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### Developing Community-Based Tourism Among the Khmer Ethnic Minority Towards Sustainable Development in the Mekong Delta

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#### Abstract

In the context of Vietnam's growing integration into the global economy, community-based tourism (CBT) has become an important strategy for promoting sustainable development, particularly among the Khmer ethnic minority in the Mekong Delta. This study applies a qualitative research method based on synthesis and analysis of secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and statistical reports related to ethnic communities and tourism development. The research contributes to both theory and practice by identifying key factors that influence the effectiveness of community-based tourism within Khmer communities. The findings reveal that

community-based tourism not only enhances local livelihoods and preserves cultural identity but also strengthens community cohesion and supports environmental sustainability. The paper further proposes practical solutions focusing on human resource development, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, and the integration of Khmer cultural heritage into tourism products. By emphasizing local participation and intersectoral collaboration, this study provides meaningful insights for policymakers and local authorities in promoting inclusive and sustainable tourism development in the Mekong Delta.

**Keywords:** Khmer, Community-Based Tourism, Sustainable Development, Mekong Delta

#### 1. Introduction

In recent years, community-based tourism has become an increasingly important approach to sustainable development in Vietnam, especially in the Mekong Delta, where the Khmer ethnic minority has long preserved a distinctive cultural identity (MERA & NSO, 2025) <sup>[12]</sup>. The process of openness and international integration has created both opportunities and challenges for localities in utilizing cultural and natural resources to develop tourism in a sustainable and inclusive manner. Within this context, the Khmer community with its rich Theravāda Buddhist traditions, diverse festivals, and distinctive architecture represents a unique cultural asset that can be transformed into an important driver of socioeconomic growth.

However, despite this potential, community-based tourism among the Khmer remains underdeveloped and fragmented. Previous research has primarily focused on the economic or cultural aspects of tourism, with limited attention to the comprehensive and participatory management models that integrate sustainability, community empowerment, and equitable benefit distribution (Hai & Thanh, 2020; Lo & Janta, 2020; ASEAN, 2022) <sup>[7, 11, 1]</sup>. This reveals a significant scientific gap in understanding how community-based tourism can be effectively applied within ethnic minority settings like the Khmer community to balance cultural preservation with modern development needs.

The objective of this study is to analyze the current conditions and challenges of developing community-based tourism among the Khmer people in the Mekong Delta and to propose feasible, evidence-based solutions for sustainable implementation. Academically, the paper contributes by (1) refining the theoretical framework of community-based tourism in ethnic minority contexts; (2) synthesizing practical insights to enhance policy formulation and community participation; and (3) offering a model that links cultural heritage preservation with inclusive and sustainable tourism development in Vietnam.

#### 2. Research methods

This study primarily employs a qualitative research design, emphasizing synthesis, interpretation, and contextual analysis to understand the development of community-based tourism among the Khmer ethnic minority in the Mekong Delta. The research builds upon secondary data while integrating limited qualitative field insights to enhance contextual validity and

academic reliability.

The study draws upon a diverse range of secondary materials, including academic publications, government reports, policy documents, and statistical data. Key datasets were derived from sources such as the “Survey Results of Data Collection on the Socio-Economic Status of 53 Ethnic Minorities in 2019” (CEMA & GSO, 2020) [3] and the “Socio-economic survey of 53 ethnic minorities in 2024” (MERA & NSO, 2025) [12]. Supplementary materials include ASEAN (2022) [1], UNESCO (2019) [14], and journal studies by Hai & Thanh (2020) [7], Lo & Janta (2020) [11], and Jackson (2025) [9]. The inclusion criteria prioritized materials that (1) explicitly address ethnic minorities, sustainable development, or community-based tourism; (2) were published or updated within the past decade; and (3) provide empirical evidence relevant to the Mekong Delta’s Khmer population.

