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Sustainable Tourism Development in Vietnam: A Critical Review

Vietnam has achieved enormous economic growth after a series of reforms in the 1980's, leading to foreign direct investment and the development of the tourism sector. A tourism industry emerged and has burgeoned with the increase of inbound international tourists. In this introductory paper, we critically discuss the three pillars of sustainable development – economic, environment and social elements and how they are addressed in Vietnam tourism research. As well as introducing the special issue papers, primarily written by local scholars, we suggest future research directions. In this special issue, the papers offer Vietnamese scholars' voices, their interpretations, methodological approaches, and conceptualisations, as they explore sustainable tourism practices and development in Vietnam. These papers provide meaningful insights for future tourism development and research directions.

Key words: Vietnam, Sustainable Tourism Development, Social Sustainability

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Introduction

Since the start of the century, Vietnam has achieved enormous economic development, following a series of political reforms in the 1980s, which led to the growth of the tourism sector and foreign direct investment. A tourism industry emerged and has burgeoned with rapidly increasing international tourist numbers. In 2019, Vietnam welcomed 18 million international tourists and 85 million domestic tourists (Quang, Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2022). From 2015 to 2019, the number of international tourists to Vietnam increased by an average of 22% per year (Tourist Information Center, 2020). As the middle class within the country expanded with greater purchasing power, lucrative domestic tourism markets have emerged as well. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic and border closures for almost two years significantly slowed down international tourist arrivals, the closures to outbound travel from Vietnam fuelled domestic tourism growth and tourism product and destination diversification.

Following the tourism industry's rapid growth, there has been an increasing number of tourism degree programmes offered within the higher education sector, including new joint degree programmes with Western universities such as Arizona State University, and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). In 2018, VinUniversity began operations and signed cooperative agreements with Cornell University and the University of Pennsylvania to launch tourism degree programmes and a tourism research centre in Hanoi. The internationalisation of universities and tourism programmes have supported quality tourism higher education in Vietnam and supported greater recognition of the tourism sector in Vietnamese society. These programmes are a key dimension of tourism professionalism in Vietnam, and the foundation for indigenous research training and scholarly output. Over the past decade, an increasing number of Vietnamese scholars have published in 'mainstream' tourism journals such as the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Tourism Geographies*, and

Current Issues in Tourism. Vietnamese scholars have begun to initiate and share their research, analyses, and interpretations about the country's tourism opportunities, challenges, and other issues. They are also engaging domestically and internationally with other tourism scholars at conferences, international research associations and books. In 2022, the book 'Vietnam Tourism: Policies and Practice' (Bui et al., 2022) published by CABI was the first tourism book written entirely by a group of Vietnamese-origin scholars and covers a wide range of topics and cases linked to sustainable tourism development in Vietnam. Despite this progress, many Vietnamese scholars still face challenges in publishing in English language journals, participating in 'mainstream' international conferences, and leading discussions on academic communities such as *Trinet*. These challenges may range from language barriers, cultural differences, a lack of research training, a lack of recognition, a lack of time to do research, a lack of international networks and a dearth of funding opportunities.

This special issue, 'Sustainable Tourism Development in Vietnam' emerged from a conference entitled, 'Sustainable Tourism Development for Southeast Asia' that was held at Vietnam National University, Hanoi in 2019. The conference provided a unique opportunity for Southeast Asian tourism scholars to share research ideas on sustainable tourism development and provide a space to network with international colleagues. The conference was supported by the 'Tourist Project' funded by the EU (Erasmus+ Programme). There has been growing momentum in Vietnamese tourism research by a new generation of Vietnamese scholars, who focus on sustainable tourism development within the Vietnamese context. It is important that their understanding of the development of tourism in Vietnam, and their knowledge of both historical and present developments are added to the existing literature, which has been dominantly by Western viewpoints. In this introductory paper, we critically discuss the three pillars of sustainable development – economic, environment and social

elements in Vietnam tourism research, and suggest future directions as well as introducing the special issue papers, primarily written by local scholars.

