Empowering Rural Communities through Role Modeling: The Spread of Community-based Tourism in Lo Lo Chai Village

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Abstract

Community-based tourism (CBT) is an important strategy for sustainable rural development in Vietnam, leveraging local cultural and natural resources to foster community resilience and economic growth. This study examines how community empowerment developed in Lo Lo Chai Village, Ha Giang province, where a pioneering family's adoption of CBT practices catalyzed broader community transformation. Guided by Community Empowerment Theory and the concept of Kankou Machizukuri, the research examines how role modeling by early adopters inspired other households to participate in tourism, thereby preserving traditional Lo Lo architecture, revitalizing cultural heritage, and improving livelihoods. Through qualitative case study methods, including in-depth interviews with 18 participants and participant observation, the findings reveal that collective decision-making, shared values, and local leadership were instrumental in building social capital and promoting sustainable tourism practices. The study highlights how a local role model, supported by an exogenous catalyst, drove grassroots empowerment without the need for external training programs. This research contributes to understanding how role-model-driven diffusion operates within CBT, offering practical insights for rural destinations seeking inclusive and sustainable development.

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1. Introduction

The global tourism landscape has undergone a significant transformation over the past few decades, emerging as a major economic force with far-reaching implications for societies worldwide. With international arrivals nearly recovering to pre-pandemic levels and generating over $1.6 trillion in global exports by 2023, tourism's economic magnitude cannot be understated [1]. Yet, behind this rapid expansion lies a persistent paradox: while tourism generates income and employment, unregulated growth frequently leads to environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and social displacement, particularly in vulnerable rural and ethnic minority communities [2].

This tension between economic opportunity and sustainable development has stimulated growing interest in alternative tourism models that prioritize local participation and community control. CBT represents a fundamental paradigm shift from traditional tourism models, transforming local residents from passive recipients to active architects of their tourism destiny.

Rather than allowing external forces to exploit local resources, CBT empowers communities to control, design, and benefit directly from tourism activities within their territories [3-4]. By emphasizing community ownership, participatory governance, and local benefit distribution, CBT seeks to align tourism development with social equity, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability [4].

The core premise of CBT is that authentic tourism experiences emerge organically from everyday community life and cultural practices, and they cannot be artificially created. When local families open their homes to visitors, prepare traditional meals, or lead cultural tours, they offer experiences that mass tourism cannot replicate. This approach shifts tourism from being an extractive industry to a collaborative partnership, where visitors gain meaningful cultural understanding and communities maintain control over their own development [5]. This locally embedded approach contrasts sharply with externally driven tourism models, which often marginalize community voices and redirect economic benefits away from host communities [6].

Vietnam's rural regions present a compelling laboratory for examining CBT's transformative potential. The country's diverse ethnic communities, pristine natural environments, and rich cultural traditions offer immense tourism appeal, yet many rural areas struggle with poverty and limited economic opportunities. Vietnamese policymakers and communities increasingly recognize CBT as a pathway to harness tourism's economic benefits while preserving cultural identity and environmental integrity [7-8]. However, putting CBT into practice is complex. It takes more than good intentions as it requires strong coordination, fair sharing of benefits, and ongoing community involvement. Studies in Southeast Asia show common issues: benefits often go to a few local elites, outside groups may control decisions, and real community participation is often limited despite being encouraged in theory [9-10].

These challenges point to an important gap in understanding how communities truly gain the power to take part in and guide tourism development. While many studies discuss the potential benefits and common difficulties of CBT, there is still limited understanding of how communities naturally organize, learn, and adapt their tourism activities over time. Particularly understudied is the role of local leadership and peer influence in catalyzing community-wide adoption of sustainable tourism practices.

The idea of role modeling provides a useful way to explore how change happens within communities. When certain individuals lead by example and try new ways of doing tourism, their actions can motivate others and encourage wider participation. However, how these role models actually influence community empowerment and the spread of CBT remain poorly understood, representing a significant gap in both theory and practical guidance for developing CBT.

