

# The Sustainable Tourism Development for Decreasing the Inequality at Frontier: Case Study of Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province, Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

The research was highlighted to the Sustainable Tourism Development for Decreasing the Inequality at Frontier: Case Study of Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province. This research conducted to the qualitative method. The objectives were: 1) To study the problems of tourism management in order to decrease the inequality at the border. 2) To create the guidebook and tourism routes in this area and 3) to suggest the pathways of sustainable tourism management to this district. The collective data was focused on groups; such as District Chief, Deputy District Chief, Senior Deputy District Chief, Subdistrict Headman, Village Headman, resort entrepreneurs, and homestay owners, etc. This method planned to analyze the problems or obstacles in this area toward sustainable tourism development. Moreover, the researcher suggested a sustainable tourism strategy for this area.

The results were found: WanYai district is a small district. Due to a field survey in this area, this district has the potential abilities because of the variety of tourist places and a special economic zone. Nevertheless, there were many problems; for example, drug trafficking, inconvenient transportation, lack of infrastructures, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In sum, sustainable tourism is a pathway to solve income inequality. Hence, all public and private sectors should solve seriously these problems towards strengthening economic and social benefits and maintaining the traditional cultures in this area.

## Keywords

Sustainable Tourism, Inequality, Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province

## Introduction

Inequality in society, especially income distribution, is a critical “problem” for national development and, in particular, the inequality arising from tourism management. In other words, most of the income has not yet reached the local community, the poor, and the minority in society who have not received a share of tourism management as it should be. As can be seen from the distribution of tourism income in Thailand, it found that only Bangkok had an income of 1,051,119 million baht in 2018. On the other hand, Phuket had an income of 477,324 million baht, and Chonburi province had an income of 272,436-million-baht, accounting for 65% of the nationwide tourism income, which were considerably less than that of Bangkok. (Information Center and Investigative News for Civil Rights. 2012)



**Photo 1:** Graph showing tourism income by province in 2018

**Source:** Bank of Thailand (2019)

Interestingly, Mukdahan is a border province in the Northeast, bordering the Lao People's Democratic Republic with the Mekong River as the border for a distance of 72 kilometers, 642 kilometers from Bangkok, the total area of 2,712,394 rai (4,339.83 square kilometers). Consisting of 7 districts with a total population of 339,000 people, it is located at the highest east end of Thailand along the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC). According to the 2017 survey, it revealed that the population had the third income inequality in the country. It means that the income households had difference 15.5 percentage between the richest and the poor. The population had an average income of 72,444 baht/person/year. Interestingly, Muang District is the highest average income of 80,639 baht/person/year. (Provincial Integrated Administrative Committee, Mukdahan Province.2019)

As a result of the disparity in the area, tourism become an essential mechanism for sustainable economic development. That is to say, Mukdahan has many highlighting places: it has one of the most beautiful banks of the Mekong River in Thailand and also has interesting attractions including archaeological sites, religious monuments and beautiful scenery. Furthermore, there are ancient traditions; for example, ancient drums that have important cultural values of 8 tribes, WatManopirom is an important Buddhist temple, and KaengKabao islet is a natural tourist destination, etc. These data are associated with the Mukdahan Province Development Plan (2018 - 2022) which has focused on provincial economic development with a strong focus on the development of tourism along the Mekong River. (Mukdahan.2018)

From the aforementioned reasons, the researcher was interested in Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province as a study area. This research is a further study which called “Thai Special Economic Zone and Economic Border: Case Study of Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province”. From the results of the aforementioned studies, it was found that the development of such areas is a sustainable tourism city. This has become a critical strategy for sustainable local economic development in order to reduce the inequality of income distribution. (SuchittraRitsakulchai. 2019: 69-78)



Photo 2: Location of Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province  
 Source: Wan Yai District

## **Research Objectives**

This research aims to (1) To study the problems of sustainable tourism operation in border areas of Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province, (2) To create a sustainable tourism guide for Wan Yai District, and (3) to suggest guidelines for the development of sustainable tourist destinations on this border in order to help to reduce inequality in other areas.