Collected data were systematically coded and categorized according to thematic areas: cultural identity, livelihood transformation, governance, and sustainability. The synthesis process followed an inductive logic, identifying recurring issues and emerging linkages among policy, practice, and community participation. Triangulation across multiple document types (academic, statistical, and policy-based) was used to ensure validity and minimize interpretative bias.

By combining secondary synthesis with field-based qualitative evidence, this research adopts a multi-layered analytical approach that connects theory to practice. The method ensures that findings are both contextually grounded and generalizable, enabling the study to propose actionable solutions for sustainable and inclusive community-based tourism development in the Mekong Delta.

### 3. Content

#### 3.1 The Khmer people in the Mekong Delta and theoretical issues of community-based tourism

##### 3.1.1 Overview of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta

The Mekong Delta is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious region in which the Kinh form the majority alongside other groups such as the Hoa, Khmer, and Cham. These groups have lived together in solidarity and interdependence, creating a strong sense of community cohesion and contributing to the cultural diversity of southern Vietnam. This diversity is particularly evident in the cultural and religious traditions of ethnic minority communities, especially the Khmer.

The Khmer population in the Mekong Delta is approximately 1,158,292, accounting for 6.6% of the region’s total population (MERA & NSO, 2025) [12]. Based on geographical and historical patterns of settlement, Khmer communities are concentrated in three main areas: the coastal provinces from Soc Trăng to Ca Mau; Tra Vinh and part of Vinh Long; and the border areas stretching from Chau Doc to Rach Gia.

Through a long process of community consolidation, the Khmer have coexisted harmoniously with other ethnic groups such as the Vietnamese (Kinh), Hoa, and Cham. This has fostered extensive cultural exchange, in which religion and cultural practices serve as the foundation of inter-ethnic harmony. For example, Theravāda Buddhist temples of the Khmer have integrated certain cultural elements from Mahāyāna Buddhism, as reflected in Khleng Pagoda (Soc Trang), where Chinese characters appear on the columns of

the main hall. Similarly, Khmer temples often stand alongside Catholic churches, Cham mosques, or Vietnamese and Hoa Buddhist temples, such as Munir Ansay Pagoda (Can Tho). These examples highlight the outcomes of centuries of settlement and inter-ethnic coexistence in the Mekong Delta, which in turn have enriched the diversity of community-based tourism development in the region.

In recent years, educational development has contributed to significant shifts in the employment structure of the Khmer population aged 15 and over. While the majority continue to work in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries (42.7%), between 2009 and 2019 there has been rapid growth in employment in industry and construction (39.5%) and services (17.8%) (CEMA & GSO, 2020) [3]. This reflects rising levels of awareness and education among the Khmer, contributing to improvements in employment, income, and long term poverty reduction.

The Khmer predominantly follow Theravāda Buddhism, which was introduced early to the Mekong Delta from Sri Lanka. With its strict monastic discipline and canonical texts emphasizing practical application, Theravāda Buddhism became well suited to the Khmer. Historically, the southern region of Vietnam, particularly present-day Vinh Long, was among the most densely populated Khmer areas and one of the two major centers of the Angkor civilization in Cambodia. With their distinctive cultural features including cuisine, traditional practices, festivals, and religious life the Khmer possess favorable conditions to develop community-based tourism. This transition from a primarily agrarian economy to tourism and service oriented industries has improved living standards and incomes while enabling broader access to new values and opportunities in line with the dynamic development of Vietnam’s market economy.

##### 3.1.2 Theoretical issues of community-based tourism

The theoretical framework for community-based tourism can be organized into three interconnected themes: (1) community ownership and governance, (2) participatory development and benefit sharing, and (3) sustainability through cultural and environmental preservation. Each perspective provides insight into how community-based tourism principles can be adapted to the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta.