This research addresses these knowledge gaps through an in-depth examination of Lo Lo Chai Village in Ha Giang province, Vietnam-a remote mountain community where a single family's pioneering adoption of CBT practices has catalyzed village-wide transformation. This case offers valuable insight into how individual leadership can lead to broader community engagement and sustainable tourism in rural areas with limited resources. This study is guided by two key research questions that explore the core of community empowerment in tourism: First, through what pathways does community empowerment support and sustain meaningful participation in tourism? Second, how do local role models influence the spread and adoption of CBT practices within their communities? By exploring these questions through the case of Lo Lo Chai Village's transformation, the research aims to shed light on the complex dynamics of grassroots empowerment and offer practical insights for advancing sustainable rural tourism.

The findings are expected to contribute both to theoretical advancement in understanding community empowerment mechanisms and to practical guidance for policymakers, development practitioners, and communities seeking to harness tourism as a tool for inclusive, sustainable rural development. As demand for authentic, community-controlled tourism experiences continues to grow, understanding how rural communities can successfully position themselves as partners rather than subjects in tourism development becomes increasingly important. Thus, this study makes three main contributions. First, it advances community empowerment theory by explicating the micro-processes through which individual pioneers facilitate collective capacity building in CBT contexts. Second, it extends tourism diffusion research by demonstrating how role modeling operates within culturally embedded social networks. Third, it provides empirically grounded insights for policymakers and development practitioners seeking to design context-sensitive interventions for ethnic minority and rural tourism development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Community-based Tourism: A paradigm for inclusive development

CBT has revolutionized traditional tourism paradigms by positioning local communities as the primary architects and beneficiaries of their tourism destinies. Unlike conventional tourism models that often extract value from destinations while leaving communities marginalized, CBT fundamentally reimagines the relationship between visitors, destinations, and local populations [11]. This approach focuses on shared ownership and active community involvement in every stage of tourism planning, execution, and management.

The strength of CBT comes from its ability to tackle several development challenges at once. In addition to creating income, it helps strengthen community ties, protect cultural

traditions, and promote care for the environment. When communities take ownership of their tourism stories, they offer genuine experiences that appeal to more mindful travelers, while keeping tourism benefits within the local economy instead of flowing to outside businesses [12]. This locally driven model has shown to be especially effective in disadvantaged areas where traditional development efforts have fallen short.

The growing recognition of CBT's potential has positioned it as a cornerstone strategy for addressing rural poverty and promoting inclusive development. International development agencies, governments, and communities increasingly view CBT as a viable pathway for economic diversification, particularly in regions endowed with natural beauty, cultural richness, but limited industrial opportunities [7]. The model's emphasis on preserving indigenous cultures while generating economic value creates a powerful synergy that addresses both cultural conservation and economic development imperatives.

However, the journey toward successful CBT implementation is fraught with complexities that demand careful navigation. Research reveals that the positive or negative impacts of tourism activities often determine whether CBT initiatives flourish or fail [13-14]. Success depends on communities' ability to harness tourism's economic benefits while mitigating potential negative consequences such as cultural commodification, environmental degradation, or social displacement. This delicate balance requires sophisticated community capacity, strong leadership, and external support systems that many rural communities initially lack.

The relationship between community development and CBT success creates a reinforcing cycle that merits particular attention. Communities experiencing improvements in fundamental living conditions, including healthcare access, educational opportunities, and economic stability, demonstrate greater enthusiasm for tourism participation and stronger commitment to CBT principles [2, 4, 5]. This suggests CBT functions most effectively within broader community development frameworks rather than as isolated tourism interventions.

Interestingly, some communities only recognize their tourism potential after external research reveals their cultural and historical significance, highlighting the importance of heritage awareness in CBT development [15]. This phenomenon underscores the need for communities to develop critical assessment capabilities that enable them to evaluate CBT opportunities, risks, and outcomes against their sustainability objectives (Ngo & Creutz, 2022). Such analytical skills empower communities to make informed decisions about tourism product development and to proactively address implementation challenges [6, 16].

