



## PROFESSIONAL VOLUNTEERING-BASED TOURISM AND ITS ROLE IN NARROWING THE INTRA-STATE DEVELOPMENT GAP IN ASEAN COUNTRIES: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN CAMBODIA

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### ABSTRACT

Booming tourism industry recently has contributed significantly to the socio-economic development and structural change of many countries in the world, especially those of emerging economies. However, negative impacts resulted from tourism development of whatever forms – community-based tourism, ecotourism, etc. – should not be neglected. Thus, the tourism forms that can maximize the positive environmental and socio-economic effects while potentially minimizing the negative ones in the destinations where the host communities, tourists, and tourism enterprises interact are strongly encouraged. A tourism model named Professional Volunteering-based Tourism (PVBT) can become one. Based on the 2-week pilot study in rural areas around Cambodia, it can be seen that the PVBT is a highly feasible tourism form, remarkably benefiting the local people. In this paper, the author firstly describes what such a model is, followed by its organization and operation. The paper then examines the role that PVBT can play in community development, particularly in reducing the development gap between rural dwellers and urban ones, with a set of convincing proofs observed and collected in the two provinces in Cambodia where the pilot studies had been carried out in Kampong Speu and Kandal Provinces (Cambodia) in August and September 2013 respectively.

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism, travel for sightseeing, experiencing social and cultural manners, recreation, instruction, or obtaining a particular service or activity that is not available at home, often within a short period and in organized groups (World Tourism Organization, 1995; Redmond, 2009). Over last two decades, tourism industry, also called “de-smoked industry,” has become one of the fastest growing industries worldwide, contributing significantly to economic growth of many countries. According to Endresen

(1999), though the exact size and growth of tourism is still controversial, it “clearly is one of the largest industries in the world, if not the absolute largest,” generating hundreds of million jobs and billions USD in world gross domestic production (GDP) in 1999 (1999:1).

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the number of international tourists has more than double in less than 20 years, from 425 million in mid-1990s to 982 million in 2008; and this figure continued to rise, reaching 1.035 million

in 2012. Also, the UNWTO forecasted that this figure could rise to 1.4 million tourists by 2020 and then 1.6 million in 2030. Additionally, the contribution of tourism to the world's GDP increases more and more, reaching 9% of GDP worldwide in 2012, equivalent to US\$6,379 billion. In countries where tourism is just a comparatively small sector, the contribution of tourism to the GDP approximately 2% per year while countries, particularly emerging economies, where tourism is an important pillar of the economy, the importance of tourism tends to be higher and higher (UNWTO, 2013).

However, like other forms of industrial development, tourism can also result in a wave of serious problems, for example, social dislocation, loss of local cultural identity, and ecological degradation, etc. This definitely involves “*all tourism activities of whatever motivation – holidays, business travel, conferences, adventure travel and ecotourism – need to be sustainable*” (UNESCO, undated).

The concept of “sustainable tourism” has grown out of the concept of sustainable development which has risen from the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1986 (Endresen, 1999). Sustainable tourism is defined as “*tourism that respects both local people and the travelers, cultural heritage and the environment*” (UNESCO, undated).

Recently, several sustainable tourism models have been applying in many countries around the Southeast Asian region, such as nature-based tourism or ecotourism (Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brunei, etc.), community-based tourism (Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, etc.), agro-tourism (Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, etc.), Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) tourism (Vietnam, Thailand, Brunei, and Indonesia), etc. Among such these tourist activities, community-based tourism (CBT) is now regarded as “the hottest tourism model” worldwide.

CBT is a tourism form organized by the local community in co-operation with tour operators in order to bring themselves economic benefits by showcasing the travelers their native natural and cultural specific characteristics (Asia Foundation, 2012). In fact, CBT emerges from a community development strategy, using tourism as a tool to strengthen the ability of rural community organizations that manage tourism resources with the participation of the locals.

