptualization will be followed in this paper. Based on qualitative research in Kenya, they identified three crucial elements of CBT. First, the initiative must be 'owned' by the community. This means that tourism resources (e.g. lodges) must be in the hands of the community itself. Second, communities should play a central role in both the design and management of CBT. Third, the benefits of CBT (e.g. employment) should go primarily to the local community itself (Manyara and Jones 2007).

CBT has the potential to bring about several positive effects such as creating jobs and generating extra income for the community, improving its infrastructure (Eom and Han 2019), improving local

living standards (Manyara and Jones 2007), protecting cultural resources (Lee and Jan 2019) and natural resources (Okazaki 2008).

Negative effects can also arise from the introduction of CBT in local communities such as unequal share of the benefits, increasing living costs, and resource degradation (Lee and Jan 2019, Okazaki 2008). Therefore, to implement CBT fairly and sustainably, both economic and environmental factors should be considered (Lee and Jan 2019).

3.2. Sustainable Tourism and Sustainable Community-Based Tourism

As the link between poverty and environmental degradation became clearer, the role of tourism arose as one of the ways to operationalize sustainable development actions. Sustainable tourism (ST) has evolved through time and is built on the 3 major pillars of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental pillars (Dangi and Jamal 2016).

Taking both ST and CBT approaches into account, Sustainable Community-based Tourism (S-CBT) is about the synergies between the environmental needs of sustainability and local priorities of community control, capacity building, empowerment, and sustainable livelihoods. On the local level, these approaches pay attention to local governance, inequality, and diversity. Not only is the local community able to self-regulate tourism development, but they also need to participate in the governance process, facilitating social justice, gender equity and environmental sustainability, and the well-being of the local livelihoods (Dangi and Jamal 2016). S-CBT focuses not only on environmental sustainability but also on the

social and cultural impact of tourism development, as well as the economic and overall well-being of the local communities (Dangi and Jamal 2016).

3.3. Governance

Governance refers to the processes and structures through which authority and power are exercised to manage public affairs (Bramwell 2011). Governance involves decision-making processes, the distribution of power, and the mechanisms for holding decision-makers accountable. According to Bramwell (2011), governance implies coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders, including private and public entities.

The possible forms of tourism governance can vary widely (ranging, for example, from formal government tourism governance to networks of non-governmental actors) (Bramwell 2011, Bramwell and Lane 2011). In tourism governance, power is present in every aspect, shaping the interactions among various actors involved in the creation of tourism policies and their implementation (Hall 1994). All choices about how tourism grows, how much the government gets involved, how it is managed, and how community issues are handled come from a political process where different actors struggle for power (Hall 2003).

In the governance of CBT, the local community occupies a central place. They are expected to largely determine the direction of CBT, and the benefits should be primarily for them. However, this does not mean that other actors are absent, such as NGOs, the government, the private sector, cooperatives, other public institutions, etc. In several practical examples, we see that these actors also have

their role in CBT, especially in the start-up phase (George 2007, Mtapuri and Giampiccoli 2013). Although possible, initiating CBT by the local community itself is rather rare, mainly because of insufficient resources and knowledge in this domain (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli 2013). Therefore, it often starts with the help of “a local non-governmental organization (NGO), or an international agency concerned with conservation, a donor, a park ranger, a tour operator or a small business officer from the government” (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli 2013).

Some of these actors continue to be involved in these CBT projects (ranging from short-term to long-term). These actors are often involved in these CBT projects in various ways, such as through education provision, skills development, funding, and marketing advice (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli 2013). Whatever role these actors play, according to Mtapuri and Giampiccoli (2013), they should always play a facilitating role. This means that they should only help the community achieve their goals (by transferring certain resources, knowledge, etc.).

3.4. Institutional Analysis and Development Framework

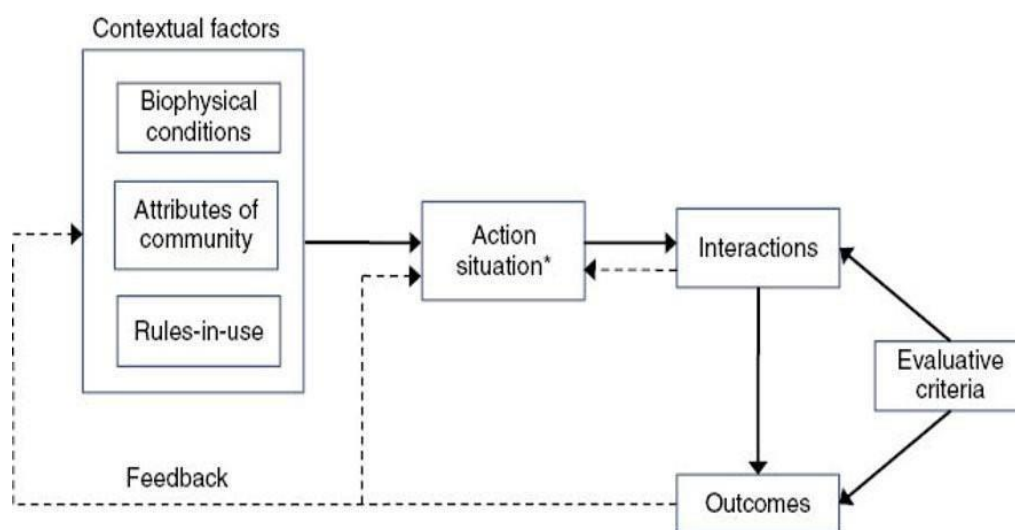
Having clarified the concept of CBT and its connection to sustainability, it is crucial to examine the governance of these initiatives in more detail. This will clarify necessary concepts and approaches to address the first research question regarding how CBT is organized, including its actors, institutions, and resources.

