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THE TRANSFORMATION OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN VIETNAM: FROM LIVELIHOOD DEVELOPMENT TO RURAL ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of Vietnam's ongoing economic restructuring toward green and sustainable development, community-based tourism is increasingly recognized not merely as a form of tourism but also as an instrument for promoting rural economic development and preserving indigenous cultural values. This article examines the transformation of community-based tourism in Vietnam during 2015–2025 in relation to the country's economic restructuring, while clarifying its role in rural economic restructuring and sustainable development. The study employs a combination of historical and logical methods, policy analysis, comparative analysis, and case study research. Primary sources include Party and State documents, tourism and rural development policies, reports issued by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, UN Tourism, as well as domestic and international studies on community-based tourism. The article argues that the significance of community-based tourism extends beyond expanding tourism activities and generating additional income for local communities. More importantly, it serves as a mechanism for integrating cultural, ecological, and community resources during rural economic restructuring. Based on these findings, the study proposes policy directions to strengthen institutional frameworks, enhance community governance, develop local value chains, and promote stronger linkages between community-based tourism and rural development programs in order to ensure sustainable development in the coming years.

KEYWORDS: community-based tourism; economic restructuring; rural development; sustainable development; Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Community-based tourism emerged in Vietnam in the late 1990s and has gradually become an important component of the country's sustainable tourism development strategy. According to the 2017 Law on Tourism, community-based tourism is defined as a form of tourism developed on the basis of a community's cultural values, managed and operated by local communities, with the benefits generated accruing primarily to the community itself (National Assembly, 2017). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam's tourism sector experienced robust growth, welcoming 18 million international visitors and 85 million domestic tourists in 2019, with total tourism revenue reaching VND 755 trillion

(Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2020). Following a severe downturn during 2020–2021, the tourism industry recovered strongly. By 2025, Vietnam had received more than 21 million international visitors, surpassed the pre-pandemic level and set a new record (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2026, January 8). Domestic tourism also continued to expand, reaching approximately 135.5 million trips in 2025 and remaining a key driver of the sector's growth (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2026, January 8). In recent years, the network of community-based tourism destinations has continued to expand across most of Vietnam's major tourism regions.

Examining community-based tourism in the current context is particularly significant as Vietnam is restructuring its tourism sector toward greater sustainability, reducing its dependence on international markets while strengthening local capacities. Community-based tourism is expected to contribute to narrowing regional development disparities, creating sustainable livelihoods for ethnic minority communities, and preserving cultural heritage.

Although community-based tourism in Vietnam has attracted considerable scholarly attention, existing studies have largely focused on poverty reduction, cultural preservation, or local tourism development. Relatively few have examined community-based tourism from the perspective of rural economic restructuring and its role in the country's sustainable development strategy. Addressing this research gap, this article analyzes the development of community-based tourism in Vietnam during the period 2015–2025, highlighting the transformation of the model before and after 2020, while assessing its role in rural economic restructuring, the transition toward a green economy, and the New Rural Development Program. Based on these findings, the article proposes several policy directions to strengthen the role of community-based tourism as a key component of Vietnam's national sustainable development strategy in the years ahead.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Community-based tourism began to attract scholarly attention in the 1980s, when the limitations of mass tourism became increasingly evident, including the overexploitation of natural resources, unequal distribution of benefits, and the erosion of local cultural identities. Consequently, academic perspectives gradually shifted from viewing tourism solely as an economic activity to recognizing it as an instrument for community development and sustainable development.

One of the pioneering and most influential works in this field is *Tourism: A Community Approach* by Peter E. Murphy (1985). Murphy argues that tourism should be understood as an industry closely embedded within local communities, where residents are not merely recipients of tourism's impacts but active participants in planning, management, and benefit-sharing. He further contends that the success of tourism development depends on effective collaboration among government authorities, businesses, and local communities, while emphasizing that community support is a prerequisite for the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations (Murphy, 1985). Building on this perspective,

community-based tourism is regarded not simply as a tourism product but as a participatory model of development governance grounded in community engagement.