However, it clearly can be seen that after some a decade and a half since the worldwide emergence

of CBT, it has benefited host communities, particularly poor rural inhabitants, very little. Instead, they have suffered from a spectrum of negative impacts that have damaged their natural resources and changed their society and culture in multiple ways (Suansri, 2003). This means although CBT is regarded as a perfect tourism form today, it is neither a miracle cure nor knight in shining armor that is to come to benefit the community. In other words, if carelessly applied, CBT can result in unexpected problems in terms of nature and society (Asia Foundation, 2012).

Therefore, the contemporary sustainable tourism industry always involves a novel form that can bring the host communities as many benefits as possible in sustainable harmony, and that can manage effectively negative impacts it may result in (Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002).

In relation to studying about “Tourism for Community”, the author had spent two weeks to make a fact-researching trip regarding the tourism model that may be called “Professional Volunteering-based Tourism” (PVBT) in Samraong Tong District, Kampong Speu Province and Lvea Aem District, Kandal Province (Cambodia). Such a programme had been held from 24 August to 9 September 2013. Most of participants were young professionals from around the ASEAN countries, including Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. This is the most important method for this study as it allows the author to experience reality and collect evidences in order to examine the feasibility of PVBT. In addition, in order to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) involved in the PVBT, the SWOT Analysis (alternatively SWOT Matrix) was utilized to analyze the possible advantages and foreseeable challenges to the development of the model. Also, the SWOT showcases clues helping the author suggest basic solutions for the effective development of the PVBT.

In the following sections, the paper firstly conceptualizes the PVBT as a new form of tourism, including its concept, goals, and in what ways it can be organized. The paper then identifies possible socio-economic spheres that have potential to develop the tourism model, particularly the healthcare service, educational, and agricultural sectors. The paper ends with an assessment on the role of PVBT in contributing to narrowing the development gap between the rural and urban areas.

## 2 PVBT: CONCEPT, GOALS, AND ORGANIZATION

### 2.1 Concept of PVBT

Professional Volunteering-based Tourism (PVBT) is a CBT form designed to bring together tourists from home and/or abroad, who are keen on helping societies in different places and expert in a few key sectors including, but not limited to, health service, education and agriculture, to not only experience rural people's traditional culture and livelihood but also contribute to the local socio-economic development by undertaking voluntary community work in areas of their expertise.

In recent times, volunteerism has gained recognition and popularity because of its noble concept of helping people by providing aid to the community in need. It actually benefits both those who receive assistance as well as the volunteers themselves. In this tourism initiative, the tourists are targeted to undertake volunteer work in groups because of their aspiration, and most importantly, because through such activity, not only do they have valuable opportunities to strengthen the ability to communicate and build cultural understanding and connections among diverse groups made up of those who come from diversified professional background, but they will have great chances to contribute to nation building.

In addition, CBT has provided tourists with opportunities to be involved in community development efforts over short periods, and in small doses. In fact, tourists who are taking part in CBT tours are merely visitors, doing sightseeing and a bit of shopping. This will result in most of revenue obtained from tourists may belong to tour operators while the locals just share a little profit gained from tourists' purchasing local hand-made goods and souvenirs. Therefore, the model of PVBT should be encouraged to develop to ensure that the host communities can be benefited more and more.

Also, it is quite important to note that PVBT is available for everyone from young through old, from home and abroad. In order to make the tour more meaningful and meet its proposed goals (*see section 2.2*), however, tourists who are majoring in health service, education, and agriculture are encouraged. They will play a backbone role while the others who are not expert in such three fields will support them in helping the locals with their own knowledge and delivering mini-workshops.

*So, why are health service, education, and agriculture given top priority?*

As a matter of fact, the ASEAN is made up of agriculture-based countries, except Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. Although it is very rich in natural resources, decades of war and civil conflict have left it one of the late-developed regions in the world. Today, despite relative political stability and strong economic growth, average annual income (GDP per capital) of many countries, notably Myanmar and Cambodia, is just below US\$ 1,000 (2012), with around 21 percent of the region's total population living below the poverty line. In addition to this, over 60 per cent of the total population is in rural areas in which health, agricultural and educational conditions still remain backward (World Bank, 2011, 2012).