Economic Sustainability

Following the ‘Đổi Mới’ policy in 1986, which shifted Vietnam from a centrally planned economy to a market oriented one, tourism was among the first economic sectors opened to foreign investment and privatisation (Bui & Phi, 2022). Because of supportive policies and incentives from the government, Vietnam tourism experienced unprecedented growth since the beginning of 21st century and is now one of the Southeast Asia’s top tourist destinations. The economic development of Vietnamese tourism was largely influenced by neoliberalism, fuelled by the belief that tourism is a commodity for modern consumption, and that the ‘invisible hand’ of the free market would create the best conditions for economic growth (Smith, 2005). Advocates of neoliberalism argued that tourism could support market-led growth and in turn, poverty alleviation, by acting as an export sector to generate foreign exchange earnings and to attract foreign investment, with trickle-down impacts on the local economies (UNWTO, 1998). Subsequently, a number of research projects focused on tourism’s contribution to economic growth, GDP and poverty alleviation in Vietnamese provinces and to Vietnam as a whole (e.g., Nguyen & Nguyen, 2013; Shih & Do, 2016; Truong, 2013). However, whilst it is evident that the tourism industry has contributed to Vietnam’s economic growth and GDP, there is little evidence that tourism has helped poverty reduction. More research should explore if and how tourism can contribute to poverty alleviation and benefit marginalised communities.

Despite the seemingly strong tourism growth, Vietnam tourism also faces issues such as a declining visitor yield and overcrowding pressures at popular tourist destinations during peak seasons. Right before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a consultancy report

by the World Bank Group (2019) pointed to the key areas that needed improvement to enhance Vietnam tourism's competitiveness. These include (i) enhancing coordination of destination planning and product development, (ii) diversifying tourism products and visitor source markets, (iii) developing tourism workforce skills, (iv) strengthening local tourism value chain linkages, and (v) improving visitor flow management. However, research on Vietnam tourism in these areas are still in the infancy stage with few projects looking into Vietnam tourism branding (e.g., Bui, Perez & Bureau, 2010; Tran, Nguyen & Tran, 2020) and local tourism value chain analysis within the context of poverty alleviation (e.g., Nguyen, 2015). The government and destination authorities should develop sustainable planning and placemaking models for cities and provinces, as well as rural and peripheral areas (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2021). Government supported projects such as large resort developments in seaside tourism destinations, such as Phu Quoc, Da Nang and Na Trang also have primarily benefitted local elites. More research should explore if and how local people and communities experience the benefits of these development projects.

Concurrently, the shift towards the digital economy transformed Vietnamese tourism by increasing “the variety and volume of tourism products, services and experiences, with on-demand functionality accelerating the speed of economic transactions, market awareness and feedback” (Dredge et al., 2019, p.1). Given that a large portion of Vietnam tourism is made up by small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), digital transformation has created both opportunities and challenges for Vietnam tourism businesses and destinations to effectively engage with digital technologies to remain competitive. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need for digital transformation by Vietnamese businesses and destinations, as the integration of technologies can create innovative tourism products/services and ensure the health and safety for travellers. While much attention has been placed on digitalisation in the manufacturing and industrial sectors, there is little research exploring the challenges and

obstacles for Vietnam tourism businesses to digitalise (see e.g., Tran et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020), especially for small-scale tourism businesses in remote and rural villages. While the economic contribution of tourism is visible, inequality and development gaps between local elites and small scale businesses in rural regions remain large and problematic, which needs to be re-oriented to a more sustainable direction.

Environmental Sustainability

Rapid economic development in Vietnam, and tourism industry growth, has led to numerous environmental and cultural issues and conflicts. Thus, there has been an increasing attention on environmental concerns among tourism scholars (e.g., Mai & Smith, 2015). Today, Vietnam ranks low on average, in comparison, to other developing countries in Southeast Asia, in almost all aspects of environmental sustainability (Nguyen, Ho, Nguyen & Le, 2019). Vietnam suffers from serious level of air pollution, a lack of wastewater treatment and the little compliance with environmental regulations (Nguyen et al., 2019). Environmental degradation in the Vietnamese context is unique because of the historical and colonial background to tourism development. Pham, Bui, Do, and Jones (2022) note that “the physical environment has been significantly degraded, first by the establishment of plantation and extraction economies of the colonial times, followed by military conflicts and wars in the 20th century” (p. 85).