The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, developed by Elinor Ostrom and colleagues (2011), is a useful tool for studying the behavior of

individuals and institutions in complex social systems. IAD is a conceptual map that can be used to identify an action situation and the resulting patterns of interactions and outcomes and to evaluate these outcomes. The first step is to identify the ‘action arena’, which includes the biophysical and social components of the system such as natural resources used, rules and norms, and the relationship and power dynamics between actors. This step is essential to analyze the outcomes (evaluating the effectiveness, efficiency, and equity of the institutions, in addition to their sustainability over time) as well as identifying potential solutions. In the context of CBT in Hoa Binh, the IAD

framework can be applied to examine the relationships between actors involved in CBT activities across five distinct villages in the province. This framework enables us to understand the context in which these activities are situated and to analyze various formal and informal rules linked to the evolving nature of tourism that govern these activities. The broadness of categories in the framework (nature, society, and rules) that govern interactions makes it compatible with a wide range of theories and adaptable to various contexts. This framework effectively connects the actors’ decision-making processes across multiple levels of governance (Muthia Evirayani et al. 2024).

Figure 2: Components of IAD framework (Ostrom 2011)



4. Methodology

This research utilizes qualitative methods based on both primary and secondary data. There are various stages, starting with the elaboration of a research question and a review of the literature. The research of secondary sources has been the starting point of this study (Hox and Boeije 2005, Johnston 2014). From these secondary data, we elaborated a conceptual framework including the concepts of CBT, sustainable tourism, IAD, and governance.

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which were selected, designed, and refined during fieldwork in September 2023.

During our research, we conducted 5 semi-structured interviews and 7 focus groups in the districts of Mai Chau and Da Bac. Each focus group had an average of 6 participants and the discussion lasted an average of one and a half hours. We brought together various stakeholders involved in tourism management in their communities. There were people involved

in local government, representatives of a Women's Association, Communist Youth Union representatives, members of coordination teams, homestay owners, etc. The focus groups included 4 to 6 students from different educational backgrounds based on rotation in the Living Lab groups (Muthia Evirayani et al. 2024). The roles were divided as follows: Interviewer 1 (Leader), Interviewer 2 with the role of assisting, note-taker(s), and an individual responsible for observation, photos, and logistics (materials and geolocation), which reflects a strategic distribution of responsibilities. Based on the groups, some of these roles were sometimes merged.

The purpose of these focus groups is to gain comprehensive insights into various aspects of tourism development in Hoa Binh such as the historical evolution of tourism, the main actors and institutions involved in tourism, the main natural and

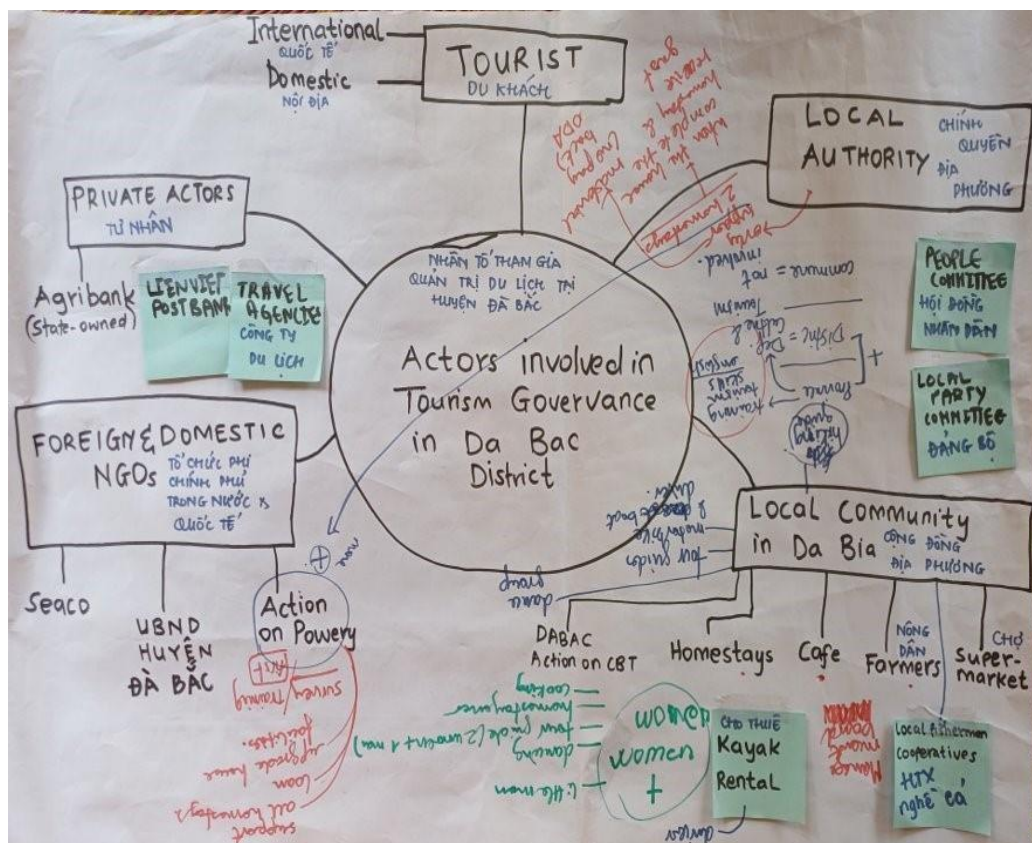
other resources mobilized, the sustainability challenges, the trends and the wishes (visions) of the various stakeholders regarding the future tourism development and sustainability, the obstacles, prospects, and opportunities in place.