*In relation to health service*, around 82 per cent of those who live in rural areas lack access to medical care (World Bank, 2011, 2012). In many countries, such as Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos, the number of clinics and hospitals with state-of-the-art facilities is definitely limited in rural districts. As most of rural inhabitants live on meager income, very little or no fund is set aside for any medical emergencies such as poisoning or severe illnesses that may require treatment at the hospital. For them, many times, even the severely ill get turned away for treatment simply because they cannot meet the amount of cost required. For those who sought care would often finance hospitalization and medication through loans or selling off whatever property they own as treatment can run from tens to thousands of US dollars. Thus, in most cases, health care is not a priority for average people around the region.

*Educationally*, average literacy rate of ASEAN is only 82 per cent of people aged 15 and more (World Bank, 2011, 2012). More importantly, the majority of population around the region (excluding Singapore and Brunei) cannot speak English though English, in fact, has become widely accepted as international language for communication and commerce in most of ASEAN countries, and it would be expected to be common operating language of the association by 2015. Though the Ministries of Education of most ASEAN countries have identified teaching children English as an important objective at school and now they are in the process of formally introducing English language learning into the national curriculum, there are still a few challenges for both teachers and students, especially those who live in remote areas, to adapt to the new language. For example, rural students, unlike their counterparts living in urban areas, always face lack of necessary materials and facilities for learning as well as have not enough opportunity to practise frequently.

*Finally, why agriculture?*

For ASEAN countries (excluding Singapore and Brunei), despite the rapid drop in agricultural rate, it remains an important sector of the region’s economy, contributing to nearly 20 per cent of the region’s GDP and employing the vast majority of workforce (World Bank, 2011, 2012). Many countries, particularly Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, have been well-known as the biggest rice exporters worldwide for about a decade, according to The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). However, the agricultural sector is facing a wave of serious challenges of adverse weather conditions, climate change for instance, freshwater shortage, epidemic diseases, and pestilent insects, etc. which make it difficult for farmers to produce high yield. Moreover, using old-fashioned methods and lack of contemporary agricultural equipment such as, harvesters, cultivators, fertilizers, and pesticides, etc. all make productivity have been low year after year.

There is a sad fact that a number of farmers in Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam who live right in farming areas usually confront seasonal food shortages in dry seasons – times that they cannot farm as severe lack of freshwater for irrigation. This actually makes them more and more uninterested in their rice fields as they constantly have to look for temporary work or any other income-generating activity, which are poorly paid in order to meet their food shortages.

Accordingly, effective irrigation and natural resource management systems and techniques and skills always are urgently required by the farmers who are depending on farming as a main source of income around the region.

**2.2 Goals**

The development of PVBT relies on the basic goal

that brings tourists opportunities to:

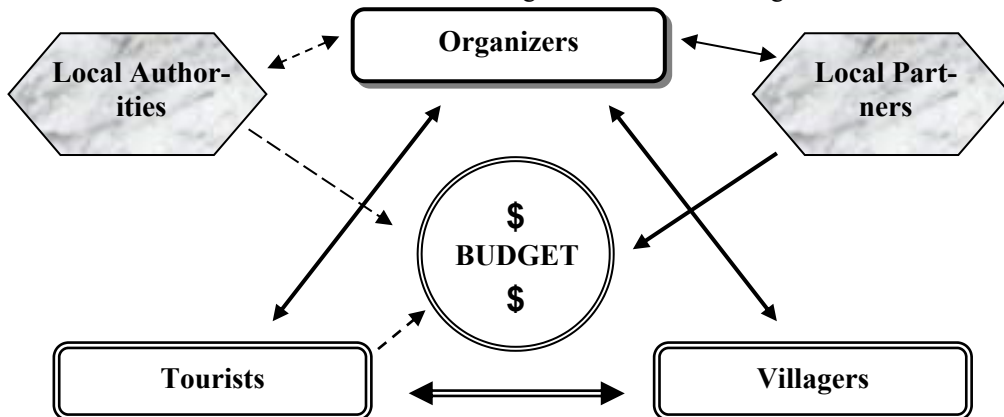
- be immersed with the local culture, food, and customs by doing homestay;
- experience the country life and the locals’ livelihood, and learn a few skills from them;
- provide assistance to the locals in areas of their expertise;
- share their skills and knowledge with the locals through voluntary work and training;
- be inspired and developed a sense of responsibility towards community;
- strengthen skills of communication, teamwork, leadership, etc.;
- and promote mutual understanding and solidarity among them through living and working in groups, and cultural exchange sessions,

and that brings local dwellers precious opportunities to:

