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## ENHANCING THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF THE NORTHWEST REGION IN VIETNAM

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### **Abstract**

*The Northwest of Vietnam is the region with great potential and many opportunities for developing the tourism industry. As pointed out in the strategy of Vietnam's tourism development by 2020, tourism in the Northwest is the key economic sector, developing the local economy, creating jobs, improving incomes for people, and developing in a sustainable manner. In the past time, the situation of the tourism industry in the Northwest provinces was not commensurate with their potential and advantages, not effective and sustainable. One of the subjective reasons is the fact that local authorities of the provinces have failed to play their role in sustainable tourism development. In order to enhance the role of local authorities in sustainable tourism development of the northwest region in Vietnam, the study focuses on the following main issues: development of sustainable tourism, the reality of sustainable tourism development, and the role of local authorities. In addition, it also provides solutions for enhancing the role of local authorities in sustainable tourism development in the Northwest region.*

**Key words:** *Sustainable tourism, northwest tourism, local authorities.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Northwest is a large region covering 6 provinces: Hoa Binh, Son La, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Yen Bai with great potential tourism resources, and the tourism contributes more and more to economic development, creates more jobs for workers, raises income, and improves the quality of life for local people. However, the tourism development of the region is not commensurate with its potential, especially not sustainable. The reasons, among others, are the limited and non-synchronous scale of investment in tourism development and patched planning; the research on tourism resources and conditions for tourism development in each province, each destination in the region lacks a thorough and comprehensive sense; tourism managers fail to figure out the sustainable development of tourism which in turn results in unreasonableness in organization and management, while many individuals and business units of tourism only pay attention to economic benefits, but the impact of tourism on the environment, social and ecosystems etc. To overcome this reality, and to ensure the sustainable development of tourism in the Northwest region, it is necessary for local authorities, tourism business units, local people, and tourists to coordinate with each other, in which, the local authorities of provinces play the role of directing and regulating all related actors to develop sustainable Northwest tourism with its potential strengths. Therefore, the **“Enhancing the role of local authorities in developing a sustainable tourism for the Northwest region of Vietnam”** is very necessary.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

In relation to this, it should be mentioned to the *Agricultural Belt Development Theory (Thunen, 1833)*; *Center Point Theory (Christaller, 1933)*; *Development pole theory (Perroux, 1949)*; *Theory of enterprise distribution in territorial development (Schoon)*. In Vietnam, there are some studies on this topic, such as “*Renewing the activities of local authorities in market economy and international economic integration*” (Nguyen Ky et al., 2006)

Research on the sustainable development of tourism: there are some the studies on sustainable development of tourism such as: *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise? (Honey, 1998)*; *Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas: Guidelines for Planning and Management (Eagles et al., 2002)*; “*What is sustainable tourism?*”; The report of WCED (WCED, 1996); *Sustainable Tourism Management (Swarbrook, 1999)*; *Tourism and Environment (Hens, 1998)*; *Tourism and Sustainability: New Tourism in the Third World (Mowforth và Munt, 1998)*. *National and Regional Tourism planning: Methodologies and Case Studies (Inskeep, 1995)*. These studies address the sustainable development of tourism and provide some of the sustainability principles applied in tourism, including: ecological sustainability, cultural sustainability, economic sustainability, and participation of the community.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve such objectives, the principal research methods used in the articles include: Analytical methods, materials synthesis, field methods, expert interviewing methods. In these methods, field method is the main method which helps the author to get the results of the article. During the two-year study period, the author visited the tourist sites and communited the visitors to study and evaluate the potential in order to develop the community-based tourism for a more suitable area.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### **Sustainable development and sustainable tourism development**

#### *Sustainable development*

According to the World Council on Environment and Development, WCED 1987, “*Sustainable development is development meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*”.

At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in 1992 and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg (South Africa) in 2002 pointed out that “*Sustainable development is the development process in the close, rational and harmonious combination of the three aspects of development, including economic development, social development and environmental protection*”. The stable economic growth; the implementation of social progress and equality, rational exploitation, conservation of natural resources, protection and improvement of habitat quality are the criteria for assessing sustainable development.

#### *Sustainable tourism development*

According to many scholars around the world, sustainable tourism is “*the exploitation of natural resources and culture to satisfy the diverse needs of tourists, with a focus on long-term economic benefits, and to contribute to environmental protection and improve the living standards of local communities*” [2].

As defined by the World Tourism Organization at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992: *“Sustainable tourism is the development of tourism activities to meet the current needs of tourists and local people but is concerned with preserving and replenishing resources for tourism development in the future. There are will have a plan of for the sustainable tourism to manage resources in order to meet the socio-economic and aesthetic needs but still maintain the cultural integrity, biodiversity, the development of ecosystems and support systems for human life”*.