The participants in focus groups experienced the following three exercises.

4.1. Participatory Mapping

An actors' map, listing stakeholders identified through desk research and focus groups, proved successful. Participants were actively engaged, filling in the gaps, and identifying relevant stakeholders in tourism governance (Figure 3). This approach facilitated discussions on collaboration and tensions, thereby offering insights into CBT governance and development milestones.

Figure 3: Actors' map in Da Bia, 18/09/23 (Muthia Evirayani et. al 2024)



4.2. Strengths, challenges and opportunities table

The second exercise aimed to identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities of Community-Based Tourism (CBT). We

used an extensive table with three columns (strengths, weaknesses, solutions) and six rows (environmental, economic, social, tourists, tourist activities, networks and partners in tourism) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Table of strengths, challenges and solutions



4.3. Newspaper Vision

The final exercise focused on envisioning the future of tourism development in the community. Using a newspaper-themed activity, participants were asked to imagine what headlines they would want to see in 10 years when a journalist visits their village. A large poster resembling a newspaper was created with sections like tourist types, tourism landscape, inaugurations, partnerships, and community development left empty for participants to fill. To enhance

understanding, drawings were provided for the tourist and landscape sections, featuring options like family trips, backpackers, cultural tourists, and various future landscapes. Participants selected their preferences and explained the reasoning behind their choices. This process revealed insights into desired future partnerships and community development linked to CBT.

The data analysis of our qualitative data started with coding transcriptions from focus groups and semi-structured interviews, and then organizing the data in an Excel spreadsheet to extract essential

information. Additionally, we created visual maps of actors involved in community-based tourism based on our research findings. These maps were informed by interviews and focus groups. The coded information was then linked to

pre-identified theories, allowing us to analyze and draw connections between empirical data and theoretical frameworks. This process involved a careful validation and iteration of findings, ensuring consistency and reliability.

Figure 5: Hoa Binh Chronicles Modified with Drawings (Muthia Evirayani et al. 2024).



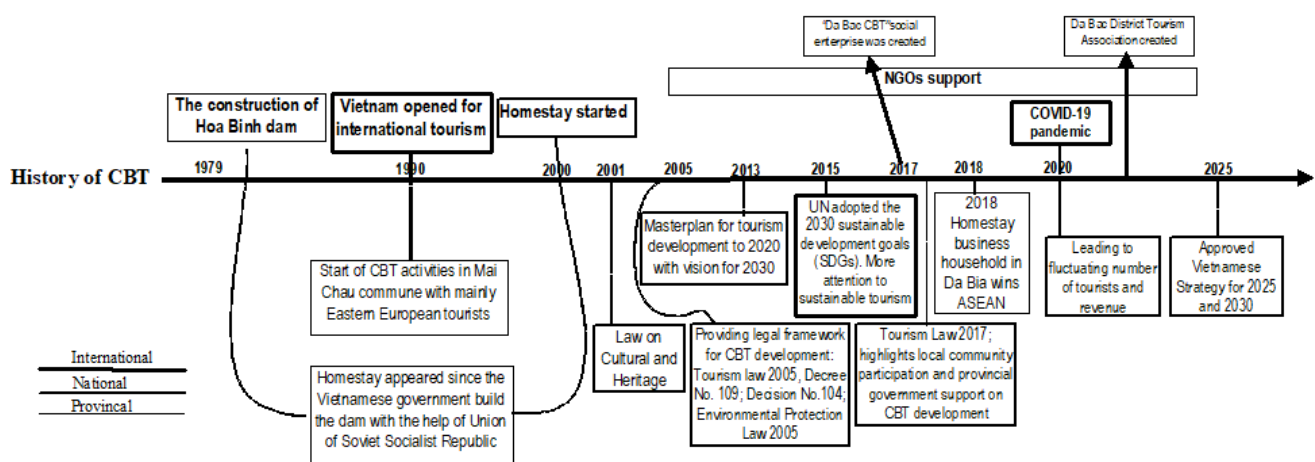
5. Results and discussion

5.1. History of CBT in Vietnam and Hoa Binh

CBT made its early appearance in Vietnam during the 1990s and has since experienced rapid expansion, with hundreds of CBT sites spreading across the northern, central, and southern regions as the

Vietnam National Administration of Tourism reported in 2020. Based on desk research and fieldwork research, we made the following timeline, as can be seen in Figure 6, with important historical landmarks in the development of (CBT) tourism in Hoa Binh Province. This timeline includes milestones at provincial, national, and international levels.

Figure 6: Timeline of Tourism Development in Hoa Binh Province



Investigating CBT in Hoa Binh revealed a dynamic landscape shaped by diverse actors and multifaceted factors. The organizational structure of CBT is intricately woven into the fabric of each village, with influences stemming from historical contexts, formal and informal relationships, local norms, and the biophysical environment. For this reason, the IAD framework is a valuable tool that allows us to understand how a multitude of factors influence the management of CBT in diverse settings.