- be approached and shared state-of-the-art techniques and methods provided by the tourists;
- be developed skills of communication and foreign languages;
- meet and get in touch with tourists who are from diverse advanced educational background;
- be kept themselves well informed about the latest development of their field;
- be kept up with the times;
- conserve and popularize their traditional customs and cordial lifestyle; and
- break themselves off old-fashioned habits.

**2.3 Organization**

Based on results and organizational experiences gained through the pilot study carried out in Cambodia, the author suggests that the PVBT should be organized as the following model:



**Fig. 1: The organization of PVBT**

The model of PVBT (Fig. 1) is made up of six (6) key components, including:

(1). **Organizers**, usually tour operators, will be in co-operation with the local partners and/or the local authorities in order to establish and operate the PVBT tour – including planning and design phase, working with the local partner organizations to identify projects that meet local needs.

(2). **Local partners**, usually non-government organizations (NGOs), local businesses, and/or other tourism stakeholders, etc. apart from the co-ordination with the organizers, they will play a backbone role in supporting and helping the PVBT tour with their own fund. In other words, they are the key sponsors of the tour and (3) **the budget** they make will be mainly used to meet the local needs, such as buying medicine, agricultural equipment (e.g. hoes, seeds, watering-cans, rat traps, and the likes), etc.

(4). **Local authorities**, like the local sponsors, will support the tour by creating convenient administrative conditions enabling the organizers to deploy and run the tour successfully. Additionally, they are expected to donate a little sum to the tour if applicable.

(5). **Tourists** (*see section 2.1*), usually young professional volunteers who are educators, students or experts majoring in English language teaching, agriculture or healthcare (medicine and pharmacy). They will work in group/team relative to their expertise or they can choose any group to involve in if they believe they are helpful to such a group.

(6). **Villagers** are expected to attend fully activities, especially mini-workshops and training courses hold by the organizers and tourists in order to help them minimize their recent weaknesses and difficulties, and meet the goals mentioned above as well.

### 3 THE ROLE OF PVBT IN NARROWING THE DEVELOPMENT GAP BETWEEN RURAL AREAS AND CITIES

Based on the results and experiences gained through the pilot study organized in Cambodia, we may conclude that not only does the PVBT, if applied carefully and methodically, bring great opportunities for the host communities to improve their own revenue, but it contribute to narrow the development gap between the rural inhabitants and their urban counterparts. This comes of reasons as the following:

Firstly, the majority of rural people around the region, particularly in late-developing countries like

Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, rarely have convenient opportunities to keep up with the times though, in fact, the mass media is more and more widespread in the cities. Televisions are the most prevalent mean of communication in rural areas while internet and mobile connectivity are not always available. However, TV programs bring them updated news and information, and in small doses. Instead, most of programs available on TV usually are music and movies attracting young people in order to help the televisions make more profit by putting TV ads. As a result, most of them, especially farmers, are old-fashioned and ‘unknown’ to state-of-the-art knowledge as well as technology.

Therefore, through communicating, taking part in cultural exchanges, and discussions on educational, healthcare, and agricultural issues with PVBT’s participants who come from cities and other regions from home and abroad, the locals may become more open-minded and be aware of what are taking place around their remote hometown. Also, they recognize that how the world outside their village has developed, and that what they have to give up by themselves and what they should keep and conserve in order to keep up with the times.

Secondly, as the development gap between rural areas and urban ones usually caused by the income difference between them, improving the local economic revenue should be considered firstly. Accordingly, it is believed that the PVBT will become a new solution helping contribute to increase the locals’ earnings as it brings the local people more job opportunities. This is because the participants not only are immersed with activities helping the host community, but also have opportunities to visit the local natural and cultural heritages as well as buy hand-made souvenirs.