Building on Murphy's perspective, Scheyvens (1999) developed the theory of community empowerment as a framework for assessing the effectiveness of community-based tourism initiatives. According to Scheyvens, a tourism project can generate meaningful developmental outcomes only when local communities exercise control over tourism activities and share equitably in the benefits arising from tourism development. The author identifies four dimensions of empowerment: economic empowerment, psychological empowerment, social empowerment, and political empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). This analytical framework has become one of the principal theoretical foundations for community-based tourism research, as it shifts the focus of evaluation from revenue growth to the quality of development and the enhancement of community capacity.

Parallel to the evolution of community-based tourism theory was the emergence of the concept of sustainable development. In *Our Common Future* (1987), the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) offered the widely accepted definition of sustainable development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This concept provided the foundation for a shift in tourism development from maximizing economic growth to balancing three interrelated pillars: economic efficiency, social equity, and environmental protection. In the context of community-based tourism, sustainable development is reflected not only in its capacity to generate employment and increase local incomes but also in its contribution to preserving cultural identity, conserving natural resources, and strengthening community resilience to socio-economic changes.

In recent years, the theory of Responsible Tourism has further expanded the conceptual approach to sustainable tourism development. Goodwin (2024) argues that sustainability cannot be achieved if stakeholders merely pursue aspirational goals or rhetorical commitments; rather, it requires concrete action and accountability for the economic, social, and environmental impacts generated by tourism. From this perspective, responsibility extends beyond governments to include businesses, tourists, and local communities. The ultimate goal of Responsible Tourism is "to create better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit" (Goodwin, 2024). This approach is particularly relevant in the context of post-COVID-19 tourism recovery, where effective governance and stakeholder accountability have become essential prerequisites for ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations.

From a policy-making perspective, Hall argues that the paradox of sustainable tourism lies in the fact that, although the concept has been widely embraced in development strategies, its environmental and social impacts continue to intensify when policy interventions are confined to technical or instrumental adjustments rather than addressing the underlying development model. Hall emphasizes the need to

move beyond technical fixes toward fundamental changes in development thinking and governance, arguing that sustainable development should serve as the guiding principle of tourism policy rather than merely a supplementary objective (Hall, 2011).

In Vietnam, several case studies have documented the unequal distribution of benefits among households participating in community-based tourism, particularly in destinations that rely heavily on external tour operators. This highlights the need to analyze community-based tourism not only as a livelihood strategy but also as a multi-stakeholder governance framework.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a combination of historical research methods to examine the development of community-based tourism in Vietnam within the broader context of economic restructuring. First, the historical method is used to reconstruct the evolution of community-based tourism across different periods, while tracing changes in policy and development models before and after 2020. The logical method is applied to analyze the internal structure of community-based tourism, with particular attention to the relationships among the state, businesses, and local communities, the mechanisms of benefit-sharing, and the interaction between economic development objectives and the preservation of cultural and environmental values.

In addition, policy analysis is employed to examine the evolution of the institutional framework governing community-based tourism through key Party and State policy documents, particularly the 2017 Law on Tourism, the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030, and the 2024 Community-Based Tourism Development Project. The comparative method is used to contrast the development of community-based tourism before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby identifying changes in its objectives, development approaches, and role in the national economy. Furthermore, the study adopts a case study approach by drawing on selected examples from different localities to illustrate major development trends and practical challenges, providing the basis for proposing policy directions to promote the sustainable development of community-based tourism.

The Evolution of the Policy Framework for Community-Based Tourism in Vietnam

Vietnam's policy framework for community-based tourism has evolved alongside changing perspectives on tourism development—from viewing tourism primarily as a service industry that exploits natural and cultural resources to recognizing it as an instrument for promoting rural development, preserving cultural heritage, and supporting sustainable economic restructuring. This evolution can be divided into four major phases.

The first phase (2005–2010) marked the establishment of the initial legal foundations for community-based tourism. The 2005 Law on Tourism was the first legal document to establish the principle of sustainable tourism development by linking tourism development with resource conservation, environmental protection, and the safeguarding of community interests (National Assembly, 2005).

Although the Law did not explicitly employ the term community-based tourism, it recognized the participation of local communities in tourism activities and identified them as key stakeholders in the tourism development process. Building on this legal foundation, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism issued Decision No. 1483/QĐ-BVHTTDL in 2009, assigning the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism to formulate a Community-Based Tourism Development Project integrated with poverty reduction and rural economic restructuring through 2020 (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2009). This policy document demonstrates that, from its earliest stage of institutionalization, community-based tourism was conceived not merely as a tourism product but also as a policy instrument for promoting rural development and improving local livelihoods.