In which, sustainable tourism development should focus on three factors: (i) the relationship between conservation of natural resources, the environment and economic benefits; (ii) the development process in the long-term; (iii) meeting the current needs, but not affect the needs of the next generation.



### **A model of factors involved in sustainable tourism development**

The model shows that exist many factors involved in tourism activities, affecting sustainable tourism development. In which, the local authorities factor affects other factors through activities such as developing strategies, planning for tourism development; developing tourism products; developing legal framework; investing the infrastructure for tourism; resolving issues related to the tourism. Specifically, the local authorities have introduced regulations for the development of sustainable tourism; policies for supporting local people in tourism exploitation; or took solutions for attracting tourists to the provinces. In addition, tourism bussiness units, workers in the tourism sector, local people, and tourist are the direct factors in the exploitation and use of tourism resources, which directly affects the sustainable tourism development.

#### *The role of local authorities in sustainable tourism development*

Local authorities play a very important role in derecting and adjusting the actions of other factors to effectively implement the goals of sustainable development. The local authorities are multi-level, with each level having certain functions and responsibilities, but ensuring the implementation of policies and laws to develop the local economy, overcome the weaknesses of the economy, and improve competitiveness in provinces. The role of local authorities at all levels in sustainable tourism development is very important, reflected in the following aspects:

- Is the decisive factor in the tourism development, helping to develop a strong and sustainable local tourism; helping to expand and establish the tourism market,



- institutional tourism market, helping to clarify the movement of market factors; and contributing considerably to the development of the tourism industry of the country.
- Is the factor for developing of tourism development strategies and planning of tourism development in the province based on the criteria of sustainable development. This is an important basis for the factors involved in tourism business such as: tourism business units, local people, and tourists to achieve the goals of sustainable development.
  - Is the factor for thoroughly solving issues related to the tourism environment through issued policies, sanctions and regulations.
  - Is the factor to develop a legal framework for attracting more foreign direct investment, this is an important basis for the local tourism to access capital markets, management level in tourism...ensuring the sustainable development of tourism.
  - Is the important factor in the promotion and advertisement of tourism, ensuring synchronism and efficiency.
  - Is the factor for inspecting, supervising and evaluating tourist tourism business unit and tourism workers to ensure the process of organizing and supplying tourist products, the quality, security, food hygiene and safety, environmental sanitation...contributing the sustainable development of tourism.

**The role of government in developing sustainable tourism in the North-West region**  
***Management reality of local authorities in tourism development***

- *Regarding the formulation of tourism development strategies and planning:* the North-western provinces have adopted The master plan for tourism development until 2020, vision to 2030 and many other tourism development plans have been approved by People's Committees of provinces, as the basis for the development of tourism development projects. However, the planning work is unsystematic and without allowing for the risks or changes in economic, social or natural environment that affect the development of tourism.
- *Regarding the development of tourism products:* The local authorities of the province in the region have identified and invested many types of tourism in accordance with the potential and advantages of the provinces in the region.
- *Regarding the development of the legal framework:* The Government has paid attention to building the legal framework for investment. In fact, over the past years, the cooperation of tourism development in the six North-Western provinces has expanded with the concern of the Central Government, the creative initiative of localities in the region, the technical support of such organization as Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), the EU project, have achieved extremely positive results: Contributing to sustainable tourism development, reducing poverty for communities directly supported from tourism development; supporting to enhance competence for manager and tourism human resources in 6 provinces; Developing unique and original tourism products, bringing practical effects to the promotion of tourism development in the region and each locality.
- *Regarding investment in the construction of tourism infrastructure:* North-West is a large region of rough terrain and rolling hills and mountains. As the result, the first condition for connecting and developing tourism must be connection of convenient transportation routes. The transport sector keeps implementing many solutions to develop transport infrastructure in the northwestern provinces to meet the demands of tourism development; hastening construction of several foreign-invested roads; investing some new projects,



- *Regarding solving some issues related to the tourism environment:* Environment protection, ecosystem maintenance – are the leading principle in ecotourism development in the North-West; The second is the conservation and organizationally rational exploitation of local cultural values – that is the whole lifestyle, cultivation, customs, folk belief associated with natural ecology making common values for the ecological tourist area; The third is the organization of educational activities and interpretation of the environment, ecosystems;
- *Regarding tourism promotion, advertisement and association:* Tourism agencies in the Northwestern localities actively participate in major tourism fairs domestically and internationally; Taking advantage of the support of national tourism agencies, domestic and foreign organizations to deploy e-marketing, apply communication technology and social networks to improve the effectiveness of advertising; actively organize to welcome delegation of fam&presstrip for survey, build products and promote images of North-West to tourists at home and abroad.
- *The state management of tourism:* Regarding this work, the local authorities has not showed all their roles that caused many shortcomings, unstable tourism development. Particularly, some divisions of the state agencies have malfunctioned and slowly recovered; the social and cultural management remain inadequate; the problem of insecure order, teasing, threatening tourists, stolen property of tourists in the hotel. The production, business, security and order, food hygiene and safety, environmental hygiene of units and individuals have not been inspected and supervised closely and seriously that affected local people and tourists.