While ecotourism was introduced in Vietnam in the mid-1990s in order to protect the natural resources and heritage, it is affected by “regulations dating back to the colonial period and carried on by the postwar socialist state of Vietnam” (Pham et al, 2022, p. 100). While coastal and marine tourism cities are the largest and fastest growing segment of the tourism industry in Vietnam, city infrastructure has also been developed without a solid-waste management capacity (Tsai, Bui, Tseng, Lim & Tan, 2021). Thus, solid waste is poorly

managed and has caused the floating pollution at important natural tourist sites, resulting in significant economic losses. An estimated 1.8 million tons of plastic waste is also generated every year in Vietnam, and the country is “one of the top five countries responsible for about 13 million tons of plastic released into the ocean per year” (Nguyen et al., 2019, p. 83). Resorts and beaches in popular tourist destinations are often flooded with plastic waste and bags.

Another major issue related to the tourism and environmental sustainability in Vietnam is ethnic minority groups’ lives in rural and remote regions. Many of the ethnic minority communities live in rural villages, and their lives and livelihoods rely on the natural resources. They have been affected the most by forest closures and exploitation, including “land disputes involving tribal minorities, and the state and private logging interests which have become frequent and intense” (Pham et al, 2022, p. 95). While they have not experienced the full benefits of the country’s development and modernisation, ecotourism has become an important means for them to diversify their income sources away from agriculture. While it is important to develop ecotourism in remote areas with biodiversity or unique landscapes (Pham et al, 2022), there are often gaps between planning for sustainable tourism and the reality (Duong et al., 2022). Pham et al. (2022) suggest that it is crucial to find a balance between the rapid development of tourism activities and the preservation of the authentic natural and “socio-cultural elements of the ethnic minorities that make the area attractive for tourists” (p. 95). This balance must generate and sustain diversified income sources for the ethnic minority groups. Based on a case study in Đắk Lắk, Duong et al., (2022) emphasise that there are too many repetitive eco-tourism products in rural areas. They argue that future eco-tourism products should be developed, utilising unique local natural and cultural heritage resources, which can create livelihoods and help protect natural resources

and revitalise cultural heritage. These include sustainable ‘eco-wellness’ tourism, agri-tourism, and gastronomy tourism products, etc.

However, this requires appropriate funding allocation, tourism activities, policy and legal frameworks, environmental co-creation, stakeholder participation and community awareness (Tsai et al., 2021). Civil construction debris, the tourist flow, the support of political leadership, cost-sharing and mutual strategy adoption, and technical cooperation are also key success criteria for environmentally sustainable tourism development (Tsai et al., 2021). Reflecting on the existing environmental issues, in the post COVID period, the Vietnam tourism authorities and businesses should pay more attention to environmentally sustainable tourism development models. Local scholars also should conduct more critical research on environmental impacts, the role of tourism activities and provide practical and long-term strategies and solutions.

Social Sustainability

The social element of sustainable development has gained little attention in Vietnamese tourism research. This is not surprising as the social sustainability aspect has not picked up the full momentum in tourism studies, compared to the economic and environmental aspects of sustainability (Choe, O’ Regan, Kimbu, Lund, & Ladkin, 2022). However, there is a growing number of scholars focusing on inequity and imbalanced geographical distribution in tourist income/benefits; and the well-being of marginalised communities (e.g., Coles & Morgan, 2010; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018) in developing countries where tourist incomes often stay in capital cities and among local elites; or foreign investors, which causes economic leakage. Equality, equity, empowerment and poverty alleviation are important elements of socially sustainable development (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017).

Though the social sustainability framework may not yet be explicitly used, the tourism research in Vietnam has explored alternative tourism forms and practices such as pro-poor tourism (PPT) and community-based tourism (CBT) as a means for reducing inequity and poverty. Existing studies often emphasise poverty alleviation through tourism in rural regions, and strategies to distribute tourist income to marginalised populations (e.g. ethnic minority communities). During the early 2000s, many development agencies and international organisations in Vietnam utilised CBT as part of their poverty reduction strategies (Phi & Pham, 2022). Such tourism forms remain important options to help locals diversify their income sources and become less vulnerable to the risks associated with subsistence agriculture and fisheries (Phi & Whitford, 2017). However, alternative tourism practices continuously face challenges of social inequality, poor (re)distribution of tourism income and exclusion of marginalised communities. These forms of tourism, which involve capacity building, community involvement and empowerment, cultural revitalisation and confidence building for poor rural communities require further research.