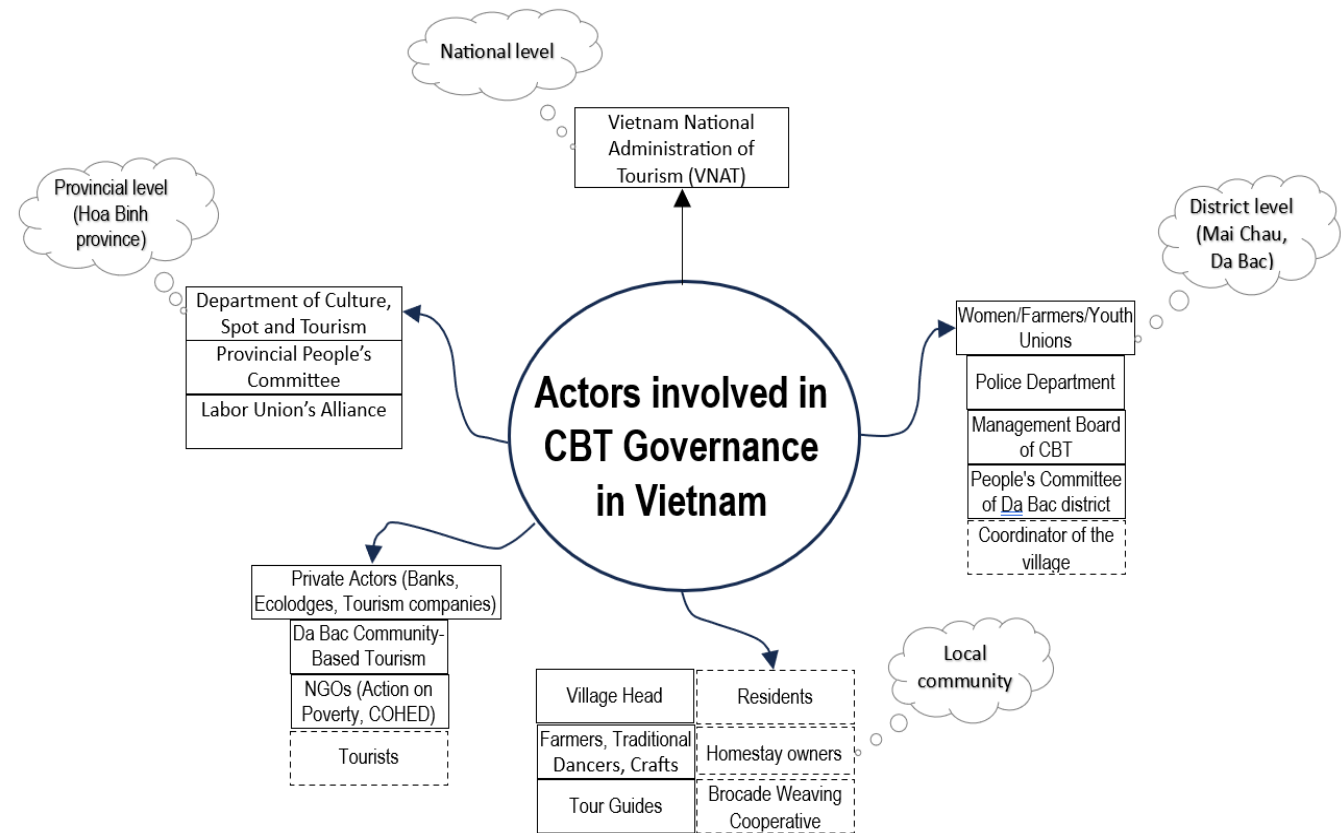
5.2. CBT governance in Hoa Binh

Through fieldwork conducted in five villages spanning two distinct districts, Mai Chau and Da Bac, we identified the involvement of many additional actors who

contribute to the governance of CBT activities such as NGOs, tourism agencies, cooperatives, unions, governmental institutions, and private sector actors (Figure 7).

Our observations also confirmed the active participation of women in the governance of CBT. Specifically, we highlight the notable role of a businesswoman who runs Thuyet Nhung Homestay in Mai Hich. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Thai women hold a significant influence and are actively "listened to" during the decision-making processes within the realm of CBT (Homestay employee, Interview 6, 140923). Also, during a focus group held in Da Bia, two women actively participated in the district-level management board of CBT.

Figure 7: Actors Identified in Literature (Dotted line) and Fieldwork (Solid line)