###### (1) Community ownership and governance

Community-based tourism emphasizes local control, in which the community manages tourism activities and retains economic benefits. According to Kunjuran *et al.* (2022) [10], community-based ecotourism involves management decisions made by local people, ensuring that profits directly support the community. Jackson, L. A. (2025) [9] similarly identifies community-based tourism as a participatory approach that positions communities as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries. These frameworks align closely with Khmer social organization, where *phum sóc* (village) structures and monastic leadership form traditional centers of decision-making. Thus, applying the principle of community ownership to Khmer villages naturally builds upon their collective governance systems, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for cultural and economic outcomes.

###### (2) Participatory development and benefit sharing

Theories of participatory development, promoted by agencies such as USAID, the World Bank, and the United Nations since the 1960s, emphasize that local communities should be involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating development projects (Catley, 1999) [2]. Within

the Khmer context, these ideas translate into engaging monks, artisans, and local leaders in tourism planning to ensure that economic benefits are distributed equitably. This approach also helps prevent the marginalization of rural Khmer households, addressing inequalities in access to training, credit, and market opportunities. The participatory model, therefore, reinforces community solidarity and aligns tourism with the Khmer value system, which prioritizes collective welfare over individual gain.

### *(3) Sustainability through cultural and environmental preservation*

Community-based tourism is also conceptualized as a sustainable development strategy that balances tourism growth with environmental protection and cultural conservation (Lo & Janta, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>. ASEAN (2022) <sup>[1]</sup> highlights that community-based tourism contributes to sustainable development by integrating ecological awareness and cultural continuity into local economies. In the Khmer case, sustainability depends on maintaining tangible and intangible cultural heritage such as pagoda architecture, Ok Om Bok and Chol Chnam Thmay festivals, and performing arts like Ro bam and Du kê - as living elements of tourism experiences. UNESCO (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> further underscores that protecting intangible cultural heritage is a fundamental condition for sustainable tourism. For Khmer communities, this means tourism should not commodify cultural expressions but instead provide mechanisms to sustain them through education, training, and local entrepreneurship.

These theoretical perspectives demonstrate that community-based tourism is not only an economic model but also a culturally embedded process of empowerment and sustainability. For the Khmer people, the principles of community participation, equitable benefit sharing, and heritage preservation provide a theoretical foundation for linking economic growth with social and spiritual well being. Applying community-based tourism in Khmer communities thus requires integrating traditional governance with modern management models, ensuring that tourism development strengthens rather than disrupts their cultural and ecological balance.

## **3.2 Community-based tourism development of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta**

### **3.2.1 Advantages**

*First*, distinctive festivals, products, and services.

Traditionally, the Khmer in the Mekong Delta have been associated with rice based agriculture and Theravāda Buddhism as the foundation of their spiritual and social life. Today, however, distinctive cultural products such as cuisine and festivals are increasingly recognized as valuable tourism assets (Hai & Thanh, 2020) <sup>[7]</sup>. With the rapid transformation of the market economy, new products and services have emerged, including market based cuisine which attracts tourists to Khmer community-based tourism areas. Festivals such as Chol Chnam Thmay, Ok Om Bok, and Ngo boat racing now function not only as cultural and religious events but also as important drivers of tourism development (NDO, 2025; Hai & Ngan, 2022) <sup>[13, 6]</sup>. Supporting services such as restaurants, hotels, and travel agencies have expanded alongside festivals, creating jobs and generating income for Khmer communities.

*Second*, the persistence of cultural identity.

Ethnic culture, particularly religious culture, remains one of the most distinctive assets of the Khmer. Theravāda Buddhist temples serve as centers of spiritual and community life, embodying architectural and artistic values that attract visitors on a cultural basis (UNESCO, 2019) <sup>[14]</sup>. Renowned temples such as Doi (Bat) Pagoda in Soc Trang, Xiem Can Pagoda in Bac Lieu, and Ang Pagoda in Tra Vinh exemplify the role of religious architecture in cultural tourism. Intangible heritage such as Ro bam dance, Du kê theater, Rom vong dance, and Ngo boat racing are increasingly used as highlights in tourism activities, particularly in provinces with large Khmer populations. These cultural resources not only sustain identity but also generate significant economic value through tourism.