The second phase (2011–2016) marked the integration of community-based tourism into Vietnam's national tourism development strategy. The Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2020, with a Vision to 2030, approved under Decision No. 2473/QĐ-TTg in 2011, identified tourism as a key economic sector while emphasizing the principles of sustainable development, cultural heritage preservation and promotion, environmental protection, and regional connectivity. The Strategy also called for the development of distinctive tourism products based on local resource endowments and cultural identity, laying the foundation for the emergence of numerous community-based tourism initiatives in mountainous areas, ethnic minority regions, and rural communities (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2011). Nevertheless, during this period, community-based tourism was largely approached as a component of sustainable tourism development rather than through a dedicated policy framework. A major turning point came in 2017 with the adoption of Resolution No. 08-NQ/TW by the Politburo, which identified tourism as a key economic sector of the national economy. The Resolution affirmed that tourism development should contribute to economic restructuring, the preservation of cultural heritage, the improvement of people's livelihoods, and the promotion of local communities' role in tourism development (Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2017). In the same year, the 2017 Law on Tourism marked a significant milestone by formally incorporating the concept of community-based tourism into Vietnam's legal framework for the first time. The Law defines community-based tourism as a form of tourism developed on the basis of a community's cultural values, managed and operated by local communities, with the benefits accruing to the communities themselves. It further stipulates that tourism development should safeguard the interests of the nation, local communities, tourists, and businesses, while encouraging the development of tourism products that actively involve local residents and preserve indigenous cultural values (National Assembly, 2017). This represented a landmark in the institutionalization of community-based tourism within Vietnam's national legal framework.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the policy framework was further expanded to integrate community-based tourism into Vietnam's broader strategy for sustainable development and economic restructuring. The Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030, promulgated under Decision No. 147/QĐ-TTg in 2020, identifies green tourism, responsible tourism, and inclusive tourism development as strategic priorities. It also recognizes tourism as a catalyst for the growth of other

economic sectors and as a driver of modern economic restructuring (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2020). Subsequently, Decision No. 1719/QĐ-TTg of 2021, approving the National Target Program for the Socio-Economic Development of Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas for the 2021–2030 period (Phase I: 2021–2025), designated cultural preservation linked with community-based tourism development as a key component of regional development. This policy further expanded the role of community-based tourism in poverty reduction and local economic development (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2021).

The most significant policy milestone of this phase was Decision No. 3222/QĐ-BVHTTDL, issued in 2024, approving the Community-Based Tourism Development Project in Vietnam. This was the first legal instrument to establish a relatively comprehensive policy framework for community-based tourism. The Project sets out strategic objectives to strengthen the national brand of Vietnam's community-based tourism, promote its integration with the New Rural Development Program, improve local livelihoods, ensure equitable benefit-sharing among stakeholders, advance digital transformation, standardize service quality, and develop professional community-based tourism villages. It also emphasizes the integration of community-based tourism development with the National Target Programs on New Rural Development, Sustainable Poverty Reduction, and the Socio-Economic Development of Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2024).

Overall, Vietnam's policy framework for community-based tourism has evolved toward greater comprehensiveness, progressing from its integration into tourism development and poverty reduction policies to the establishment of a dedicated policy system closely aligned with sustainable development and economic restructuring. This transformation reflects a broader shift in policy thinking, whereby community-based tourism is no longer viewed merely as a livelihood support model but is increasingly recognized as a strategic instrument for mobilizing cultural resources, promoting rural economic development, and advancing the country's sustainable development goals.

The Transformation of Community-Based Tourism Before and After 2020

Community-based tourism in Vietnam first emerged in the 1990s in several localities endowed with distinctive natural landscapes and rich ethnic cultural heritage, including Hòa Bình, Lào Cai, and Quảng Nam (Bùi, 2015). However, it was not until the 2015–2019 period, alongside the rapid expansion of Vietnam's tourism industry, that community-based tourism entered a phase of accelerated growth and nationwide expansion. As international tourist arrivals increased from 7.94 million in 2015 to more than 18 million in 2019, while domestic tourism reached 85 million trips and total tourism revenue rose to approximately VND 755 trillion, many localities increasingly embraced community-based tourism as a strategy for diversifying tourism products and making more effective use of the cultural and ecological resources of rural and mountainous areas (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2020).