Vietnam based scholars now recognise that there are numerous challenges to achieve social sustainability in top-down tourism projects across destinations in Vietnam. For example, the marginalised communities often lack members with business and language skills, tourism knowledge, and capital for producing quality/unique products (Holden et al., 2011; Huynh, 2011; Truong, Hall & Garry, 2014). The lack of opportunities to learn foreign languages creates difficulties in daily tourism operations; direct marketing relationships with tourists; and building connections to external tour operators and companies (Phi & Pham, 2022). Due to a lack of regulation and policies concerning local control and distribution of tourism profit, external investors can easily take over local tourism resources. For example, in Pù Luông, Thanh Hóa province, a large amount of local land has been purchased by investors from Hanoi and other parts of Vietnam to build commercial accommodation businesses (Phi

& Pham, 2022). In Sapa, Lào Cai province, many external tour companies have taken over existing tourism enterprises, creating significant economic leakages (Phi & Pham, 2022). Without adequate attention on the distribution of tourism benefits (Deller, 2010), feelings of scepticism, jealousy, and distrust can arise, and negatively affect community cohesion (Simpson, 2008). Drawing on from their pro-poor tourism research in Sapa, Truong et al. (2014) note that the tourism sector only benefits the non-poor and often results in conflicts of interest among community members.

Nguyen, d'Hautesserre and Serrao-Neumann (2021) stress that there are barriers to community empowerment given the traditional dependence on government, in the top-down political system in Vietnam. Drawing on research on local tea tourism in Thai Nguyen province, Nguyen et al. (2021) stress that locals have knowledge in traditional tea cultivation acquired over generations, capabilities, creativity, life experiences and the ability to recognise local issues and can contribute to tourism development in their local communities. However, they lack the confidence to engage in democratic decision-making, due to locals' dependence on government support and their perceived lack of formal education (Nguyen et al., 2021). Poverty reduction and equity through tourism can only be achieved by valuing the perspectives of those who are experiencing poverty (Truong et al., 2014). Marginalised locals should be included in decision making processes, development plans, project design and implementation (Truong et al, 2014). Government projects often are designed without listening to what poor people need, and how they interpret the role of tourism as a means of poverty alleviation (Holden et al., 2011; Pleumarom, 2012; Truong, 2013b). This can be substantially different from the views of academics and policy-makers (Truong et al., 2014). Capacity development, specific policies and regulations, and training programmes should be developed with the goal of ensuring long-term social equality, and the objective of suiting the needs and strengths of locals (Phi & Pham, 2022). Pro-poor tourism discourses and initiatives

may not be successful if the realities on the ground and the voices of marginalised and poverty-stricken people are not considered (Pleumarom, 2012). It is important to provide the structural avenues where poor locals can express their voices, and exercise power (Nguyen et al., 2021). Government authorities initiating tourism projects as well as scholars researching them, should listen to their voices and the voices of those who truly understand the perceptions and experience of the marginalised communities in remote regions in Vietnam. Solutions should be based on the locals' viewpoints. Vietnam tourism research should systematically use the social sustainability principles to contribute to the sustainable tourism literature development. Further research can also explore whether such approaches can help contribute to the achievement of some of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals such as 'No. 1: No Poverty'.

The Special Issue

This special issue includes four academic papers and one industry perspective paper. Most papers include Vietnamese scholars as authors. Tourism research in Vietnam has been traditionally written within a Eurocentric approach (Jones & Bui, 2022) while tourism scholarship remains highly Anglo-Western-centric (Tucker & Hayes, 2021). Sin, Mostafanezhad, and Cheer (2022) critique Anglo-Western centrism in tourism theory and call on tourism scholars to make a radical shift toward more inclusive epistemology and praxis. Thus, through this special issue, we hope to contribute to a more decentred tourism scholarship, which is more open and sensitive to diversified and culturally relevant knowledge(s) (Tucker & Hayes, 2021). The papers in this special issue offer Vietnamese scholar's voices, interpretation, methodological approaches and conceptualisation on sustainable tourism practices and development in Vietnam, which could provide meaningful insights for future development and research directions.

In *Sustainable tourism development in Vietnam: A critical review*, Jaeyeon Choe and Giang Phi provide an overview of sustainable tourism development in Vietnam, and explore economic, environmental and social sustainability elements. They find that Vietnamese tourism has a strong focus on economic aspects, but increased attention has also been given to the environmental issues. Choe and Phi further emphasise that social sustainability should receive more attention by scholars, practitioners and authorities to ensure a better balance in the sector.

