



Local government involvement in post-pandemic development initiatives for the Lao Khrang Ethnic Group of Nakhon Pathom Province

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study examines the role of social enterprises among the Lao Khrang ethnic group in Nakhon Pathom Province. There is particular emphasis placed on the relationship between government agencies and local community leaders. Results were gathered from document analysis and field investigation in five districts of Nakhon Pathom Province, Thailand. Surveys, interviews, and focus-group discussions were the primary research methods. Results reveal that there is a strong community spirit among the Lao Khrang people of Nakhon Pathom. They are involved in the upkeep of traditional culture and participate in the local tourism sector. There has been past government involvement in the maintenance of culture for the benefit of tourism, although this has been put on hold during the current pandemic. This paper argues for a stronger relationship between local government organizations and community leaders to promote sustainability in post-pandemic society.

Keywords: Community participation, ethnic groups, Lao Khrang, local governance, minority representation

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1. Introduction

Prior to the global Covid-19 pandemic, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) forecast 6.5% annual economic growth for the Thai tourism industry, which was projected to account for 30% of the total economy of Thailand over the next decade [1]. The government had thus begun campaigns to promote the Thai tourism industry in developed countries in an attempt to further boost national income. Thailand was branded as a quality leisure destination and there was a systematic operation to develop tourism within the private and public sectors. This had led to expansion of local community economies in an attempt to promote local Thai culture, which was succeeding in creating jobs, generating income, and improving the quality of village life. Tourism had become a driver of community development.

Nakhon Pathom was one of the many provinces emphasizing the importance of tourism development at the local level and it was incorporated into the 4-year provincial development strategy (2015-2018). Located in Central Thailand, in close proximity to the national capital, Bangkok, the vision was to raise Nakhon Pathom Province as a safe location meeting international standards. Historical tourism and cultural tourism were the primary focal areas and were promoted in accordance with tourism standards. The ultimate objective was to develop competitiveness at the national level by developing natural resources, restoring the environmental quality of tourist attractions, raising the standard of utilities, developing sou-

venirs, raising community product standards, and developing management systems, tourism personnel, marketing and public relations.

However, this progress was stalled by the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic. Although the Thai response to the pandemic, which hit the Southeast Asian nations in early 2020, was widely commended for limiting the spread of the disease and preventing loss of life, considerable economic sacrifices were made [2]. International borders were closed and a countrywide lockdown was put in place. For an economy that boasted 60,521,000,000 USD worth of international tourist receipts in 2019 (a 13.7% share of the Asian market), these virus containment measures were a huge blow [3]. Suddenly, a 10% chunk of gross domestic product was directly in jeopardy, with a higher percentage of indirect tourism-related professions also under threat [4]. In June 2020, it was found that at least seventy percent of small manufacturing companies were only earning (at most) half of their pre-pandemic income [5]. This is representative of the catastrophic consequences of COVID-19, which has hit the tourism sector the hardest. All this came at a time when Thai economists were buoyant about the perspectives of a growing economy that was projected to expand further in 2020 due to “(i) a gradual global economic recovery following easing trade tensions and lower risks of a no-deal Brexit; (ii) a favorable expansions of private consumption and investment of both private and public; (iii) key government stimulus measures; and (iv) a low growth base in the last quarter of 2019” [6].

Yet, rather than wallow in the unfulfilled predictions and missed opportunities, it is imperative that developers and

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economists focus on the future and retain the sense of optimism from the pre-COVID years. To enable all sectors to take part in the post-pandemic recovery and solve pre-pandemic problems in the climate of a ‘new normal’, there must be a reduction of self-interest, a drive towards communal benefit and a focus on sustainable living [7]. Social businesses are a potential solution that can help to reduce these problems. The establishment of community enterprises or cooperatives will be a vital step towards economic recovery because these organizations all aim to work in response to the problems that arise in their own local context, as well as achieve common economic and social goals. Given the value and heightened importance of future innovations in the tourism industry, this investigation was designed to examine the potential role of tourism-driven social enterprises among the Lao Khrang ethnic group in Nakhon Pathom Province.

