

Solutions For Community-Based Tourism Development In The Mekong Delta Region

Le Thi Ngoc Van¹, Quoc Nghi Nguyen¹, Le Thi Khanh Duy²

¹School of Economics, Can Tho University, Vietnam

²Kien Giang College, Vietnam

Correspondence Author: Email: quocnghi@ctu.edu.vn

Abstract

This study was conducted to propose solutions for community-based tourism development in the Mekong Delta region (MDR). Qualitative research methods (expert consultation and SWOT matrix analysis) were used to address the research objectives. Research results show that community-based tourism in the MDR has achieved many positive accomplishments in recent decades, with numerous community tourism spots establishing attractive brands in the minds of both domestic and international tourists. However, limitations in human resource capacity, regional connectivity, product diversity, and the impact of climate change have hindered the development of this tourism type. Consequently, the study proposes several solutions for community-based tourism development in the MDR, including (i) Developing distinctive community-based tourism products associated with the riverine and orchard culture, (ii) Enhancing human resource training and management capacity for community-based tourism, (iii) Investing in infrastructure development and digital transformation in destination management, and (iv) Strengthening public-private linkages and international cooperation for sustainable community-based tourism development.

Keywords: community-based tourism, local community, Mekong Delta region (MDR)

INTRODUCTION

The Mekong Delta Region (MDR) possesses a dense network of rivers, distinctive natural landscapes, and unique orchard culture (Son et al., 2023), offering great potential

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for sustainable community-based tourism (CBT) development (Nguyen et al., 2024). In 2024, the MDR welcomed over 52 million tourists, including about 2.8 million international visitors, with total revenue reaching 62 trillion VND, an increase of 36% compared to 2023. These figures reflect a positive growth trend, indicating that tourism, in general, and community-based tourism, in particular, are gradually becoming a vital sector of the MDR's service economy. In the process of economic restructuring from traditional agriculture to a tourism-integrated agricultural model, CBT development is considered a strategic direction for effectively leveraging local natural and cultural advantages, while simultaneously improving livelihoods and preserving national identity (Mai et al., 2023). However, the practical development of CBT in the MDR still faces numerous limitations and challenges. These include: An imbalanced tourist structure, mainly dominated by domestic visitors; limited proactive participation from local communities; a lack of professionalism in CBT products and unsynchronized infrastructure; while the impact of climate change, saltwater intrusion, and land subsidence is increasingly severe. These challenges demand an approach to sustainable, inter-regional, and community-connected tourism development to optimize the potential of community-based tourism in the MDR for the coming period.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research data are secondary sources collected from the Mekong Delta Tourism Association, the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, and the Departments of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of provinces and cities in the Mekong Delta region during the period 2020-2025. A qualitative research approach is employed in the study. The expert consultation method is applied to assess achievements and limitations, thereby identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges in community-based tourism development. The consulted experts include community-based tourism researchers and managers. The SWOT matrix analysis method is used to combine these strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges, from which solutions for developing community-based tourism in the MDR are proposed.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Current status of community-based tourism development in the Mekong Delta region

The Mekong Delta Region (MDR) is considered an area with exceptionally favorable potential for community-based tourism development due to its distinctive

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riverine ecosystem, rich local culture, and unique human resources (Phung et al., 2024). With its dense network of rivers and canals, along with the orchard lifestyle, traditional crafts, and unique culinary culture, the MDR offers authentic and appealing experiences to both domestic and international tourists. By participating in community-based tourism in the MDR, visitors immerse themselves in the local rhythm of life, experience agricultural production, special product processing, and participate in folk festivals. Furthermore, local authorities in the region are increasingly focusing on developing green and eco-tourism, creating a crucial foundation that helps the MDR become a key region for community-based tourism development in Vietnam.