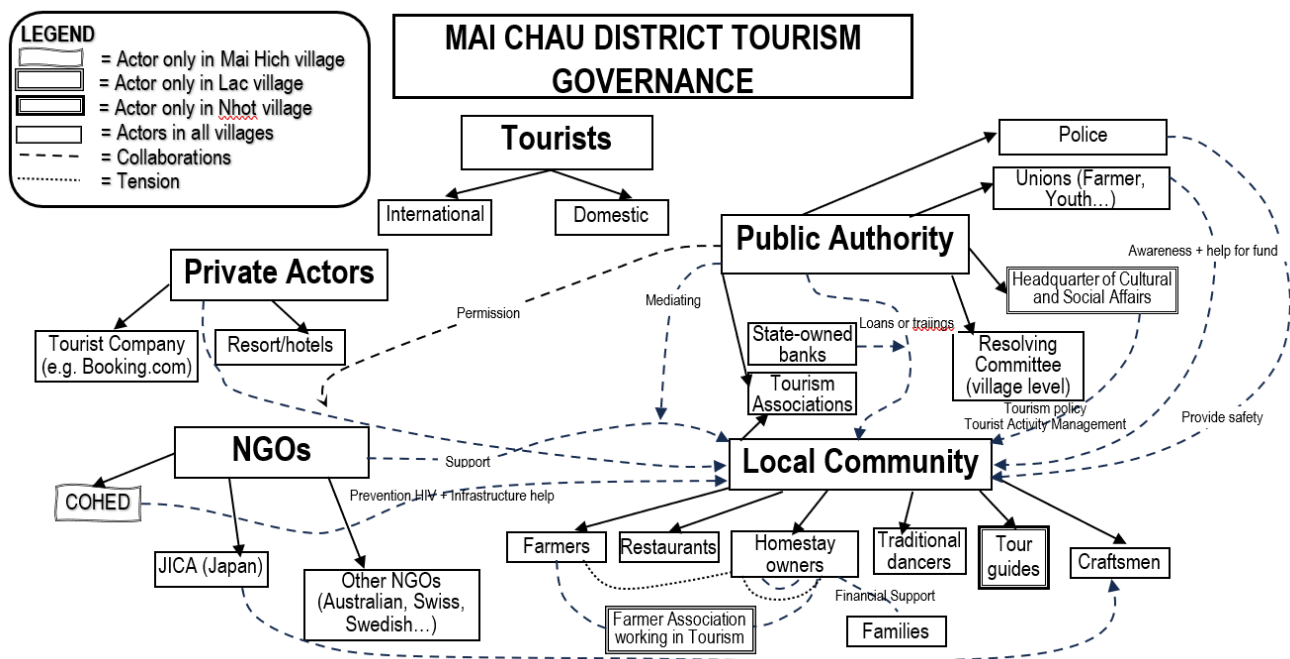


In the sections below, we will examine the similarities and differences in governance dynamics that arise from these variations. As previously discussed, the multifaceted nature of tourism governance encompasses various typologies, with critical factors like knowledge, power relations, rules, and collaboration among diverse actors affecting it (Bramwell 2011). In the context of CBT, this study revealed a significant role of the local community within the governance framework. However, it is essential to recognize that the government contributes by providing necessary structures and frameworks that shape and facilitate the operation of CBT initiatives. By using the IAD framework, we will delve into a spectrum of elements, including biophysical conditions,

community rules, attributes, as well as social, cultural, and historical contexts.

5.2.1. CBT in Mai Chau District: dynamics between local authorities, communities and NGOs

Figure 8 summarizes the set of actors present in CBT governance of Mai Chau district, with attention being paid to differences between all these villages (with specific actors for Mai Hich, Ban Lac, and Nhot in different symbols in the legend in Figure 8). As can be seen in Figure 8, in Mai Chau district, there are many actors involved in the governance of CBT. Three actors emerge as very crucial in facilitating CBT activities in the district: NGOs, public authorities, and the local community.

Figure 8: Stakeholders Involved in Tourism Governance in Mai Hich, Lac and Nhot village, Mai Chau district

In the village of Mai Hich, the initiation of CBT started at the district level accompanied by support from a French NGO called COHED (Center for Community Health Research and Development). In 2012, the local authorities sought opportunities for the locals to receive training outside of the Hoa Binh province on how to operate tourism activities. With the support of NGOs in providing tools and upgrading infrastructure, the first homestay opened its doors in 2013. The NGO's connection with travel agencies in the major city brought tourists to the area, drawing locals and foreign tourists to the village.

In Ban Lac, the CBT model is led by local authorities and government, providing planning and regulation for the tourism industry. According to the interview with the Vice head of Chieng Chau commune (Interview 2, 150923), the administrative role of Cultural and Social Affairs is responsible in promoting policy and direction for tourism development,

supporting locals with tourism activities organization and creation. Moreover, the local authority is responsible for the building of basic tourism-related infrastructure such as bridges and roads. On the other hand, the government assists the growth of CBT by permitting NGOs to enter and operate. Training sessions for homestays were also initiated by the local government in 2013, allowing local communities to visit other villages that adopt CBT and learn from their experiences.

In terms of internal structure, different village levels and district levels have their tourism association, situated under the Hoa Binh Tourism Association with a major focus on branding and marketing the tourism experience in the area. Locally, underneath the government are the different department branches that specialize in the different aspects of tourism, such as the cultural, security, fire, and food departments. These departments oversee the operation of these activities, making sure

that restaurants are following food safety guidelines and tourists' information is being collected at the homestays and submitted to the security department.

There are various actors presented in the CBT model of Ban Lac such as homestay owners, restaurant owners as well as farmers, and craft store owners. These actors need to follow the regulation proposed by the local government and adapt to the regulation accordingly. One actor that plays an important role in agriculture and tourism synergy is the farmer association, under its direction, farmers and homestay owners work together on creating tourist activities such as harvesting crops, drying rice, and making traditional crafts.

The role of NGOs is also essential to construct the foundation of Ban Lac's tourism development, they also took the lead in helping the local community to build infrastructure including homestays, watering systems, as well as traditional craft development and tourism marketing training. With the help of NGO such as JICA Japan and other NGOs from Sweden and Switzerland (Vice Head of Chieng Chau Commune, Interview 2, 160923), the community was able to receive infrastructural upgrades and training to develop traditional crafts.

Contrary to Ban Lac, the local community in Nhot seems to play a leading role in the facilitation of CBT. The local community is actively seeking collaboration and partnerships to develop tourism. The participants of focus group 2, when asked to design their map of actors, stated that the local community was the leading actor. When asked about the reason for this, they mentioned that these community actors represent the cultural identity of this place and that this is one of

the important reasons why tourists come to visit this place (Focus Group 2, 160923). Local traditional practice and culture thus also seem to be emphasized more explicitly in this village, compared to Ban Lac.

The local community is not the only important actor in CBT, the local government also plays a role. Decision-making on CBT matters usually takes place through meetings with all relevant actors, including local authorities, with the latter giving suggestions on matters such as redesigning houses and creating additional jobs. Moreover, local authorities also play a supporting role by creating tourism training opportunities (e.g. greeting customers and serving) for local people.

The government also acts as a middle person in the introduction of NGOs to the locals and raising awareness of the benefits of CBT.