A defining feature of this period was that community-based tourism was viewed primarily as a means of livelihood development and poverty reduction rather than as an independent tourism development strategy. As stated in the Vietnam Community Based Tourism Handbook, "CBT provides visitors with an experience of local life, in which local communities are directly involved in tourism activities and get socio- economic benefits from tourism activities and take responsibility for protecting the natural resources, environment and local culture" (European Union Funded Environmentally and Socially Responsible Tourism Programme [ESRT], 2013). To achieve these objectives, the ESRT proposed a market-oriented development model consisting of five steps: identifying market demand, assessing community resources, engaging relevant stakeholders, developing tourism products, and monitoring and refining implementation. Within this framework, local communities are positioned as the principal actors in the development process rather than merely the beneficiaries of tourism development (ESRT, 2013).

With support from international development programs, numerous community-based tourism initiatives were established in ethnic minority areas across the Northwest, Central Vietnam, the Central Highlands, and the Mekong Delta (ESRT, 2021). ESRT, launched in 2011, directly supported the development of pilot community-based tourism models in many localities. It also produced practical handbooks, training programs, and management tools to strengthen community capacity. Over its six years of implementation, the project delivered 460 training courses to 13,276 participants and played a significant role in mainstreaming the concept of responsible tourism into Vietnam's tourism development policy (Hanoimoi, 2016).

The rapid expansion of community-based tourism during this period is reflected in its growing scale. By 2020, Vietnam had approximately 300 community-based tourism villages and hamlets, along with more than 5,000 homestay establishments capable of accommodating nearly 100,000 guests, of which over 2,000 met official tourism service standards (Travel News, 2020). These initiatives were concentrated primarily in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous Region, the North Central Coast, the Central Highlands, and the Mekong Delta, where traditional cultural heritage and natural landscapes have been relatively well preserved.

Despite these encouraging achievements, the development of community-based tourism prior to 2020 exhibited several structural constraints. First, most initiatives were established through government-funded or internationally supported projects and therefore remained dependent on external resources, with limited capacity for self-sustained operation after project completion. Second, tourism products remained relatively homogeneous, focusing largely on homestay accommodation, cultural performances, and community-based experiential activities, while linkages with tour operators and tourism markets were still limited. Third, the economic benefits generated by tourism were not distributed equitably within local communities, as households located in more accessible areas or possessing greater investment capacity were able to capture substantially more opportunities than those in more remote locations.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 delivered an unprecedented shock to the global tourism industry, including that of Vietnam. For community-based tourism, however, the pandemic represented more than a decline in visitor numbers and tourism revenue; it also served as a catalyst for a fundamental shift in development thinking. Whereas prior to 2020 community-based tourism was viewed primarily as a mechanism for livelihood support, poverty reduction, and the utilization of indigenous cultural resources, in the post-pandemic period it has increasingly been recognized as a key component of sustainable development, community resilience, and rural economic restructuring.

During 2020–2021, tourism activities came to an almost complete standstill as a result of pandemic control measures and international border closures. According to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (2022), international tourist arrivals to Vietnam fell to approximately 3.8 million in 2020, representing a 78% decline compared with 2019. Consequently, many community-based tourism destinations that relied heavily on international visitors were forced either to suspend operations or to shift to alternative livelihood activities (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2022). This experience exposed the structural weaknesses of the pre-pandemic development model, particularly its dependence on international markets, the small scale of tourism operations, limited community governance capacity, and the absence of effective mechanisms for responding to crises.

Nevertheless, it was precisely under these circumstances that a growing body of research highlighted the distinctive advantages of community-based tourism over conventional forms of mass tourism. An International Labour Organization (ILO) report identifies community-based tourism as an integral component of responsible tourism, capable of generating sustainable employment, strengthening community capacities, and improving local livelihoods through a tourism value chain approach. The report further emphasizes that the long-term effectiveness of community-based tourism depends on local governance capacity, collaboration among stakeholders, and continuous capacity building across the entire tourism value chain. At the same time, diversified livelihood strategies associated with community-based tourism can help households reduce their vulnerability when tourism activities are disrupted (ILO, 2017).