## **Literature Review**

### *1. Research on Sustainable Tourism*

According to the national research, there is a large number of researchers on community participation and sustainable tourism development, especially the studies of the needs and forms of people participation about the management of sustainable tourism sites. This matter is considered as an important tool to the economic development in the area. As the research of Sakarin Boonpitak (2003: 114) found that the villagers in Ban Mae Kampong participated in the activities in the management of sustainable ecotourism in all steps directly and indirectly and also participated by providing opportunities. The community leader group played a greater role and participated more than the villager's group. This was the result of several important factors including economic status, status quo, education, personal experiences, chances to participate, expectations and receiving benefits.

However, the current epidemic situation and the economic recession affected travel to the secondary city, the use of digital media technology is therefore important in public relations to promote tourism in the area as the research of Sathaporn Keitpiriya et al (2020: 436-448) found that a part of the growth of tourism driven by the advancement of Internet of Things (IoT) that facilitates tourists can search book flight ticket, book rooms and pay more conveniently. As the part of entrepreneurs, they have to create digital media in such a way that the entrepreneurs in the secondary cities come together in the same groups of entrepreneurs. Consequently, tourists have the confidence to travel.

In terms of the international research, there were some foreigners who are interested in tourism in Thailand, for example, Sheldon (2000: 94) studied ecotourism development in Northern Thailand for creation purposes. Much of the area is protected as a result of increased development and pollution, where ecotourism is an option to tackle the problem. This research explores the relationship between benefits and disadvantages of ecotourism. The results were as follows: Ecotourism will achieve its goals if the industry adheres strictly to the following: Improving services and facilities to increase visitor satisfaction, the diversity of interests in wildlife exists beyond the traditional plays. Hence, Doi Inthanon National Park is examined as a case study.

### *2. Research on Inequality*

For domestic research, there are people who study on income inequality and other dimensions. In particular, tourism development is mostly concerned with income and economy, which has resulted in disparity in many issues related to physical and infrastructure development, environmental and pollution management, labor, and gender equality. As shown in the research of Tiamsoon Sirisrisak and Gritsana Patjakreng (2018) investigate the status of knowledge on inequality in Thai tourist cities. The results of the research show that inequality in tourist cities is still relatively small and has shown the need of the research on the inequality in tourist cities to lead to development and action plan to reduce the gap in inequality. Although the study of inequality on tourism development focuses primarily on income distribution inequality, others issues are unclear. Nevertheless, the existing research can reflect the disparities from tourism

development in Thailand, many studies are concentrated on the state of problems and solutions to address the impacts from tourism development.

Additionally, inequality can be significantly linked to the special economic zone, for example, the work of SakkarinSapu (2020: 1-48) analyzed the concept of special economic zone development in Thailand has been driven by policy development towards determining border town areas. This study aims to review the related former research framework in order to reconceptualize and reframe the status of knowledge in terms of inequality and urban poor. The results on inequality in this zone are classified into four types: politics capitals, economic capitals, natural capitals, cultural and social capitals. By considering the mechanisms of inequality in urban areas, it occurs through all spatial dimensions causing from the inequality in land and local resource management and the disparity in taxation mechanisms between central and local authorities. In sum, it is necessary to build an understanding of each phenomenon, especially in a special economic zone, this matter is also based on natural resources and the environment, and social and cultural resources.

As for international research, people study the relationship between tourism development and income inequality in each country. When the tourism industry is growing rapidly, it affects inevitably to the environment, culture, and economies, for instance, the study's Mahadevan and Sandy Suardi (2019) analyzed the growth of tourism incomes links to economic growth (GDP) which has an impact on poverty conditional between 1995 and 2012 in 13 countries. Using a panel Vector Autoregression method, there is little evidence to suggest that growth in tourism reduces headcount poverty. On the other hand, the poverty gap measure shows that the amount of money needed to help the poor out of poverty is significantly reduced. Based on different types of Gini coefficient, the results fail to find an improvement in income inequality resulting from tourism growth. In conclusion, alternative measure such as relative poverty and poverty gap may be considered to better assess the impact of tourism on the poor.

### **Research Methodology**

This research was qualitative research which collected physical data of Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province, the researcher then collected the primary data by focus group, as follows:

1. Documentary Research was a collection of information to create a sustainable tourism development plan. Initially, the researcher examined general information of the area by reviewing literature from books and textbooks, research reports, academic journals which were published by governmental and non-governmental agencies. Furthermore, other documents and relevant websites were formulated a grand strategy for sustainable tourism development at the district level.

2. Field Research was a survey and collection of information at the local level, including;

- 2.1 Observation by using Non- participant Observation, the researcher explored the behaviors, lifestyles, well-being, and general geographic conditions of the research area.