In addition, private actors also play a role in CBT in Nhot. One example is the private actor 'Ecolodge'. Homestays are operated by locals, but ecolodge attracts private investment from outside the community. This company operates on a larger scale, which is likely to create competition and power dynamics with local homestays. Therefore, some participants in focus group 3 had reservations about whether the Ecolodge would be a useful partner for the community's vision for the future. The difficulty stems from Ecolodge's preference for more international investment, which may differ from the community-oriented approach desired by local homestay owners (Focus Group 3, 160923).

As an overall conclusion of CBT in Mai Chau district, tourism is mainly built around local authorities, NGOs, local communities, and private actors. Cultural and ethnic identity can be seen as a focal

point of CBT development, revealing the goal of cultural preservation during the making of CBT. While there are some similarities, there are also some important differences between the governance of CBT in these villages, showing CBT's flexibility and adaptability.

5.2.2. CBT in Da Bac District: Migration history, NGO Influence, and Local Dynamics

In Da Bac district, it is crucial to highlight the distinct historical trajectories and ethnic compositions influencing CBT in both Da Bia and Sung village. In Da Bia, the community has experienced displacement due to dam construction, resulting in the loss of community members and traditions. This has prompted a shift towards alternative livelihoods, particularly in the form of CBT initiatives and fish farms, filling the void left by the interruption of their agricultural activities. Nevertheless, the loss of community members and traditions due to displacement is a critical institutional factor that shaped the evolution of tourism in the village. The village is influenced by a contemporary touch and activities brought by an NGO. This stands in contrast to Sung village, where traditional crafts play a central role in shaping tourism, reflecting the village's cultural heritage. These differences underscore the unique historical and cultural contexts shaping the diverse expressions of CBT in each village.

At the time when NGO support was playing a big role in tourism development in Vietnam (see Figure 9), the "Da Bac CBT" social enterprise was established in 2017 under a project with the support of the NGO "Action on Poverty". It aims to create sustainable incomes for families in three remote ethnic minority villages: Sung, Da Bia, and Ke. The focus is on supporting

families in establishing homestays. The Da Bac District Tourism Association, formed in June 2022, acts as an information hub, disseminating policies and market insights. In 2022, the members of this association welcomed 143,337 visitors, generating an estimated revenue of 64 billion VND (People's Committee of Da Bac District 2022).

As revealed in the fieldwork, a complex web of actors managed CBT, with NGOs playing a crucial role (see Figure 9). To begin with, the introduction of tourism in Da Bia Village in 2016 and Sung Village in 2013 was facilitated by the NGO "Action on Poverty" (AOP). This collaborative effort involved the district people's committee, representing the local government, and a private company called Seaco. AOP engaged with the village coordinator and the local community, making space for participatory decision-making. The process involved initial discussions with the coordinator, who was chosen by the villagers and needed to have prior experience in tourism and undergo specific training. However, funding for CBT initiatives was provided by the NGOs. The local community is involved in developing a detailed plan submitted to AOP for review and potential investment. Also, villagers can secure a loan of approximately 100,000,000 Vietnam Dong from Da Bac CBT for homestays. As such, essential items such as blankets, chairs, and furniture are sourced from the NGOs, with the understanding that repayment occurs once the community generates a profit (President of the local party committee and tour guide, Focus Group 5, 180923). This approach emphasized the need for collaboration among homestay owners, the overseeing tourism coordinator, and the NGO that provided loans.

Figure 10: A sign in between the kindergarten and cafe in Da Bia

In Sung village, convincing the Dao ethnic community in Sung village to participate in CBT was more challenging for AOP, especially when the community mostly worked in forestry and agriculture, and did not understand the added value of CBT. Ultimately, after a series of meetings, the community decided that a project would proceed only if it gained approval from at least 70% of its members (Focus Group 6, 190823). In both villages, community meetings are crucial for collective decision-making and problem-solving, indicating a strong community bond. For instance, the Women's Union in Da Bia plays a pivotal role in overseeing crucial aspects of tourism-related activities, with a focus on maintaining cleanliness and managing waste (Focus Group 4, 180923). Women's groups are important for bringing the community together.

Meanwhile, due to differences in community norms, in Sung village, the involvement of the elderly is seen as essential in shaping governance dynamics within the community, as highlighted in the

Focus Group 6 discussion (190923). Here, decision-making is inclusive of community members not only when starting tourism projects but also in everyday activities.

Finally, within the complex web of actors, we note impactful collaborations in the community emerge, particularly between farmers and homestay owners in both villages. In Da Bia, the role of the coordinator is seen as important to organizing tourism in the village:

“At the beginning, they did not have enough tourists equivalent to the number of staff present, so the coordinator was distributing the staff to different homestays to accommodate” (President of the local party committee and tour guide, Focus Group 5, 180923)

It can be seen that the community plays an essential role in a successful CBT implementation. In the next section, we delve into the challenges posed by the NGO-driven model, noting that power dynamics are not absent.

5.2.3. Challenges in CBT governance

While the Da Bia CBT model appears suitable, its reliance on NGOs raises concerns about long-term sustainability. Power dynamics are not absent in this approach, while the local community is actively involved in planning and generating profit, the ultimate approval and support depend on the review and potential investment decisions made by AOP. For instance, AOP's introduction of various tourism activities, such as kayak excursions, boat tours, and the establishment of a local café, underscores their influential role in shaping the tourism offerings of Da Bia. According to the President of the local party committee (Focus Group 5, 180923), AOP stopped investing after the COVID-19 pandemic hit, indicating that the influx of tourism has decreased, and this could hinder the development of future tourism activities. NGOs hold the financial means and expertise to shape and drive tourism in the village.