2. Literature Review

Traditionally, the tourism industry has been resilient and rebounded well from international or regional crises. Some examples included the Bali bombings, the 2004 tsunami and the 2003 SARS outbreak [8]. This recovery has usually been driven by government intervention that targets incentivized investment [9]. Airline rescue packages have already been authorized by the Australian, Russian, and United States governments [10]. Forecasts predict that the EU will allocate a fifth of its emergency funds to boost post-pandemic tourism, which would make the sector the biggest beneficiary of its recovery strategy [7]. However, unlike former times of upheaval, the current pandemic has been a sudden and long-lasting trauma with multiple levels of overlapping impact [11]. Quick fixes are unlikely to prove sufficient in rectifying the catastrophic impact of the pandemic. Moreover, they are likely to return to a status quo of uneven wealth distribution and climate destruction. There will be a tendency to assist the largest firms to ensure the sector gets up and running again quickly but there is an argument that this pandemic has provided governments with a unique opportunity to fix issues in tourism from the ground up [7].

One of the national government’s key strategies for the development of local tourism in Thailand has been to provide assistance to community-based enterprises (CBEs) and transform traditional artisans into larger enterprises [12]. This is part of a drive to promote local culture as a key attraction within the country. The Thai One Tambon One Product (OTOP) policy for generating stronger local identities and providing community narratives to bolster both tourism and the economy was based on a similar Japanese model developed in the 1980s, One Village One Product. OTOP is an entrepreneurship stimulus program established in 2001 to aid the development of community businesses through the promotion of one distinctive, locally crafted product from each Thai district. The idea was based on the premise that strong community enterprise can strengthen the national economy and enhance local economic performance [13]. The program has had mixed results.

Although there have been numerous examples of successfully implemented OTOP businesses, inconsistencies continue to occur when businesses are not adequately supported or do

not fully embrace the principles of the program [14]. Surveying OTOP-focused community enterprises in Thai border towns, Pholpirul, Charoenrat, Kwanyou, Rukumnuaykit and Srijamdeeit [15] found that there was inadequate emphasis on both upstream and downstream business activities. There was a lack of research and development during the production process, and also insufficient marketing and branding practices among small community businesses. It was concluded that targeted government support in these areas would significantly enhance profits generated by community enterprises. Similar research has identified a lack of continuous improvement and government involvement in public goods and services, recommending increased social capital and deeper local participation to ‘improve public sector accountability and performance’ [16]. Other studies have identified a dearth in digital marketing expertise [17], budget management [18], weak business culture [19] and poor leadership [20], as well as a multitude of external factors that now include the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community-based tourism is a particularly effective promotion strategy in developing countries, whose governments seek to exploit the growing international tourist desire for the exotic and otherly [21]. Using their rich cultural and social capital, tourism strategies attempt to use local communities as tools to aid wider economic growth. The most successful of these initiatives empower communities to control tourism management and development within their locality and reap the benefits that tourism activities can generate [22]. It has been argued that such a method mostly helps remote communities because the economic benefits give them a reason to manage local resources and ensure community participation [23]. In this way, community-based tourism can be a means of reducing rural poverty, however, an effective long-term vision and continuous leadership and monitoring are required to achieve this goal [21].

By involving local people in the tourism sector, they become invested in the conservation of both natural and cultural resources. For this reason, community-based tourism is a viable method for combating poverty and developing sustainable tourism practices in a post-COVID world [24]. The economy, the environment, and quality of life can all benefit [25]. Yet the involvement of local people in tourism development presents multiple challenges that are rarely overcome easily [26]. Effective and sustainable resource management, communication to all stakeholders, and equal distribution of benefits must be considered priorities in any tourism development initiatives based on community participation. Financial risks are a particularly significant factor in the success or failure of community businesses [27]. The emphasis is therefore on local governments to provide financial support, which communities will lose control of external businesses [26].