- 2.2 Focus Group, the researcher analyzed the needs of both government agencies and tourism entrepreneurs in the area. This procedure aims to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the area, including the problems and opportunities that arise from sustainable tourism development, as well as recommendations on guidelines and support measures to formulate a tourism development plan. The seminar was conducted in a small group of 20 people, including District Chief, Deputy District Chief, Senior Deputy District Chief, Subdistrict Headman, Village Headman, resort entrepreneurs, and homestay owners, etc.

## Research Results

Wan Yai District has the potential for economic development with an emphasis on ecotourism and culture. According to a geographical survey, it found that Wan Yai has a central area that links with other tourist attractions; such as, Mukdahan City and That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom Province. Moreover, there is an area along with the Mekong River opposite Saibuli, Savannakhet District, Lao People's Democratic Republic. In this zone, there are not only interesting ecotourism but it has also become “the Special Economic Zone”. Moreover, the district has a variety of tourist attractions such as ecotourism sties: Kaeng-Kabao islets, Manopirom Beach, Sang Kham (natural pool). Religious attractions such as Wat Song Khon (Christianity), WatManopirom, Wat Si Maha Pho and historical tourist sites such as NohakPhoumsavanh Memorial Museum, etc.

For economic development, the role of local administration has been expanding continuously, the district has promoted tourism policies for economic development such as activities of the star parade belonging to Christianity. This activity has maintained its uniqueness such as it is decorated with charming simplicity and bringing tractors and wagons to parade as well. In the future, the district will have promote this event to the public in order to participate in activities. Furthermore, the activity may be religious-related shows such as the legend of Jesus, the villagers dressed in Roman clothes to participate in various activities as well.

At the provincial level, there has been increasingly corporate with the district activities. For instance, the area development at Kaeng-Kabao Islets is another action in tourism development to distribute increasingly income for the people in the area and to obtain mutual benefit from local products during the Dao Parade events.

At the beginning, the researcher analyzed that the public relation on tourism should be prepared by social media. Nowadays, this media (website, Facebook, Instagram) have become another media to promote tourism efficiency. Therefore, the researcher prepared a public relation by the brochure as a tourist guide (completed version) and a map (introduce the interesting places in Wan Yai). The objective of this matter aims to promote this area to people and to generate income from sustainable tourism and to reduce the income gap between the city area and this district.







Photo 3 and 4: Travel brochures (Online)  
 Source: Researcher

Due to the COVID-19 situation, this research used data collection methods by small group (20 participants). The results revealed that the major problems and obstacles of the tourism development in the area are as follows: (1) Transportation is not as convenient as it should be, for example, there are no directions signs to tourist sites in the area, however, the district has allocated the limited budgets, and the guide post must be made according to the standard size specified by the government. (2) Since the District is not yet well known to outsiders, the number of tourists is not as large as it should be. (3) Since Wan Yai District is a small size at the border, the administration has a delayed and limited budget, then unable to seriously promote and invest in tourism. (4) Agricultural prices continue to fall significantly. (5) Illegal drug trafficking along the border exists continually. (6) Utilities are not enough in some areas such as electricity and water, etc. (7) According to the COVID-19 situation, the NCPO's government policy for security along the border launched an order to close the traditional checkpoint (Saturday-Sunday) in front of Wat Song Khon Temple. As a result, this situation affected to decrease extremely income of villagers.

From the virus outbreak, this has affected to the livelihoods of people and economies in many countries around the world including Thailand. Additionally, the industry sectors are affected increasingly, particularly the Thai tourism industry. According to the figures of the World Travel and Tourism Council, it declared that Thailand is the most affected by COVID-19 in the world, average 22 percent of GDP of the country (Siam Rath Online,2020). As a result, the case of Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province, was also affected by this phenomenon. The local administration launched the announcement of the closure at Ban Song Khon traditional checkpoint, Pong Kham sub-district to prevent and control the epidemic of COVID-19. Although there are no COVID-19 cases in the area, it is working efficiency to prevent and reduce the risk of the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In addition, the administration has to launch many intensive measures to stop the spread of the virus by refraining from activities in crowded places, closing high-risk venues such as entertainment venues, sports stadiums, and educational institutions, and enhancing the screening of foreign visitors to the country intensively. Practically, Wan Yai

District closed the Ban Song Khon Tradition Checkpoint, Village from now on indefinitely (Thailand Broadcasting Station, Mukdahan.2020).