The pandemic also prompted a significant shift in the approach of government policymakers. Rather than focusing solely on expanding tourism scale and increasing visitor numbers, post-2020 policies increasingly emphasized the quality of development, destination resilience, and the central role of local communities. This shift is clearly reflected in the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030 (Decision No. 147/QĐ-TTg, 2020), which identifies green tourism, responsible tourism, and inclusive tourism development as the guiding priorities for the sector in the new era. Within this policy framework, community-based tourism is no longer regarded merely as a distinctive tourism product but as a sustainable approach to mobilizing cultural, ecological, and indigenous knowledge resources. The 2021–2025 period has witnessed the repositioning of community-based tourism within Vietnam's national development strategy, linking it more closely with the New Rural Development Program, the green economy, cultural preservation, and local economic restructuring. The Vietnam Tourism

Development Strategy to 2030 identifies sustainable tourism development as a strategic priority and recognizes local communities as one of the principal actors in the development process. It also emphasizes the need to strengthen public–private partnerships and enhance the roles of businesses and local communities in destination governance. Furthermore, the Strategy sets the objective of making tourism a key economic sector by 2030, contributing directly 15–17% of GDP, creating approximately 8.5 million jobs, and developing high- value-added tourism products rooted in local culture and indigenous resources (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2020).

Building on this policy foundation, the 2021–2025 period witnessed the introduction of two major policy initiatives of particular significance for community-based tourism. The first was Project 6 under the National Target Program for the Socio-Economic Development of Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas, while the second was the Community-Based Tourism Development Project in Vietnam, issued by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2024. Whereas Project 6 focuses on preserving traditional cultural heritage in conjunction with tourism development, the 2024 Project establishes a long-term strategic framework for standardizing, professionalizing, and developing a national brand for community-based tourism.

The implementation of Project 6 demonstrates that investment in community-based tourism has expanded considerably compared with previous periods. During 2021–2025, at the central level, the program supported the preservation of 15 representative traditional festivals, established 36 cultural preservation models, provided support for 31 community cultural houses and sports facilities, organized more than 40 training courses on culture and tourism, implemented 29 research and intangible cultural heritage restoration projects, established 150 community libraries, and developed five eco-museum models to promote heritage conservation in conjunction with tourism development (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025).

At the local level, the outcomes have been even more pronounced. More than 3,000 community cultural houses and sports facilities in villages and hamlets inhabited by ethnic minority communities have been newly constructed or upgraded. In addition, over 100 traditional festivals have been restored and incorporated into tourism products, while many traditional cultural villages have been improved and transformed into community-based tourism destinations. These initiatives have contributed to the development of cultural–tourism villages and promoted local economic restructuring (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025). These achievements indicate that policy priorities have shifted beyond the development of accommodation facilities and individual tourism services toward investing in cultural infrastructure and community development spaces, thereby establishing a long-term foundation for sustainable tourism development.

Another notable feature of this period is the transition from the concept of individual community-based tourism destinations to that of a community-based tourism ecosystem. According to the Community-Based Tourism Development Project (2024), community-based tourism should be developed through

a process of professionalization, leading to the establishment of community-based tourism craft villages closely linked with the New Rural Development Program, the One Commune One Product (OCOP) Program, the development of cultural industries, and local value chains. The Project also sets out objectives to establish a national brand for Vietnam's community-based tourism, meet ASEAN standards, diversify tourism products, accelerate digital transformation, and progressively position community-based tourism as a flagship product within the national tourism portfolio (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2024). The significance of this expansion, however, extends beyond quantitative growth. More importantly, many localities have shifted from a project-based approach dependent on short-term external support to a long-term strategic approach that integrates community-based tourism into regional development planning, the development of distinctive local products, and destination branding. This transition has enabled many community-based tourism initiatives that previously relied on external funding to gradually strengthen their self-reliance and operate more effectively under market-oriented conditions.

The shift in policy also reflects a fundamental change in the way the role of local communities is understood. Whereas residents were previously involved primarily as homestay operators or service providers, recent policies emphasize their role as destination stewards, participating throughout the tourism development process—from resource conservation and product development to destination promotion and benefit-sharing. This approach is consistent with international trends in sustainable tourism development and contributes to strengthening community self-governance and resilience in the face of socio-economic change.