Thirdly, the PVBT is quite beneficial to the local people as well as the participants. The interactions between them will foster deeper mutual understanding and as a result, they will become closer and closer to each other. Thanks to the tourists, the locals may reach many great scientific and technological breakthroughs taking place in urban areas, and the tourists in turn will be learned traditional values and customs that have not been westernized yet and preserved by the old villagers through doing homestay. Mutual understanding and sharing are two of the key goals of this tourism model, and they are always regarded as the practical ways to ensure that the gap between rich and poor remains narrow among regions around a nation in particular and around the Southeast Asian region in general.

Besides, the PVBT's participants help contribute significantly to enhancing human development index (HDI) in rural areas in the long term. The result gained through the pilot study in Cambodia is a highly visible example for this. The pilot study has lasted 2 weeks, and one week each in Samrong Tong commune and Lvea Aem commune respectively. Incredibly, after two weeks, the total number of villagers who were examined and treated medically by Healthcare Team made up of doctors and students from universities of medicine and pharmacy is 931 people. Most of them are the elders, women, and children, having not enough money for seeking treatments in hospitals. Educationally, nearly 200 local students (most of them are studying at primary schools) were tutored English language free and received a lot of English books from the Education Team. The last team, Agriculture Team, have been immersed with the locals' farming activities as well as shared new techniques, fertilizers, pest controls, high-yield seeds, hoes, watering cans, and other agricultural materials with the local farmers. Tens of local farmers have been benefited.

Finally, PVBT also helps to bring the locals, especially young people, inspiration and strong motivation in order to fulfill themselves and strive for a more developed life. Take education as an example. The majority of dwellers in remote areas nowadays are of the opinion that children should leave school as soon as possible in order to help their parents make money as well as meet their family's current needs. That is why the literacy rate there is always far lower than that of urban areas even though the children in country-sides may be more fondness for learning than their counterparts in the cities. Thanks to teaching activities carried out by Education Teams of PVBT, the villagers have more evidences to believe that schooling is one of the best ways helping their children keep up with the times indeed.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

The booming tourism industry has become one of the main economic activities as well as resources of local revenue, contributing significantly to the local development in particular, and the overall development of ASEAN in general. However, the negative impacts caused by tourism development definitely indicate that a tourism model which can boost the role of tourists in nation building by helping local communities with practical and helpful work, maximize positive environmental and socio-economic impacts that benefit the local people as well as minimize negative ones obviously need to be encouraged. Professional Volunteering-based

Tourism (PVBT) with its goals and roles should become one. The following is the recapitulation of the major characteristics of the PVBT approach to closing development gap between intra-state areas that this paper has identified:

For one thing, the PVBT appears to have been a new and significant tourism form that allows those young professionals who are willing to help underdeveloped communities in rural remote areas. Through the volunteer activities offered by the program, the participants have opportunities to provide assistance to the locals in areas of their expertise and share their skills and knowledge obtained from university with the host community. They, in turn, will be benefited from experiencing the countryside way of life and learning working skills from local livelihoods. In other words, the PVBT offers the volunteer activities enabling young professionals to contribute their learning to community development while at the same time experiencing benefits from teamwork and immersing in rural way of life.

For another, the PVBT distinguishes itself from prevailing models of mass tourism that merely focus on stakeholders' interests and the pastime of tourists by looking much more at the rights and interests of local communities and the role of participants in nation-building. Because of this, the model appears to focus on the three major social spheres, notably education, healthcare, and agriculture, whose development is still lagging behind, facing remote villagers in their way to integrate into the national mainstream. Volunteers are expected to keep them well informed with the latest development of these fields through applicable volunteer work.

Finally, the results collected from the pilot study in Cambodia indicate that the PVBT, if carefully carried out, may have potential to narrow the existing intra-state development gap and raise a sense of responsibility towards community, promote mutual understanding and solidarity among participants and host community through living and working together. It further helps develop skills of communication and foreign languages for the local farmers. Also, cultural exchange sessions offered by the programme can promote conserving and popularizing local traditional customs and values, and cordial lifestyle while breaking poor villagers off outdated habits and way of life.

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