2.2. Sustainability as the foundation of responsible tourism

The sustainability paradigm in tourism emerges from humanity's evolving understanding of the intricate relationships between economic activity, social equity, and environmental integrity. This conceptual framework has shaped tourism discourse since the industry's early recognition of its profound impacts on destinations and communities [17, 18]. Sustainability transcends simple environmental protection to encompass a holistic vision of development that balances present needs with future generations' wellbeing, requiring fundamental shifts in how societies approach economic growth and resource utilization [19].

The sustainability imperative in tourism reflects broader recognition that short-term economic gains often come at unsustainable social and environmental costs. Authentic sustainability demands integrating social justice principles, ecological stewardship, and equitable development strategies that create lasting benefits rather than temporary windfalls [19]. This comprehensive approach challenges tourism stakeholders to consider the full spectrum of their activities' impacts and to design interventions that enhance rather than diminish destination sustainability.

Tourism's relationship with sustainability manifests through three distinct yet interconnected dynamics that shape industry outcomes. First, tourism often becomes a victim of unsustainable development when destinations deteriorate due to environmental degradation, social conflict, or economic instability, rendering them less attractive to visitors. Second, tourism can drive unsustainable practices when poorly managed growth overwhelms local infrastructure, displaces communities, or degrades natural resources. Third, and most promisingly, tourism can serve as a catalyst for sustainable transformation when properly designed and implemented with community needs and environmental limits in mind [17].

The complexity of achieving sustainable tourism outcomes has led industry leaders to recognize that transformation requires collaborative efforts extending far beyond tourism operators themselves. The World Travel & Tourism Council's findings emphasize that sustainable tourism success depends on multi-stakeholder partnerships involving governments, communities, civil society organizations, and international development agencies [17]. This collaborative imperative reflects sustainability's inherently systemic nature-meaningful change requires alignment across multiple sectors and scales of intervention.

CBT emerges as a particularly compelling approach to sustainable tourism because it naturally aligns with sustainability principles. By embedding tourism development within community ownership structures and local decision-making processes, CBT creates inherent incentives for long-term thinking and responsible resource management. Communities living in tourism destinations have strong motivations to preserve the natural and cultural assets that attract visitors, creating a natural alignment between tourism success and sustainability objectives that

is often absent in externally-controlled tourism development.

2.3. Community empowerment

Community Empowerment: The Engine of Transformative Tourism Development

Community empowerment stands as the fundamental catalyst that transforms tourism from an extractive industry into a force for authentic local development. This multifaceted concept encompasses far more than token consultation or superficial participation, it represents a profound shift in power dynamics that enables communities to assume genuine agency over their development trajectories [20-21]. True empowerment manifests when local populations acquire not only the technical capabilities to manage tourism enterprises but also the political influence to shape policies, the economic leverage to negotiate favorable terms, and the social cohesion to maintain collective action over time.

The empowerment paradigm fundamentally challenges conventional development approaches that position communities as passive beneficiaries of external interventions. Instead, it recognizes communities as sophisticated social systems with inherent knowledge, capabilities, and decision-making structures that, when properly supported and strengthened, can drive sustainable development outcomes more effectively than top-down approaches. This perspective acknowledges that lasting change must emerge from within communities themselves, supported by external resources but not controlled by external actors.

In the tourism context, empowerment manifests through communities' capacity to exercise meaningful control over tourism planning, implementation, and benefit distribution. Empowered communities can articulate their vision for tourism development, establish boundaries around acceptable tourism activities, and negotiate partnerships that align with their values and priorities [11, 22]. This level of agency enables communities to harness tourism's economic potential while safeguarding their cultural integrity and environmental resources from exploitation or degradation.