*Third*, ecological landscapes, natural environment, and the development of supporting services.

The Mekong Delta's diverse geography including plains, coasts, wetlands, and river systems offers strong potential for Khmer community-based tourism. Khmer communities are traditionally concentrated in coastal, riverine, and low hilly areas, enabling the development of eco cultural destinations such as Tra Su Cajuput Forest, An Hao Solar Power Tourist Area, Tan Long Stork Garden, and the Bac Lieu Wind Power Site. In response to rising demand for eco and community-based tourism, provincial authorities have expanded supporting services, with travel companies like Saigontourist and Vietravel offering tours to Khmer cultural sites in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang. These tours highlight unique heritage assets, including Khmer temples, mat weaving villages, cốm dẹp (flattened young rice) production, and reconstructed moon worship ceremonies (Hai & Thanh, 2020; Hai & Ngan, 2022) <sup>[7, 6]</sup>.

### **3.2.2 Challenges**

*First*, the quality of human resources remains inadequate to meet the requirements of community-based tourism development and recovery, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many sites have yet to be transformed into viable community-based tourism products due to the lack of interpreters, insufficient numbers of tour guides for group travel, and limited coordination between management and tour expansion through professional travel agencies.

*Second*, management and governance methods, though receiving more attention than before, still lack long term orientation. There are no systematic approaches to managing or operating community-based tourism by developing new products or enhancing existing ones to attract and retain tourists.

*Third*, the range of tourism products and services remains monotonous. As a result, tourism activities often stop at simple sightseeing because destinations have not been systematically developed or invested in. Cultural and artistic activities have not been given adequate attention, and facilities and services for visitors such as photography spots, thematic attractions, centralized culinary areas, symbolic landmarks, or unique tourism products are lacking.

*Fourth*, promotional and communication activities lack a strategic vision. While efforts have been made to provide information about destinations, promotional content often fails to highlight distinctive features, novelty, or elements that stimulate tourists' interest.

*Fifth*, investment in infrastructure, particularly transportation, remains limited. Despite many locations

attracting large numbers of visitors, road systems are often narrow, damaged, or underdeveloped, which constrains accessibility and reduces convenience for tourists during their visits and travel.

### 3.3 Proposals and Solutions

*First*, develop human resources from local capacities.

Improving the quality of community-based tourism sites in areas with large Khmer populations requires greater investment in human capital, both from tourism enterprises and local authorities. Mobilizing Khmer students currently enrolled in tourism related majors to return and serve their communities could strengthen local expertise. Previous studies emphasize that the availability of skilled human resources is a decisive factor for sustainable community-based tourism (Hiwasaki, 2006; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2017) [8, 4]. Moreover, leveraging natural advantages in riverine and coastal areas to organize recreation integrated with Khmer cultural performances can enrich tourist experiences. Raising community awareness of their cultural heritage including religion, festivals, architecture, language, and cuisine is essential, alongside the involvement of Khmer artisans, intellectuals, and scholars in safeguarding and promoting heritage.

*Second*, ensure equitable sharing of economic benefits.

Local residents should be empowered to independently manage tourism activities while receiving consultation, training, and support from researchers, authorities, and local organizations. Equitable benefit sharing is widely recognized as a key element for community-based tourism success (Lo & Janta, 2020) [11]. In the Mekong Delta, advisory support for community enterprises and cooperative economic models can enhance competitiveness and inclusiveness. Access to financial resources, micro credit, and capacity building initiatives will help sustain Khmer specific tourism products. Transparency in benefit distribution, particularly for cultural stakeholders, builds trust and strengthens community participation (ASEAN, 2022) [1].

*Third*, preserve cultural values and ensure sustainability.