For decades, community participation, community-based tourism, and social enterprises have been the mechanism by which the Thai government has created opportunities for sustainable development. There have been concerted efforts to establish community enterprises to address financial problems throughout the country, many of which have encountered some success [28]. Yet the failures are equally numerous and often due to the same problems: low-level community participation, external business involvement, and lack of standardization [21].

Ultimately, ‘when residents have greater sustainable tourism development attitudes, or when they understand that community tourism development requires long-term planning, environmental sustainability, the development of community-centered economic benefits and tourist satisfaction, they are more willing to prevent environmental issues developing or resolve environmental problems in their communities, thus displaying active and responsible behaviors’ [29].

Two different perspectives exist concerning the consequences of tourism for ethnic groups [30, 31, 32]. The first perspective advocates for the benefits of tourism for ethnic groups, especially the revival of traditions and customs, in addition to economic and political benefits for rural communities [33, 34, 35]. On the other hand, some scholars argue a second viewpoint, which suggests that there is a nominal economic benefit of tourism for minority groups, even if tourism does strengthen traditional identity [36, 37]. However, research consensus concludes that meaningful community participation in ethnic tourism leads to empowerment and local benefit [26, 38]. Studies have indicated that ethnic minority groups tolerate ethnic tourism in spite of limited economic benefits due to its transformative effect on culture and ethnic identity [39]. Nonetheless, there are many arguments that criticize the artificial creation and manipulation of traditional culture in the name of tourism [40, 52] (Grünewald 2002; Yang and Wall 2009). Given these debates, the researchers were keen to investigate the readiness of Lao Khrang communities in Nakhon Pathom Province to be self-manage effective social enterprises in tourism sector.

3. Research Methodology

This qualitative investigation gathered results from document analysis and field investigation. The research population was composed of 30 individuals in local government positions with roles and duties as advocates or promoters of tourism in Nakhon Pathom, 30 people working in private sector businesses with an interest in the tourism industry of Nakhon Pathom Province, 5 Lao Khrang community leaders in Nakhon Pathom Province, 5 academic experts in the implementation of social enterprises and domestic Thai tourists traveling in Nakhon Pathom Province. All informants, except tourists, were purposively selected. In 2019, 3,718,847 tourists traveled to Nakhon Pathom Province. Using Taro Yamane’s formula with a tolerance set at 0.05, the tourist sample size was fixed at 400 people [41]. The tourist research sample was selected using a random non-probability sampling method to identify a group of Thai tourists traveling in Nakhon Pathom Province aged 18 years and over and not domiciled in Nakhon Pathom Province. This study was conducted within the context of ethnic Lao Khrang communities in five districts of Nakhon Pathom Province, namely Mueang District, Kamphaeng Saen District, Nakhon Chai Si District, Bang Len District, and Don Tum District. This research was carried out from 1 March 2020 to 28 February 2021.

For the investigation, the research team used a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Surveys were conducted with the 400 tourists to better gauge their opinion of tourist attractions

and activities in Nakhon Pathom Province. In-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted with people involved with tourism in Nakhon Pathom Province and local community leaders. The second set of interviews was conducted with experts in social enterprises. These were followed by focus-group discussions to consolidate understanding of social enterprises and community participation among the Lao Khrang ethnic group in Nakhon Pathom Province. All data was validated by the investigator and methodological triangulation methods. The data was analyzed by analytic induction and typological analysis with the results presented below as a descriptive analysis. A field investigation was conducted in three stages: Firstly, the researchers conducted participant and non-participant observation to identify the culture of Lao Khrang people. In-depth interviews were also conducted with community leaders and village elders during this research phase. Then, the researchers conducted informal interviews with randomly sampled villagers to gather their opinions on the impact of tourism on Lao Khrang culture. Finally, research respondents were invited to participate in a focus group discussion alongside representatives of the local government to identify a future direction for tourism and cultural conservation in the Lao Khrang communities of Nakhon Pathom. All data were categorized according to the research aims following a process of methodological and source triangulation to validate the data. Data were then analyzed using a typological analysis method and analytic induction. The results are presented below in the form of a descriptive analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Distinctive culture of the Lao Khrang community in Nakhon Pathom Province