In recent years, community-based tourism in the MDR has achieved many prominent results, contributing to socio-economic development and improving the livelihoods of local people. Several CBT models, such as Con Son community tourism village (Can Tho), Con Chim community tourism village (Tra Vinh), Sa Dec Flower Village, and the Country Market model (Dong Thap), have become preferred brands, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. These models not only create stable jobs and increase income for residents but also raise community awareness about cultural preservation and environmental protection. Many distinctive tourism products, such as agricultural experience, river-based livelihood activities, folk cuisine preparation, and visits to traditional craft villages, have been highly rated by tourists. Particularly, the community's participation in tourism management and operation is becoming more professional thanks to support from authorities and travel businesses.

At Con Son community-based tourism village (Can Tho), tourism products such as the “flying snakehead fish” show, visits to fruit orchards, and hands-on experiences making traditional folk cakes have created a distinctive impression of the Southern riverine garden culture. The Con Chim community-based tourism village (Tra Vinh) is considered a model example of community-based tourism, where the local community jointly manages resources, develops agro-tourism products, and preserves indigenous cultural identity, forming a unique “green” tourism ecosystem. Meanwhile, Sa Dec Flower Village (Dong Thap) - the largest ornamental flower center in the MDR - has successfully transformed from a traditional agricultural model into one that integrates agriculture with tourism. Visitors can enjoy the vibrant floral landscape all year round, learn about the traditional flower cultivation craft, and take part in creative ornamental plant art activities. This model not only provides stable income for farmers but also preserves the local flower-growing tradition that is more than 100 years old. In addition, the Countryside Market model in Dong Thap, particularly on Tan Thuan Dong islet, has recreated the



image of a traditional rural market rich in the riverine garden culture of the Mekong Delta. Tourists can enjoy folk cuisine, participate in cooking activities, listen to Southern folk music, play traditional games, and interact directly with residents. This is not only a tourism product but also a form of cultural preservation of the river-based lifestyle.

Although community-based tourism in the MDR has achieved noteworthy results, the region still faces many challenges. Tourism activities remain fragmented and lack professionalism, while the management capacity and skills of the local labor force have not met the requirements for sustainable tourism development. Infrastructure, especially transport and tourism facilities, is limited and lacks synchronization among localities, leading to the weak formation of value chains and interconnected tourism products. Moreover, the impacts of climate change, such as land subsidence, saltwater intrusion, and changes in the Mekong River flow, are directly threatening natural resources, landscapes, and the livelihoods of local communities.

Solutions for community-based tourism development in the MDR

To formulate solutions for community-based tourism development in the MDR, the study conducted expert consultations to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats concerning community tourism development. Subsequently, the research applied the SWOT matrix to propose the most suitable solutions. Some proposed solutions are as follows:

Table 1. SWOT matrix for community tourism development in the MDR

SWOT	Opportunities (O)	Challenges (T)
	O1: The demand for indigenous, nature and community tourism experiences is increasing. O2: National and international policies encourage sustainable tourism development. O3: The application of digital technology, digital marketing and international	T1: Climate change, saltwater intrusion, and land subsidence threaten the ecosystem and landscape. T2: Fierce competition from domestic and foreign destinations. T3: Disease risks and global economic

	tourism linkages are increasingly expanding. O4: ASEAN and international linkages open up new markets for Mekong Delta tourism.	fluctuations impact international tourism. T4: The sustainability of the community tourism model depends on management capacity and conservation awareness.
Strengths (S) S1: Rich natural resources (rivers, primeval forests, coastal islands). S2: Garden culture, traditional craft villages and ethnic communities (Kinh, Khmer, Hoa) with strong identities. S3: Support from the community for community tourism development. S4: Homestay activities, community experiences are developed.	S-O Strategy - S1+O1+O2: Developing eco-tourism products - community based on river resources. - S3+O4: Expanding inter-regional and inter-national tourism routes. - S4+O1+O2: Building the brand "Community tourism - Experience the identity of the South".	S-T Strategy - S1+T1: Developing green tourism, adapting to climate change. - S2+T2: Diversifying cultural products, increasing experience value. - S4+T4: Training community human resources, maintaining identity.
Weaknesses (W) W1: Lack of specialized human resources, management and marketing skills. W2: Tourism products are still monotonous and lack specialization. W3: Traffic infrastructure, accommodation, and digital transformation are not synchronized.	W-O Strategy - W1+O2: Vocational skills training, homestay management, communication and digital transformation. - W2+O1: Innovation of experience products based on tourism needs. - W3+O3: Upgrading tourism infrastructure, applying smart technology.	W-T Strategy - W1+T3: Training to adapt to global crises and risks. - W2+T2: Standardizing products, building service standards. - W4+T4: Raising community awareness, avoiding rampant development.