The relationship between empowerment and sustainable tourism outcomes creates a reinforcing cycle that strengthens over time. As communities develop greater capacity to manage tourism initiatives, they gain confidence in their ability to influence broader development processes. This growing sense of efficacy encourages continued engagement and investment in collective action, building social capital that extends beyond tourism to enhance community resilience across multiple domains [12]. The strengthened social networks and leadership skills developed through tourism empowerment often translate into improved capacity for addressing other community challenges, from healthcare access to educational opportunities.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that community empowerment in CBT generates cascading benefits that extend far beyond economic gains. Empowered communities exhibit enhanced social cohesion as tourism activities create opportunities for collaboration and shared decision-making. They develop sophisticated conflict resolution mechanisms as they navigate the complexities of balancing diverse stakeholder interests. Most importantly, they build adaptive capacity that enables them to respond creatively to changing circumstances, whether environmental challenges, market fluctuations, or policy shifts [3-4].

The innovation potential unleashed through community empowerment represents one of CBT's most compelling advantages. When communities control their tourism narratives, they can draw upon deep local knowledge to create authentic experiences that cannot be replicated by external operators. This authenticity advantage enables empowered communities to differentiate their tourism offerings in increasingly competitive markets while maintaining cultural integrity. The ability to innovate and adapt based on local knowledge and market feedback creates sustainable competitive advantages that external operators struggle to match [7].

However, achieving genuine community empowerment requires more than goodwill or participatory rhetoric. It demands systematic capacity building, institutional development, and long-term commitment to sharing power and resources. Many CBT initiatives fail because they conflate participation with empowerment, creating forums for community input without transferring meaningful decision-making authority. True empowerment requires communities to develop technical skills, access financial resources, build market knowledge, and establish governance structures capable of managing complex tourism enterprises while maintaining democratic accountability to community members.

2.4. Role Modeling and Leadership in CBT

The diffusion of innovation within rural communities has long been studied through the lens of social learning theory, which posits that individuals adopt new behaviors by observing and imitating others [23]. In the context of CBT, this mechanism takes the form of role modeling: when a pioneering local actor demonstrates the viability of tourism-based livelihoods, neighboring households are more likely to follow suit. Unlike top-down training or externally imposed development programs, role-model-driven adoption is organic and self-reinforcing, as early success generates visible proof that others can draw upon to reduce perceived risk and build confidence [16, 24].

Recent scholarship has begun to examine how local leadership figures shape the trajectory of CBT in Southeast Asia. [16] found that in rural Thailand, the presence of a single community leader with entrepreneurial experience significantly accelerated the adoption of homestay-based tourism among neighboring families, outperforming formal government-led capacity-building programs in both speed and depth of participation. In Vietnam, women leaders in ethnic minority villages in northern Vietnam also

served as critical catalysts for CBT uptake, leveraging informal social networks to share knowledge and reduce barriers to entry for other households [25]. These studies collectively suggest that the identity, credibility, and social embeddedness of the role model are as important as the model's economic viability.

A particularly relevant theoretical framework for understanding this dynamic is Kankou Machizukuri, a Japanese concept of tourism-led regional revitalization. Originating in rural Japan during the 1980s and 1990s, Kankou Machizukuri posits that sustainable rural development can be achieved by positioning local cultural and natural assets at the center of a community-led tourism strategy, supported where necessary by external partnerships [16, 24]. Crucially, the framework emphasizes the interplay between endogenous innovation driven by local actors who champion cultural preservation and exogenous catalysts, such as outside volunteers or advisors who help communities recognize and activate their latent potential [26]. This hybrid model of local agency and external facilitation closely mirrors the dynamics observed in emerging CBT cases across Southeast Asia, making it a valuable analytical lens for the present study.

Despite these advances, a notable gap persists in the literature. Most existing studies on role modeling in CBT focus either on the economic outcomes of pioneer-led tourism or on the structural conditions that enable community participation, without thoroughly examining the process by which a single role model's actions catalyze community-wide empowerment over time. The Lo Lo Chai case, examined in this study, offers an opportunity to address this gap by tracing the full arc of role-model-driven empowerment, from initial external collaboration through grassroots diffusion within the integrated framework of Community Empowerment Theory and Kankou Machizukuri.