### **Discussion**

Wan Yai District is considered a small district, the outsiders could know rarely this area, therefore, they visit rarely in this area. In addition, the distance of this district is average 30 kilometers from the city, and the administration offices are separated from the city. As a result, it is difficult to contact the central provincial administration, including the absence of public transportation into the area, it becomes an obstacle in arriving at the district. As mentioned, trade and economy in the area are seldom expanded, and businessmen are rarely invested in the area, and villagers could not make fully use of the available natural resources. Therefore, tourism promotion is an important instrument to make the well-known site to the people. Due to the use of digital media technology, it is an essential tool to promote tourism in the area. This study is consistent with the research by SathapornKeitpiriya et al (2020: 436-448) found that the promotion of secondary city tourism through digital media technology which has continuously attracted both Thai and foreign tourists to visit the secondary city. The advancement of the Internet could help to tourists to find information, book flight tickets, book hotels, and make payments conveniently. Moreover, entrepreneurs want to create an attractive feature in order to encourage alternatively the tourists' decisions.

Nevertheless, the issue of inequality in tourism cities was found that there are not many people to study on the inequality arising from tourism development, which focuses mainly on the inequality of income distribution. Interestingly, the promotion of sustainable tourism is a crucial tool which is the heart of all sectors, both public and private, have to take an action seriously by collaborating on tourism development pathways and strengthening society and economy while maintaining local cultural roots. The result from this research is in line with the research of ChanjiraSukbanjong and SomyotWattanakamolchai (2019) surveyed the current conditions of the Nan Moddaeng attraction, Pa Phayom District, Phatthalung Province. The direction of the sustainable development of the area has to limit of tourists, thereby reducing car accidents, solving the problem of insufficient rooms and parking. In addition, most of the villagers are lack of knowledge in sustainable tourism. Both public and private agencies also should provide the specialists to pass on knowledge to the villagers, as well as provide opportunities for local communities to take part in the administration and management of tourism in this area.

Additionally, Wan Yai District is also located in the Special Economic Zone by the 2/2557 of Thai Cabinet's resolution on the special economic development zone. This research is consistent with the research of SakkarinSapu (2020: 1-48) analyzed the concept of special economic zone to reduce economic inequality in border areas. The result was found that the inequality in special economic zones are classified by four aspects: political resources, economic resources, natural resources and environment, and socio-cultural resources. By analyzing the mechanisms of inequality in urban areas, it is clear that this is a process that occurs through all spatial dimensions such as the inequality in land and local resource management in dimensions of special economic zone development, the inequality in taxation mechanisms between central and local authorities, or disparities through the proposals that support some platforms from technology-based production. As mentioned, the explanation on inequality dimension is necessary to formulate an understanding of each phenomenon, especially in special economic zones which often based on natural and environmental and socio-cultural resources.

## Suggestions

**Suggestions for the use of research results:** (1) In this research, there is the public media to promote local tourism by using short pamphlets (brochures), and travel guides, are considered as a part of sustainable tourism development in the area. Hence, there should be other forms of public media such as the preparation of video clips to promote tourist attractions through YouTube channels or other online platforms. (2) The improvement of the location and landscape of tourist attractions such as the old district office is currently not in use, it should be therefore renovated into a museum to tell the history and traditional life of the local people. (3) Local products should be developed to have a unique style such as souvenirs to increase continually income for the villagers, and the local authority hence provide the community outlet around many important tourist attractions. (4) All of villagers should maintain the traditional way of life, intercept capitalism from overflowing into the area in order to maintain the identity of the area. Consequently, the public sector, the private sector, and the people should continue to work together in issuing regulations to protect the traditional way of life in the community and preserve the local environment permanently. (5) The local administration should build awareness to tourism participation at the local level, particularly the Subdistrict Administrative Organization and the villagers.

**Suggestions for the next study:** This research solves the initial tourism public relations problems such as the preparation of public relations through online media. The methodology is focused on ask for opinions from small-size participants due to the COVID-19 situation. This research found that there is a lack of opinions from local residents and tourists, the researcher therefore suggests that a questionnaire or interview should be conducted to inquire about the opinions and satisfaction on the tourism promotion through media as mentioned.

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