#### ***Solutions to improve the role of local authorities in sustainable tourism development in the North-West***

*Developing strategies and plans for tourism development in the provincial area according to the criteria of sustainable development.* Local authorities in the region need to improve tourism development strategies and planning in a sustainable context, in accordance with the general orientation of national target programs and local specific conditions. At present, it is necessary to have strategies and solutions to connect tourism in the region, determine the types of tourism, develop more tourism products such as ecotourism model associated with the natural heritage in the North-West region, exploiting thermal energy, growing medicinal plants, developing regional links on the basis of value chains.

*Thoroughly solving issues related to the tourism environment.* Provincial authorities should provide strict sanction for the cases that affect the ecological environment of tour operators, tourism exploitation companies or even tourists. Foods and drinks are restricted to bring in the ecological tourism area, uncontrolled dropping litter is avoided; regular garbage collection must be managed, garbage is sorted to save costs of waste treatment and make advantages of recyclable waste.

*Developing legal framework to attract more investment from abroad.* In the situation of revenue from North-West tourism of domestic enterprises, the attraction of investment from abroad is very important that ensured that the tourism sector has the opportunity to contact the capital and technology market. This is the fastest way for the provincial tourism sector to improve its capabilities and qualifications.

*Investment and renovation of tourism infrastructure:* Local authorities at all levels need to use effective investment capital to upgrade infrastructure, ensure traffic quality on major roads to the tourism destination; Associate with the transportation and aviation sectors to meet the demands of tourists when coming to the North-West.



*Fostering and strengthening promotion activities, advertisements and associations.* For provincial authorities, it is possible to advertise tourism through conferences, forums and specific programs, such as promoting the North-West tourism advertisement through images on national highways and provincial roads, open policies on foreign visitors visiting and staying in the locality. In addition, it is necessary to strengthen links with other localities in the region, localities in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand to develop tourism products and support development.

*Strengthening the role of management:* Appraisal and re-appraisal of accommodation establishments and standard restaurants to serve tourists are performed well; grant new and change cards for tour guides and interpreters are issued and changed. The Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism should have good coordination with functional units and regularly inspect and supervise the enterprises to ensure the serious implementation of listing prices, selling in accordance with posted prices, continuously improve the quality of services, ensure security and order, food hygiene and safety, environmental sanitation, especially in the high tourist season, and strictly deal with violations as well. Units violating tourism business are ensured to strictly handled.

- *Developing diversified types, routes and products of tourism:* It is necessary to coordinate with tourist businesses, tourist associations and local people in expanding tourist services; building new tourist routes.
- *Improving the quality of labor in tourism sector:* The level of managers is organized and trained, improving the level of the managers at all levels and direct labors should have specifically oriented. In addition, regular seminars on tourism promotion, training courses to improve the level, especially foreign language, not only in English, but also other foreign languages such as Laos, Thailand, French, German should be held to attract more tourists from other countries in the world; the learning experience in sustainable tourism development of countries with similar natural conditions like Vietnam such as Thailand should be strengthened.
- *Enhancing awareness of tourism business units, direct labors, tourists and local people on the sustainable tourism development.* Meetings are held between local stakeholders so that local people, tourists, travel agents and competent agencies can find a common voice in balancing interests between the parties and ensure sustainable tourism development as well. In addition, community-based activities such as homestay, farmstay, and training will be strengthened so that each local person can become a tourist guide on culture and life in the community. Community-based tourism in combination with the unique cultural features of ethnic groups, forming ethnic cultural tourist spots must be studied and developed.
- *Governmental officials at all levels* should enhance contact with tourists and local people in order to study the remaining problems, quickly propose solutions and often research, find out new directions, new forms of tourism to ensure the development of sustainable tourism strategies.

## **CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS**

Sustainable tourism development is the orientation and development goals of many countries and many localities in the world. The tourism sector of the North-West region is considered as a key economic sector, contributing greatly to the local economy. However, in order to achieve the objective of sustainable development, it should be paid much attention by many relevant agents, especially role of the local



authorities should be identified and enhanced. The result of reality assessment indicated that the tourism sector in the North-West region has not really developed and sustained. One of the main reasons is that the local government has not promoted all its roles and responsibilities. Therefore, one of the important solution to guarantee of the sustainable development of North-West tourism is that local authorities at all levels should be aware of their roles and implement useful measures to promote their roles in the goal of sustainable tourism development.

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