Interview results revealed that it is assumed among local oral histories that the people of Lao Khrang heritage living in Nakhon Pathom Province are descended from those forcibly relocated during historical conflicts between Laos and Thailand. When Thai forces defeated Laotian armies, they sent Lao people to work in Central Thailand, especially in Nakhon Pathom, Ratchaburi, and Suphan Buri. These areas were conducive to the continuation of Laotian agriculture. The Lao Khrang were settled near water sources and assumed new lives in ethnic village clusters. As far as possible, the people retained an animist spiritual culture, marrying it with the common Buddhist practices found in Thailand. Merit-making in the area thus developed in a unique way, resulting in a distinctive, hybrid religious culture with numerous festivals and ceremonies that developed an exotic appeal to visiting tourists. Through relocation, urban migration, and inter-marriage, the Lao Khrang ethnic group is now scattered throughout Nakhon Pathom Province, and many traditional cultural practices have been maintained throughout the area. Involvement in the local tourism industry has also helped to restore the local identity of Lao Khrang people, most visibly through woven handicrafts and cuisine.

Observations and interviews confirmed that within Nakhon Pathom, there is a variety of cultural and historic tourist attractions. Of particular interest to the domestic visitors surveyed in this investigation are the lifestyle and distinctive culture of the various local ethnic groups. People of Lao descendant,

including Thai Song Dam, Yuan, and the Lao Khrang minority groups, are especially linked with the region. These groups are Laotian ethnic groups and have unique cultural identities, which manifest in dress, traditions, and performing arts. Local governments have sought to help these ethnic groups attract and facilitate more tourism by encouraging community participation in tourism initiatives. This has led to the development of manufacturing systems and services that connect environmentally conscious consumers and sustainable processes. Past developments have included improvements to product quality and safety, marketing, and integration of modern technological innovations. Particular emphasis has been placed on training members of minority groups to provide them with the expertise to manage the market by themselves and raise the level of the local economy. A positive side effect of these initiatives has been the preservation of culture and traditional knowledge. Products under the 'One Tambon One Product' (OTOP) initiative have been seen as the primary outlet for traditional culture and a suitable access point in the tourist market for unique indigenous groups. This serves as a mutual benefit for the province because the cultural heritage of the Lao Khrang adds to the provincial narrative and attracts tourists to the region.

However, further investigation has found that local Lao Khrang community members have not received real benefits from the system. There has been a lack of participatory involvement in operations and, whilst government work focuses on product development and regulatory changes, it still does not meet the needs of consumers. Research respondents indicated that there have been numerous examples of initial enthusiasm and motivation that have not been continued. This lack of sustained support over long periods has caused community businesses to stagnate. Furthermore, there is a need to develop the tourism market in the community and promote community products within and outside Nakhon Pathom Province. Whilst this was achieved with a notable upturn in trade during times of initial institutional support, the marketing was not maintained. Furthermore, locals did not fully acquire the expertise required to manage their own marketing campaigns. Tourist numbers have thus dwindled. This situation has added to the impact of today's social problems, which are diverse and complex and have been exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 SWOT analysis of community participation in local tourism initiatives

A SWOT analysis was carried out in the province to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats surrounding the development of sustainable tourism in the Lao Khrang communities of Nakhon Pathom. The most visible strengths of community participation in local tourism are all related to the traditional Lao Khrang lifestyle. Lao Khrang people have a unique identity, especially the spoken language, dress, traditions, and way of life. Lao Khrang weaving is particularly renowned for its beauty and style. The inheritance of Lao Khrang weaving is strong, with communities paying close attention to the transmission of local traditions and culture by running workshops and demonstrations for younger community members and tourists alike. There is still a high degree of importance placed on the nature of the community and the

harmonious coexistence of different groups in society. The community is diverse and welcomes other ethnic Thai, Lao, and Yuan. The lifestyle is simple with a foundation on agriculture and community-run farms promoting organic cultivation of vegetables. Locals also maintain the largest prawn fishery in Nakhon Pathom Province. These community-managed businesses and the rich cultural heritage combine to provide a source of community products that can continuously create careers for local people, ranging from farming to the production of clay dolls. There is a balanced mixture of newer tourist attractions, including a crocodile farm that produces products made from crocodile skin and date orchard, and more well-established attractions, including local temples and weaving centers. In each of these locations, there is a strong community presence.