The transformation of community-based tourism in Vietnam since 2020 is clearly illustrated by a number of local initiatives, which demonstrate a broader shift from resource-based tourism development toward approaches centered on cultural values, community participation, and sustainability.

In Pà Cò (Mai Châu, Hòa Bình), community-based tourism has moved beyond its earlier emphasis on accommodation services to focus on preserving and promoting the traditional brocade weaving of the H'Mông people. Visitor experiences now incorporate weaving demonstrations, indigo dyeing, cultural storytelling, and the presentation of local handicrafts as an integrated tourism experience. This model has generated additional income for local residents while contributing to the preservation of a traditional craft that was at risk of disappearing. It exemplifies the transition from resource-based tourism toward a creative economy founded on cultural heritage (Trần, 2025).

In the Central Highlands, Mơ Hra Village (Gia Lai) provides another representative example of integrating the preservation of Bahnar cultural heritage with community-based tourism development. Cultural assets—including the Central Highlands gong culture, the traditional rong communal house, brocade weaving, traditional cuisine, and community cultural practices—have been revitalized and incorporated into tourism products with the direct participation of local residents. Rather than pursuing

a commercialization-oriented model, this initiative places the community at the center of heritage conservation, tourism management, and benefit-sharing, thereby strengthening both heritage stewardship and sustainable livelihoods for indigenous communities (Nguyễn, 2023).

In the Mekong Delta, by contrast, community-based tourism has developed around riverine ecosystems in combination with orchard culture, traditional craft villages, and agricultural livelihoods. Visitor experiences—including orchard tours, floating market visits, traditional cooking, homestay accommodation, and participation in agricultural activities—have diversified tourism products while creating opportunities for local residents to participate directly in the tourism value chain. This approach demonstrates that community-based tourism contributes not only to preserving the cultural identity of the riverine region but also to promoting rural economic restructuring by increasing the share of the service sector and the experience-based economy (Luu & Sui, n.d.).

As Vietnam's tourism industry has recovered strongly, the role of community-based tourism has likewise expanded. During the 2021–2025 period, Vietnam welcomed nearly 55 million international visitors and almost 500 million domestic tourist trips, generating an estimated VND 3.2 quadrillion in tourism revenue and contributing a stable 6–8% of national GDP. In 2025 alone, international arrivals reached approximately 21.5 million, domestic tourism totaled 135 million trips, and total tourism receipts were estimated at around VND 1 quadrillion (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2026, January 22). Although these figures refer to the tourism sector as a whole, the industry's recovery has created favorable conditions for many community-based tourism destinations to expand their operations, diversify their visitor markets, and gradually shift from a model heavily dependent on international tourists to one serving both domestic and international markets.

It is evident that, after 2020, the transformation of community-based tourism in Vietnam has been reflected not only in its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic but, more importantly, in its repositioning within the country's national development strategy. From a model primarily aimed at generating livelihoods and reducing poverty, community-based tourism has been redefined as a strategic instrument for advancing sustainable development, preserving cultural heritage, fostering the cultural industries, and promoting rural economic restructuring. This transformation has also laid the foundation for community-based tourism to evolve from a niche tourism product into an integrated driver of development in Vietnam's new phase of socio-economic development.

Community-Based Tourism in the Process of Rural Economic Restructuring

In the context of rural economic restructuring aimed at enhancing value addition and promoting sustainable development, community-based tourism has increasingly been recognized as a key driver of the transition from an economy primarily dependent on agricultural production to a diversified, multi-value economy that integrates agriculture, services, culture, and experiential activities. The Socio-Economic Development Strategy for 2021–2030 emphasizes the need to restructure the economy through innovation, the promotion of cultural and human values, the development of the

digital economy, and the effective utilization of the comparative advantages of different regions to generate new sources of growth. In rural areas, this strategic orientation entails a shift from a production-centered approach to the development of a diversified rural economy, in which tourism serves as a service sector capable of connecting local resources with modern consumer markets (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021).

This policy orientation was further elaborated in Resolution No. 19-NQ/TW, adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 2022, which calls for a transition from agricultural production to agricultural economic development, the organization of production along value chains, and the balanced development of agriculture, industry, and services to create local employment opportunities and improve rural incomes. The Resolution also emphasizes the integration of rural economic development with the preservation of cultural heritage and ethnic identities, while expanding employment in the service sector, thereby facilitating the structural shift of the rural labor force from agriculture to higher value-added economic activities (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2022).