Enhancing community-based tourism quality through Khmer craft villages (e.g., brocade weaving, palmyra products, cuisine) and integrating tourism with cultural expressions such as dance, folk games, and traditional festivals can create unique tourism products. Transforming ox racing and Ngo boat racing into flagship cultural-tourism events could enhance regional branding (Hai & Thanh, 2020) [7]. UNESCO (2019) [14] also highlights that the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is a vital driver for sustainable tourism in ethnic minority communities (UNESCO, 2019) [14].

*Fourth*, improve ecological environments and attract investment.

Ecological protection must be prioritized by respecting natural resources and avoiding damage from unplanned renovations or construction. Environmental awareness campaigns for both Khmer communities and visitors can promote sustainable waste management and biodiversity protection, thereby reducing negative impacts. Strategic, transparent investment planning in infrastructure—particularly transportation—will facilitate accessibility to Khmer community-based tourism sites. Encouraging public–private partnerships and patient capital from investors is crucial, as community-based tourism often

targets niche markets rather than mass tourism (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009) [5].

*Fifth*, intensify promotion, networking, and supplementary activities.

Distinctive tourism products should be designed as thematic tours and small-scale packages to stimulate demand for Khmer cultural tourism, particularly in the short term after COVID-19. Medium term strategies should include regular farmtrip programs, inviting tour operators, travel agencies, and media representatives to experience and promote Khmer community-based tourism. Effective storytelling and presentations can introduce visitors to Khmer culture, history, and community-based activities. In the long term, intersectoral and multi stakeholder linkages are necessary to build sustainable values. Infrastructure improvements including transportation, travel services, and community-based homestays will enable visitors to experience the authentic daily lives of Khmer communities (ASEAN, 2022) [1].

The findings of this study on community-based tourism among the Khmer ethnic minority in the Mekong Delta reveal several critical policy implications for promoting sustainable, inclusive, and culturally grounded tourism development. These implications address the intersection of community empowerment, cultural preservation, and institutional coordination, serving as a foundation for evidence-based policymaking in Vietnam's ethnic and tourism sectors.

*First*, the results highlight the need for a comprehensive human resource development strategy tailored to ethnic minority communities. As the study identifies, one of the key limitations of Khmer community-based tourism initiatives lies in the shortage of skilled human resources and professional management capacity. Local authorities, therefore, should institutionalize targeted training programs that integrate both technical tourism skills and cultural competency. This could include collaboration between universities, vocational schools, and monasteries to train Khmer youth in hospitality, marketing, and digital tourism. As emphasized by Hiwasaki (2006) [8] and Giampiccoli & Mtapuri (2017) [4], capacity building is a decisive factor for sustainable community-based tourism, and policy frameworks should prioritize long-term human capital investment over short-term project-based support.

*Second*, the analysis underscores the importance of policy mechanisms that ensure equitable benefit sharing among community members. Consistent with Lo & Janta (2020) [11] and ASEAN (2022) [1], sustainable community-based tourism depends on transparency and fairness in benefit distribution. Therefore, provincial authorities should develop guidelines for financial accountability and participatory budgeting within community-based tourism cooperatives. Micro-credit funds and community-based enterprises should be established to enable Khmer households especially women, artisans, and monks to actively participate in and profit from tourism ventures. Such mechanisms would not only strengthen local trust but also prevent social inequality and dependency on external investors.

*Third*, cultural preservation policies must be integrated into tourism planning as a core dimension of sustainability. The Khmer community's tangible and intangible heritage such as Theravāda pagodas, traditional performances, and festivals constitutes both the identity and economic value of



community-based tourism. In alignment with UNESCO (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> and ASEAN (2022) <sup>[1]</sup>, national and provincial authorities should adopt regulatory tools to safeguard cultural integrity, including certification systems for cultural authenticity, grants for artisans and performers, and inclusion of cultural impact assessments in tourism investment projects. This approach ensures that tourism does not commodify culture but sustains it through education and community-led initiatives.