The investigation divided tourism initiatives into seven elements: attractions, accessibility, accommodation, facilities, activities, culture, and participation. The Lao Khrang ethnic group has strong cultural traditions, a unique language, distinctive fashions, an agricultural way of life, and both natural and cultural variety. Moreover, the sense of community is strong and accessibility in the area is good. All communities can be reached along various routes by car. Motorcycles can reach the area quickly and some areas are serviced by public transport, including trains. There are generally many accommodation providers offering different types of hotels: large, medium, small, and resorts. However, within Lao Khrang ethnic communities, there is a lack of cultural homestay accommodation. There are basic utilities and services in the communities. Restaurants are widespread as community product outlets, photo points, and vacation spots for tourists visiting the community. Yet, a lack of travel service providers in the area means that tourists must study the area by themselves and navigate independently - a further example of the disconnect between the Lao Khrang community and government infrastructure. There are a number of different activities that tourists can undertake. They can participate in Lao Khrang festivals, including the Songkran flag parade and the household merit ceremony. Lao Khrang fabrics are exhibited in weaving centers and visitors can watch weaving demonstrations, learn how to weave from expert villagers, and learn to dress in Lao Khrang style. Tourists may also visit ancient houses to admire local architecture, cook local Lao Khrang food, visit community farms, view the clay-doll production process, see how to catch prawns, and watch traditional cultural performances. All of these are run and managed by local Lao Khrang people who cooperate in community tourism initiatives. There are exhibits of dance, play, and unique dresses to welcome tourists traveling in the area. Locals have also collaborated with the Nakhon Pathom Provincial government to spread awareness of local arts and culture and continue ancestral traditions at festivals and exhibitions. The Lao Khrang people take part in organizing events and attend annual events.

The four primary weaknesses of ethnic, community-based tourism in the Lao Khrang villages of Nakhon Pathom Province are a lack of connections between main attractions, a lack of tourism routes in the community, a lack of external interest in tourist attractions, and a lack of community narrative develop-

ment connecting the people with the tourist attractions. As there are very few Lao Khrang people working in government roles in the region, there is little awareness of community-specific needs. Similarly, there is minimal communication between the government and the community with regard to infrastructure development, business strategies, and training. These links need significant improvements in order to further maximize the vast potential of the Lao Khrang culture. Whilst it was found that local tourism policies provide support to community tourism, the interaction is, at times superficial. There is little tangible government investment in the community and there is a similarly low level of Lao Khrang interest in the government. Each party is concerned with its own sphere of influence and benefits. There must be a greater appreciation of the mutually beneficial relationship for further success to be had. Interviewees suggested that this could be achieved by Lao Khrang presence in local government positions or establishment of a local tourism board with equal representation from government officials and Lao Khrang civilians. An additional observation made by villagers and business leaders alike was the need for targeted training in branding and marketing to enable the community enterprises to respond better to market trends and generate a greater reputation outside the province. There is a growing trend of tourism in the Greater Bangkok area, of which Nakhon Pathom is a part and the villagers felt they were not in a position to exploit this fully. In addition to this, the main Lao Khrang sites are relatively near the busiest metropolitan area of the province and provide a convenient opportunity for tourists to experience the traditional lifestyle. At this time though, the biggest restrictions for the development of sustainable community tourism initiatives are the COVID-19 pandemic, the consequently depressed economy, and a lack of continuity in tourism support. It was conceded by all parties that nothing is likely to change until the pandemic subsides and efforts and funding can be redistributed back into tourism development. Once this is possible, areas of the tourism industry identified as having the biggest potential for development were cultural tourist attractions that allow tourists to participate in activities, learn traditional community lifestyles, and buy products created in the community.