Building on this policy orientation, Decision No. 922/QĐ-TTg approving the Rural Tourism Development Program under the New Rural Development Program for the 2021–2025 Period identifies tourism development as a key instrument for shifting from an agriculture-centered production model to a rural economic development model. The Program promotes the integrated use of agricultural resources, traditional craft villages, cultural heritage, and natural landscapes to create distinctive tourism products, enhance the value of local resources, and expand opportunities for service-sector development. Rather than generating value solely through the production of tangible goods, local communities can increase their incomes by providing accommodation, food services, guiding, traditional craft experiences, and cultural activities, thereby fostering an experience-based and culturally driven rural economy rooted in indigenous resources (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022).

In this context, community-based tourism should be understood not merely as a tourism product but as a strategic instrument for advancing rural economic restructuring through the diversification of livelihoods, the enhancement of the value of cultural and natural resources, and the sustainable reallocation of labor from the agricultural sector to the service sector. It also provides the foundation for an integrated model of rural development in which economic growth is closely aligned with cultural preservation and improvements in the quality of life of local communities.

One of the most significant contributions of community-based tourism to rural economic restructuring is its role in fostering local value chains through the integration of agriculture, traditional craft villages, One Commune One Product products, cultural heritage, and tourism services. Unlike development models based on the exploitation of individual resources, community-based tourism enables local assets to be integrated into a broader economic ecosystem, in which value is created not only through production but also through visitor experiences, cultural heritage, and local identity. As emphasized in

the Community-Based Tourism Development Project in Vietnam (2024), the development of community-based tourism should be closely linked with the New Rural Development Program, the One Commune One Product Program, the preservation of traditional craft villages, and the development of cultural industries in order to establish sustainable value chains, enhance destination competitiveness, and increase local incomes (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2024).

From an international perspective, the World Tourism Organization argues that rural tourism and community-based tourism can achieve genuine sustainability only when they foster linkages among local economic sectors, thereby enhancing the value of agricultural products, handicrafts, and cultural heritage through tourism experiences, consumption, and related services. The Tourism for Rural Development Programme Impact Report 2021–2024 further emphasizes that rural tourism can generate employment, stimulate local economic development, promote social inclusion, and preserve the cultural and natural assets of local communities. The report also highlights the importance of tourism value chain development, improved market access, product development, and strengthened community resilience as essential components of sustainable tourism development (World Tourism Organization, 2024).

Beyond its economic impacts, community-based tourism also strengthens the endogenous capacity of local communities by enhancing their participation in destination governance. Unlike conventional tourism development models, community members in community-based tourism are not merely beneficiaries but active participants in product development, resource management, benefit-sharing, and the monitoring of tourism activities. A study of the legal framework for community-based tourism development in Hà Giang Province found that many initiatives have operated effectively through collaboration among local authorities, businesses, and local communities. Nevertheless, governance capacity remains uneven, coordination mechanisms are insufficiently institutionalized, and there is still a lack of evaluation standards tailored to local conditions. (Phi & Pham, 2024).

In the context of international integration, the adoption of sustainable tourism standards such as the ASEAN Community-Based Tourism Standard and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council Criteria has become an important strategy for improving destination governance. These standards emphasize four core dimensions: sustainable management, socio-economic benefits for local communities, cultural heritage conservation, and environmental protection (ASEAN, 2016; Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2019).

Challenges and Future Directions for the Sustainable Development of Community-Based Tourism

Despite the significant progress achieved during the 2015–2025 period, particularly in the post-COVID-19 recovery, community-based tourism in Vietnam continues to face a range of institutional, resource-related, and capacity constraints. These challenges not only affect the performance of

individual tourism destinations but also underscore the need to further reposition community-based tourism within the broader strategies for rural economic development and sustainable development.