*Fourth*, the findings call for institutional coordination and intersectoral governance in community-based tourism development. Fragmented management and overlapping responsibilities among agencies have limited policy effectiveness. To address this, tourism governance should adopt an integrated framework linking the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism with the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, local governments, and the private sector. Partnerships with civil society and research institutions could enhance monitoring and policy feedback mechanisms.

*Finally*, strategic investment in infrastructure and digital transformation is essential for scaling Khmer community-based tourism. Improving transportation, communication networks, and digital platforms would enhance accessibility, market visibility, and resilience to shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The policy implications drawn from this study emphasize the need to transition from ad hoc support to institutionalized, participatory, and culturally sensitive policies. By strengthening human capacity, ensuring equity, safeguarding culture, and promoting coordinated governance, policymakers can transform community-based tourism from a localized initiative into a sustainable development strategy that empowers Khmer communities and enriches the broader Mekong Delta economy.

#### 4. Conclusion

Community-based tourism among the Khmer ethnic minority in the Mekong Delta demonstrates both opportunities and challenges in linking cultural heritage with sustainable development. The region is endowed with diverse ecological landscapes and a rich socio-cultural fabric, particularly characterized by Theravāda Buddhist practices, traditional festivals, distinctive architecture, cuisine, and intangible heritage such as Ngo boat racing and performing arts. These cultural and environmental assets provide a strong foundation for developing community-based tourism that not only generates income but also strengthens community cohesion, preserves local identity, and promotes ecological balance.

However, the findings reveal several persistent limitations that hinder the full realization of this potential. These include insufficient human resources, weak management capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and the absence of a long-term strategic vision. Moreover, fragmented coordination among government agencies and the lack of financial mechanisms to support local participation have restricted the scalability of community-based tourism models. To address these issues, the study proposes a comprehensive approach centered on human resource development, equitable benefit-sharing, environmental sustainability, and intersectoral cooperation. The participation of local communities, supported by academic institutions, enterprises, and policymakers, is essential to ensure that community-based tourism becomes both

inclusive and competitive in the context of Vietnam's broader tourism strategy (ASEAN, 2022; UNESCO, 2019) <sup>[1, 14]</sup>.

From a policy perspective, the results highlight the importance of transitioning from small-scale, project-based initiatives to institutionalized models of community empowerment and cultural preservation. Investments in education, cultural promotion, and environmental management should be considered long-term priorities. These efforts will not only improve Khmer livelihoods but also contribute to the sustainable and inclusive growth of the Mekong Delta region, strengthening Vietnam's role within the global tourism landscape.

Limitations of the study must, however, be acknowledged. The research primarily relies on secondary data and limited qualitative field observations, which, while valuable for establishing contextual understanding, may not fully capture the diversity of community-based tourism practices among different Khmer communities. The lack of quantitative data such as household income comparisons, visitor statistics, and long-term economic outcomes also constrains the ability to measure community-based tourism's broader socioeconomic impact. Furthermore, because the study focuses on selected provinces such as Vinh Long and Can Tho, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all Khmer-populated areas across the Mekong Delta.

Future research directions should therefore focus on expanding empirical investigation and interdisciplinary analysis. First, longitudinal studies that combine quantitative and qualitative approaches would allow for deeper evaluation of the economic, social, and environmental impacts of community-based tourism projects. Second, future research could explore comparative studies between Khmer communities in Vietnam and similar ethnic groups in Cambodia or Thailand to assess regional cooperation opportunities in ethnic tourism. Third, applying participatory action research involving local monks, youth, and women's groups would enhance the understanding of community leadership and gender roles in community-based tourism governance.

In summary, while this study provides important insights into the development of community-based tourism among the Khmer ethnic minority, it also calls for more comprehensive, data-driven, and participatory research to strengthen both academic understanding and policy formulation. By doing so, community-based tourism can truly become a pathway for the Khmer people to preserve their cultural legacy, improve livelihoods, and contribute meaningfully to the sustainable development of the Mekong Delta.

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