5. Discussion

External involvement by governments and private investors has been criticized for its impact on the financial sustainability of community-based tourism [42, 43, 44]. However, it is an essential component of success [45]. In Thailand, '71% of communities deemed by the Office of Tourism Development (OTD) as possessing a high level of CBT readiness received assistance from external agencies, compared to 57% of communities with a medium and low readiness' [46, 47]. Nonetheless, it is imperative for the success of grass-roots tourism investment in Nakhon Pathom Province that local authorities get to know the Lao Khrang ethnic culture and lifestyle more thoroughly and recognize the legitimate importance of the community. Lao Khrang communities practice a rich culture that must be promoted, conserved, and celebrated. However, there is a danger that current community development initiatives are managed for

their potential benefit to the government rather than a mutual benefit. In fact, Theerapapposit [48] argues that government benefit should not be a primary objective, and instead the two main aims of community-based ethnic tourism must be to improve the local quality of life and increase economic benefits to the local community. The limited research on ethnic minority representation at the local government level suggests that the best way to achieve this might be, as indicated by the interview respondents, to include Lao Khrang representation in local government positions [49]. At the very least, government bodies charged with supporting local tourism must be set up to include representatives from the local community. This will ensure the investment priorities are in the right order [50].

Whilst growing in popularity, ethnic tourism does not have the best global reputation. If it is not managed properly, there is a very real danger that it will consume 'the cultural commodity on which it is based' and damage the host culture [51]. The authenticity of local participation must be retained and it is important that individuals are invested in genuine cultural representation, rather than driven by profits. Over-commercialized cultural products have been found dissatisfying visiting tourists and devaluing traditional culture. Consequently, diverse and high-quality ethnic products should be developed to suit both domestic and international markets. Especially, minority-made products and community-based businesses should be facilitated in order to give tourists an authentic experience and improve the economic gains for local communities [52]. When the tourism economy in Thailand restarts in the post-COVID world, any injections of support and finance must be targeted to protect and preserve the rich Lao Khrang culture, rather than exploit it. This will not be achieved without local civilian and government cooperation, yet the importance of sustainable tourism practices that conserve culture, protect the environment, and generate income will not be realized without significant steps to raise awareness [53]. In Thailand, there is a gulf between institutional understanding of sustainability and community understanding of sustainability. There is an especially alarming lack of understanding of sustainability among destination stakeholders in the country [54, 55, 56].

While external support may be obtained by ethnic communities, it will only partly ensure the success of community-based tourism initiatives. There must also be skilled, collaborative leadership and a balance between external involvement and community participation. This can be achieved in Nakhon Pathom if policy-makers and community leaders are prepared to work together and learn from successful community-based initiatives elsewhere. These are best exemplified by studies of the Mae Kampong community in Northern Thailand:

'Though many CBT projects around the world do little to challenge the status quo, and instead simply enrich the economic and political power of existing elites, Mae Kampong illustrates that widespread profit sharing and participation are indeed possible even in situations where success depends principally on the actions taken by individual leaders, as well as on the support of external agents such as government officials, NGOs, academics, and private tour operators ... In this way, tourism in Mae Kampong is both community-based, in that the community itself initiated

tourism and retained control over its nature and direction, and community-oriented, in that village elites and external actors took steps to generate benefits for the community as a whole.' [46]

Tourism will be different in the post-pandemic society. Firstly, the recovery will be gradual as domestic restrictions are lifted, followed by tourism 'bridges' or 'bubbles', providing access to nearby countries. Full international tourism will be the last step [57]. It is vital that developers use this hiatus to instill a more sustainable policy that can benefit and be led by local community members. This will require closer collaboration between the local government and Lao Khrang people, it will require investment, it will require education, but most of all it will require empathy. Government figures must understand the needs of the community and introduce mechanisms to benefit the community. Similarly, local people must understand the perspective of government agents and collaborate to ensure there is mutual benefit from tourism in the post-pandemic society.

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