In *A potential model for a private travel company-community partnership in Community-Based Tourism: the case of Mekong Rustic, Vietnam*, Andrea Giampiccoli, Long Hong Pham and Oliver Mtapuri recognise that CBT needs to be properly implemented for sustainable tourism development to occur in the Mekong region. They argue that while the government is often regarded as a key player in promoting CBT development, the private sector can also play a crucial role. Using a case study of the Mekong region, the article analyses private companies' critical role in CBT in a private sector-community CBT partnership model. The findings reveal that private organisations can effectively help small family businesses participate in CBT, help improve their facilities, products, services, and marketing, as well as expanding their business networks.

In *'E-learners' needs for sustainable tourism higher education: the case of Vietnam,*' Huu Tuan Tran, Minh Nghia Nguyen, Thuy Van Nguyen and Hong Hai Nguyen identify factors determining the learners' needs in a tourism e-learning programme. The study conducted 1,109 surveys in the central coastal region of Vietnam. Using the Technology Acceptance Model, the study found that the e-learning environment, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, playfulness, and information technology skills had a positive impact on the learners' needs. These findings provide useful managerial implications for e-learning of

tourism programmes, which contributes to the sustainable development of higher education as well as the tourism sector.

In *Sustainable tourism in Vietnam: a social-ecological analysis*, Huong Bui and Chung Nguyen synthesise literature outlining both social and ecological sustainability aspects in the utilisation of natural and cultural resources in tourism development. Along with the ecological realm of governing marine and forest resources in tourism, the authors discuss the social aspects of sustainability concerning cultural heritage conservation, community engagement, and visitor management. The article also provides important historical perspectives of sustainable tourism development in Vietnam.

In an industry perspective piece, *Industry perspectives: Vietnam confronts dual forces in tourism development: sustainable initiatives versus megaproject*, Gary Bowerman provides practical and insightful notes on the sustainable practices within Vietnamese tourism and draw in the COVID context. Bowerman emphasises that Vietnam's growth has been 'carbon-intensive and polluting' with 335 plant and animal species in Vietnam endangered due the impact of air pollution. He stresses that a priority should be to incentivise green foreign direct investment. He argues that youthful Vietnamese consumers are constantly seek to integrate new leisure, dining, and travel experiences into their lifestyles; and they are also rethinking the meaning and purpose of travel.

Tourism in Vietnam has been rapidly growing with the aid of supportive policies and government aided projects. However, given the history of colonisation and conflict, some critical Vietnamese scholars point out that the top-town tourism projects and management style should be changed, to give more voice to the private sector and community organisations. This, they believe, will help build more sustainable futures. More active collaborations and partnerships amongst public and private sectors (i.e., SMEs) and

community organisations should also be strongly supported for sustainable tourism practices (Tseng et al., 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered a unique opportunity for those involved in Vietnam tourism to look back, revise and rethink a more sustainable direction for the future growth of Vietnamese tourism. As Southeast Asian governments and tourism authorities reassess industry priorities, local voices are coming to the fore, to demonstrate the potential of domestic tourism to foster social entrepreneurship and diversified livelihoods (Adams et al., 2021). In terms of economic sustainability, there is an opportunity to further develop and strengthen domestic tourism post COVID-19, through relevant product development and marketing strategies. They require businesses that were previously reserved for international tourists, to cater for and market to domestic tourists. Future research can explore how Vietnam tourism can build a stronger balance between benefits created by the domestic and international tourism market, so as to create a more resilient tourism sector.

In terms of social and environmental sustainability, the temporary suspension of international travel during COVID-19 has led to welcome discussions about the meaning, politics, and social/environmental practices of sustainable tourism development in Vietnam. Frameworks for future policies and research in the social sustainability area can draw from emerging literature on inclusive tourism practices, which focus on supporting economic and social inclusions of marginalised populations (Scheyves & Biddulph, 2018). The voices of minority groups in empirical fieldwork research remain significantly lacking in the existing literature on Vietnam tourism. Studies utilising participatory and inclusive research approaches can help understand environmental and social sustainability issues and contribute to more meaningful sustainable futures. Minority culture-specific environmental sustainability should also be explored in future research. Actual measurements of tourism's environmental and social impacts should also be examined in future research. In addition,

future research can explore a new voluntary environmental code of conduct, which links to governmental environmental policies and may better support the mitigation of environmental degradation caused by existing and planned tourism development projects.

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