Moreover, a significant partnership emerges between AOP and tourism agencies in Da Bia, such as Exoticca, underscoring the village's dependence on these platforms for tourism. This underscores additional power dynamics as residents depend on international tourists who book through these platforms, with the agency consistently securing a share of the revenue. The dependency on NGOs, as highlighted by Giang T. Phi and Long H. Pham (2022), suggests that the community may face challenges in sustaining CBT once external loans and projects cease.

In addition to that, residents actively participating in tourism activities undergo training facilitated by AOP, specifically for homestay owners in both villages. However, with the observed limited influx of tourism in this village and difficulty in

diversifying tourism activities and skills, the CBT model might face problems with longevity. For example, conversations with the Da Bia community reveal that language training provided by NGOs lasted only a few days, insufficient for the development of skills necessary to effectively engage with tourists (Management Board of CBT, Focus Group 2, 180923). Moreover, another member on the management board of Da Bia noted that: “We receive training annually, but the topic is inconsistent. For instance, this year they have tourism training, next year it could be cooking.” (Focus Group 2, 180923)

Finally, while NGOs contribute significantly to tourism development, the state holds a reinforcing role in decisions related to tourism governance in Da Bac. However, governmental agencies do not offer financial support, but trainers from the Department of Culture or Labour Unions at the provincial level offer training in English language courses and traditional dancing.

In summary, CBT governance in Da Bac District is based on collaboration efforts between NGOs, local communities, and governmental bodies. This reveals a nuanced landscape marked by participatory decision-making, funding challenges, and power dynamics. The success and sustainability of tourism initiatives depend on community meetings, collaboration, and adaptive governance to navigate the complex interplay of actors and dynamics within the communities of each village.

5.3. Sustainability of CBT in Hoa Binh

Regarding the second research question: “How does community-based tourism governance in Hoa Binh address the sustainable (tourism) development challenges?”, we elaborated on the

environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impacts, as well as the interactions between these impacts in terms of governance.

5.3.1. Environmental impacts

The impact of tourism on the environment, however, is not seen as purely positive. This aligns with research in Hoa Binh province by Giang T. Phi and Long H. Pham (2022). They found that, due to insufficient guidance and management capacity, tourism in Lac village is confronted with multiple sustainability challenges, including environmental challenges. These might include waste treatment and the provision of clean water (Giang T. Phi and Long H. Pham 2022). The fact that some villages in Hoa Binh province face environmental challenges associated with CBT was also found in our research. For instance, in all villages except for Sung village, the problem of noise pollution was stressed. An interviewee in Ban Lac expressed his concerns:

“There are always people camping at night, there’s campfire and gathering dinner and show, it can be really loud and noisy, this can really affect students, children and elders.” (Local Authority, Interview 2, 150923).

Another 'tension' found is about forest protection. On the one hand, forests are increasingly protected, but on the other hand, this is also partly influenced by the high use of wood in building the typical wooden stilt houses (including for tourists).

5.3.2. Economic impacts

The second aspect in the sustainability pillars concerns economic issues. CBT in small villages can have a significant economic impact, both positive and negative, on the local economy. On the positive side, it can stimulate economic

growth by creating employment opportunities for locals as mentioned in all villages:

“Before tourism appeared in the area, life was hard. Since tourism started to develop, the life of people here has improved. Tourists make up 40% of the total income here and now thanks to tourism the average income of people here is about 55 million per year, the highest in the district, an increase of 30%, or even 60% for some.” (Local Authority, Interview 2, 150923).

However, there are also negative economic impacts associated with CBT in small villages. One challenge is the potential for dependency on tourism as the primary source of income. Villages may become overly reliant on tourism revenues, leading to vulnerability during off-season periods or in the event of fluctuating tourist numbers as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. This dependency could hinder the development of other sustainable economic sectors, limiting the village's economic diversification. These income benefits might also lead to income gaps between residents working in the tourism sector and residents working in other sectors, and thus certain socio-economic inequalities.

5.3.3. Socio-cultural impacts

Regarding environmental and economic components, outcomes at the socio-cultural level are also a complex issue. On the one hand, CBT provides a huge potential in the socio-cultural domain. Firstly, it can help preserve and share the local culture. This was something mentioned in all the villages studied and is therefore considered very relevant in the context of the Hoa Binh province.

What is most emphasized are good relationships within the community. According to some, CBT is also associated with better social activities, improved relations between different ethnic groups, and the expansion of social circles. CBT was also associated with increased security and a reduction in crime. Lastly, the positive impact of CBT on education and training is also highlighted. A participant in Sung village mentioned that “thanks to CBT we have the opportunity for education, we get other training, and we feel like we are more empowered” (Focus Group 6, 190923), and a participant in Nhot stated that “children have more accessibility to education” (Focus Group 2, 160923).

But again, many socio-cultural challenges also exist around CBT. On the one hand, it is stressed that CBT helps to protect cultural traditions, but on the other hand, some are concerned that it may lead to a 'weakening' of local culture. This quote by an interviewee in Ban Lac summarizes why:

“The existence of new culture and new lifestyle might cause the disappearance of traditional culture. The ethnic minority culture will be affected: people are getting more familiar with other cultures, and they tend to wear traditional clothes less (in the past, they wore them every day, now only during festivals). Also, about their traditional ethnic minority language: now they speak it less than before, as they speak Vietnamese more now. Also, young people now are getting used to social media, some people get hair dye or tattoos. If tourists come, it might bring this influence on the locals” (Local Authority, Interview 2, 150923).

However, it is also important to note that this was not mentioned in all villages. Our research also found that some find the skills

offered too limited, such as in English or advertising. For example, someone in Nhot village said:

“We communicate in English. Usually, we have a script, outside the script we do not know how to reply.” (Focus Group 3, 160923).