First, although the policy framework for community-based tourism has become increasingly comprehensive, it remains fragmented across multiple policy programs and administrative sectors, including tourism development, the New Rural Development Program, cultural heritage conservation, and the National Target Program for the Socio-Economic Development of Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas. The absence of an integrated coordination mechanism has limited the effective mobilization of resources and hindered the establishment of a coherent governance system for community-based tourism development. Although the Community-Based Tourism Development Project in Vietnam (2024) has established an initial nationwide strategic framework, its implementation at the local level still requires more specific management standards, monitoring mechanisms, and evaluation systems tailored to the characteristics of different regions.

Second, the quality of community-based tourism products continues to vary considerably across localities. Many initiatives still rely primarily on natural landscapes or basic accommodation services, while local cultural assets have yet to be transformed into high-value tourism products with meaningful visitor experiences. In some destinations, the replication of standardized models, the commercialization of traditional festivals, the superficial presentation of cultural performances, and the limited substantive participation of local communities remain evident. These practices diminish the distinctiveness of destinations and may ultimately undermine the preservation of traditional cultural heritage.

Third, the capacity of local communities remains a major constraint on the sustainable development of community-based tourism. Most participating households operate on a small scale and face limitations in management skills, foreign language proficiency, digital transformation, and market access. At the same time, collaboration among local communities, businesses, and local authorities has yet to become sufficiently institutionalized, resulting in unequal benefit-sharing and limiting the effective participation of local residents as key actors in destination governance. Similar challenges have been identified in a study of the governance framework for community-based tourism in Hà Giang Province, which emphasizes the need to establish community-based governance mechanisms and a system of standards tailored to Vietnam's specific conditions (Phi & Pham, 2024).

In this context, the future development of community-based tourism should be situated within the broader process of integrated and sustainable rural economic restructuring. First, priority should be given to transforming individual community-based tourism destinations into comprehensive community-based tourism ecosystems, in which tourism is closely linked with agriculture, One Commune One Product products, traditional craft villages, cultural industries, and local value chains. Such an approach not only generates additional income through tourism services but also enhances the value of agricultural products, handicrafts, and cultural heritage.

At the same time, strengthening the endogenous capacity of local communities should be a key priority through human resource development, support for digital transformation, the enhancement of management skills, and the establishment of transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms. The adoption of the ASEAN Community-Based Tourism Standard and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council Criteria should also be carefully adapted to Vietnam's specific context in order to improve destination governance and enhance the international competitiveness of community-based tourism.

Finally, community-based tourism should be recognized as a strategic instrument for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Beyond generating livelihoods for local communities, it contributes to preserving cultural heritage, strengthening local identity, promoting a green economy, and enhancing community resilience to socio-economic change. When effectively integrated into regional development strategies and rural economic restructuring programs, community-based tourism can become a key driver of inclusive, innovative, and sustainable rural development.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on a synthesis of the theoretical literature, an analysis of the policy framework, and an assessment of the development of community-based tourism during the 2015–2025 period, this study finds that community-based tourism in Vietnam has undergone a significant transformation in terms of its objectives, organizational model, and position within the country's national development strategy. Prior to 2020, community-based tourism was primarily promoted as a mechanism for livelihood generation, poverty reduction, and cultural preservation in disadvantaged localities. However, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the introduction of major policy initiatives such as the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030 and the Rural Tourism Development Program under the New Rural Development Program, community-based tourism has been repositioned within a broader development framework that integrates rural economic development, cultural heritage conservation, local value chain development, and sustainable development. As Vietnam continues to restructure its economy toward sustainability, green growth, and higher value-added production, community-based tourism has increasingly demonstrated its role not merely as a tourism product but as a strategic instrument for socio-economic development in rural areas.

The findings indicate that community-based tourism has contributed to the transformation of the rural economy from one based primarily on agricultural production to a diversified, multi-value economy that integrates agriculture, services, cultural industries, and the experience economy. At the same time, its development has strengthened local governance capacity, enhanced community participation in resource management and benefit-sharing, and facilitated the formation of value chains built upon indigenous cultural and ecological resources. Nevertheless, the study also identifies several persistent challenges, including uneven product quality, limited community governance capacity, an incomplete institutional framework, and the risk of cultural commodification in the absence of appropriate

governance mechanisms. Accordingly, the future success of community-based tourism in Vietnam should not be measured solely by the number of destinations or tourist arrivals, but by its capacity to foster self-reliant local communities, develop value chains rooted in indigenous cultural resources, and create sustainable rural development spaces that support the country's broader process of modernization.

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