W4: Connections between parties are still loose.		
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Solution 1: Develop distinctive community-based tourism products associated with the riverine and orchard culture. Based on the strengths (S) such as abundant natural resources, characteristic riverine landscapes, and orchard cultural identity, combined with opportunities (O) regarding the trend of experiential tourism and sustainable development policies, the MDR needs to focus on diversifying community tourism products toward specialization. Localities can develop “community eco-tourism village” models based on their unique cultural and ecological features. Additionally, it is necessary to build a brand identity kit for “Community tourism - Experience the identity of the South”, combined with an online promotional strategy, digital technology application, and social media platforms to expand brand recognition both domestically and internationally. The objective of this solution is to create a clear differentiation for community tourism in the MDR, establish a characteristic experiential tourism value chain, and bring sustainable economic benefits to the local people.

Solution 2: Enhance human resource training and management capacity for community-based tourism. One of the prominent weaknesses (W) of community tourism in the MDR is the shortage of personnel with expertise and management skills for community-based tourism. Therefore, relevant agencies need to implement practical training programs, guiding communities on guest reception skills, homestay operation, digital communication, and service management. Universities, research institutes, and travel businesses should coordinate with local authorities to establish a “Community tourism ambassador” program, creating a network of core human resources at each destination. Concurrently, encouraging the participation of women, youth, and ethnic minorities in tourism activities both preserves cultural identity and creates local employment. Furthermore, establishing a community tourism support center for the MDR with functions for consulting, connecting, and investment promotion will help strengthen management capacity and inter-regional coordination.

Solution 3: Invest in infrastructure development and digital transformation in destination management. To overcome the limitations of weak infrastructure and restricted regional connectivity, local authorities in the MDR need to strategically invest in connecting transport, accommodation facilities, environmental sanitation systems, tourist piers, as well as digital transformation infrastructure. Every community tourism site should be integrated into a smart tourism map, allowing tourists to book services online, look up



information, and provide real-time feedback on their experiences. Local authorities should prioritize supporting communities involved in tourism service provision with digital transformation, reservation management, online marketing, and tourism data analysis. In addition, developing a system of sustainability indicators for monitoring and evaluation will help effectively manage resources, minimize environmental impacts, and enhance resilience to climate change.

Solution 4: Strengthen public-private linkages and international cooperation for sustainable community-based tourism development. Based on the combination of the opportunity (O) to expand the ASEAN market and the challenges (T) related to competition and climate change, the MDR needs to promote regional connectivity and international cooperation. The Public-private partnership (PPP) model can mobilize resources for tourism infrastructure, heritage conservation, and the development of new tourism products. Cooperation programs with Cambodia and Laos within the framework of the “Green tourism - Mekong River” route should be expanded, aiming to build a sustainable transnational tourism chain. Concurrently, the provinces need to coordinate to establish a community tourism coordination council for the MDR, which will play the role of strategizing, functional zoning, and monitoring tourism activities toward balanced conservation and development.

CONCLUSION

The study conducted a comprehensive analysis of the current situation and proposed solutions for community-based tourism development in the MDR. The results show that although the MDR possesses outstanding advantages in natural resources and distinctive cultural identity, there remain many limitations regarding human resource capacity, technical infrastructure, product quality, and the effectiveness of regional connectivity. The study proposed four key solutions to capitalize on strengths, seize opportunities, and overcome weaknesses and constraints, thereby moving toward sustainable community-based tourism development. Accordingly, several recommendations are proposed as follows: (1) State management agencies should establish specific policy mechanisms to support community-based tourism development; (2) Businesses and Tourism Associations should strengthen their role in linking and sharing resources; (3) Local authorities should develop destination brands associated with the application of digital technology and environmental management.



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