The last tension, but also a limited one, concerned social ties. Although good social bonds were highlighted by almost all participants, some minor conflicts were also mentioned; for example, about someone crossing the territorial boundaries of their property, conflicts between homestays and their livestock neighbors, conflicts between tourist households and non-tourism households in keeping traditional roofs in Sung village. However, these disputes seemed quite insignificant and were usually resolved quickly.

5.3.4. The contribution of governance in the sustainability of CBT in Hoa Binh

As mentioned above, there are many actors involved in CBT governance in Hoa Binh such as NGOs, tourism agencies, cooperatives, unions, governmental institutions, and private sectors. Among these, local authorities and government provide planning and regulation for the tourism industry. Moreover, the local authority is responsible for the building of basic tourism-related infrastructure such as bridges and roads. On the other hand, the government assists the growth of CBT by permitting NGOs to enter and operate. NGOs have supported local people in tourism skills, and financial and physical capital for tourism households as well as brought tourists to the area. As many actors are involved in CBT governance, and these actors all consider the local people as the center of CBT, local people could have the opportunity to improve their tourism capacity and awareness of their values in

CBT. These actors also promote gender equality and women's empowerment with the active participation of women in the governance of CBT. However, the coordination between these actors is not really tight, leading to overlap or discontinuity in community support.

5.4. Policy recommendations

Hoa Binh province, with its stunning natural beauty and human ecological diversity, can become a destination for eco-friendly tourism. It is important to find a balance between the development of tourism and the region's environment. Tour guide training needs to be provided to give the guides an in-depth understanding of the natural and cultural tourism resources and the knowledge about how to preserve them. In addition, educating the local community on this matter is also important so that they too can understand the importance of protecting the local environment and they can be incentivized to develop eco-responsible tourism for their guesthouses and restaurants.

In addition, the government and related authorities should develop better trash management schemes to handle waste. A good idea is to collaborate with NGOs and government agencies to leverage expertise resources and funding for sustainable development projects. It's also important to educate and raise awareness around the problems and start community engagement and participation. This can be achieved through involving the local community in decision-making processes related to environmental initiatives.

To address the uneven development of tourism, a focus on engaging local communities in tourism planning and

development is key, including gender differences.

In addition, the government can continue promoting reforestation programs and improve the incentive to enhance rural households' participation, while securing an income through forest restoration programs.

To conclude, while tourism seems to be a great propeller for economic development, tourism development should adopt a holistic approach. This means that all three pillars of sustainable development need to be considered by policymakers, so not only economic development but also conserve and enhance social aspects and the environment. This must be done to avoid a situation in which Hoa Binh becomes an unsustainable mass tourism destination, which can have negative effects on the social and ecological richness that makes Hoa Binh an attractive eco-tourism destination, to begin with.

6. Conclusion

Hoa Binh is a province in Vietnam that has multiple attractive features for tourism and is one of the regions where CBT was first introduced. Literature research showed us the great diversity of actors (tourists, residents, homestay owners, coordinators, cooperatives, etc.), and this was further supplemented during our fieldwork (with actors such as NGOs, tourism agencies, unions, etc.). The implementation of CBT in these different villages presents very different pathways and governance structures. In Da Bia and Sung village, NGOs play an important role. NGOs largely provide financing and training, but the local community is also actively involved. The government still occupies an essential position. Decisions are made at the

district level, and these decisions flow down to the village level through a coordinator. In Sung village, cultural heritage seems to play a more important role. In Mai Hich, the French NGO 'COHED' also played an important role in the development of CBT, and together with travel agencies, tourists were brought to the village. In Ban Lac village, CBT was mainly introduced and led by the government and promoted as a tool for alleviating poverty. Both the district government and all kinds of governmental departments at the local level are important in the implementation of CBT. However, there are also informal organizational forms that offer homestay owners room for collective decision-making. CBT in Nhot was inspired by CBT and its popularity in Ban Lac, but in Nhot, the local community seems to play a slightly more central role. The government, on the other hand, plays a more mediating role between NGOs and the community, and between private actors and the community. They also train the community and hold meetings regularly with the local community.

To explore the relationship between CBT and sustainable development challenges, we conceptually relied mainly on the concept of S-CBT. We found a variety of tensions at the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental levels. At the environmental level, CBT had several positive impacts. Some mentioned that it led to increased environmental awareness and protection, such as the introduction of forest conservation to preserve scenic beauty. However, there are also environmental downsides in several villages: noise, air, land and water pollution and an increased demand for wood. Impacts on the economic level seemed the most

important for community members. CBT led to an increased income, more employment opportunities, and the ability to sell products to a wider market. However, with many citizens shifting to tourism, it also created the risk of over-reliance on tourism income and inequalities between those involved in tourism and those who are not. Moreover, many villages do not have sufficient financial resources to support and/or expand the tourism sector. At the socio-cultural level, certain advantages are mentioned, such as good and growing social ties, and better access to education and training. However, such training is not always considered sufficient. A similar tension can be found in the preservation of local culture.

In conclusion, while CBT in the Hoa Binh province can bring numerous economic benefits to small villages, it is essential to carefully manage its impact to ensure long-term sustainability. Balancing the economic gains with the preservation of local culture, promoting diversified economic activities, and addressing potential inequalities are crucial steps towards maximizing the positive economic impacts while mitigating the negative effects of tourism on small village communities.

Certain limitations should also be mentioned. Firstly, the number of focus groups and interviews was rather limited, which shows the importance of further research. Secondly, there were challenges in coordinating the focus group on the day of the interview. As researchers, we encountered situations where local people arrived at different times, left earlier, or

were occasionally distracted by their children jumping in during the session.

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