3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative case study approach to examine community empowerment in the context of CBT in Lo Lo Chai Village, Ha Giang province, Vietnam. The case study method is well-suited for exploring complex social dynamics in real-world settings, offering a detailed understanding of key processes, people, and outcomes related to sustainable tourism.

Lo Lo Chai is a remote ethnic minority community known for its traditional architecture and cultural identity. CBT in the village started with the efforts of a local family, led by Ms. Dìu Thị Hương and her mother, who opened the Cực Bắc Café and began offering homestay services. Their initiative, supported early on by a Japanese visitor and shaped by exposure to other CBT models, helped establish Lo Lo Chai as a strong example of tourism-led community empowerment.

Two field research trips were conducted in April 2025 and October 2025 in Lo Lo Chai and the surrounding area.

Each trip lasted approximately one week. In-depth interviews with the family and local tourism stakeholders explored their experiences, leadership, roles, and the impacts of empowerment. Local stakeholders interviewed included representatives from Đồng Văn district authorities, leaders of Lũng Cú commune, representatives of the commune's Women's Union, village heads, youth union members, members of the Cực Bắc Café family, as well as some households in the village. A total of 18 individuals were interviewed in depth. The interview data were coded using Nvivo before analysis. Coding followed an inductive approach: initial open codes were derived directly from interview transcripts, then grouped into recurring themes through iterative review. Key themes including empowerment pathways, role modeling, gender dynamics, and sustainability challenges emerged from this process and guided the analysis. Additional sources, such as village tourism plans, social media posts, and local government reports, were also reviewed to provide context on how CBT developed and how empowerment spread within the village.

Table 1: Anonymized profiles of the 18 Respondents

No.	Role / Affiliation	Gender	Approx. age range
1-2	Cực Bắc Café family (founders)	F	40 - 60
3	Ms. Dìu Thị Hương (returning graduate, café leader)	F	20 - 30
4-5	Dong Van district tourism authorities	M/F	35 - 55
6-7	Lũng Cú commune leaders	M	45 - 65
8-9	Commune Women's Union representatives	F	35 - 55
10-11	Village heads	M	50 - 65
12-13	Youth Union members	M/F	18 - 30
14-18	Neighboring households participating in CBT	M/F	30 - 60

4. Findings

4.1. Case study of Cực Bắc Café story - Origins and the role of the external catalyst

Lo Lo Chai Village, located in Ha Giang province, provides a case for examining how individual initiative can contribute to community-wide transformation. As a remote ethnic minority settlement with distinctive earthen architecture and Lo Lo cultural heritage, the village illustrates how empowerment processes can support locally driven development in rural contexts.

Table 2: Timeline of Key events in Lo Lo Chai

Year	Event
Early 2010s	Economic hardship, out-migration, loss of traditional architecture
2014	Mr. Ogura Yasushi visits; Cực Bắc Café opens
2014-2024	Café operates; early CBT skills develop
2024	Ms. Hương returns; café expanded/renovated
2024-present	Village-wide CBT diffusion; Best Village recognition

The transformation of Lo Lo Chai commenced in the early 2010s, during a period of economic difficulty in rural areas of Vietnam. The village faced multiple challenges, including high rates of out-migration for employment, the replacement of traditional rammed-earth houses with modern concrete structures, and the decline of long-standing cultural practices. These developments indicated a potential loss of cultural heritage and increasing economic dependency.

In 2014, a Japanese volunteer, Ogura Yasushi, identified the village's distinctive cultural and architectural value, which had increasingly been overlooked by local residents. When interviewed, Ms. Hương recalled: "Mr. Ogura saw something in our village that we had stopped seeing ourselves, the beauty of our old houses, our traditions." This external recognition led to a collaboration with the family of Ms. Dìu Thị Hương to establish the village's first café. Beyond functioning as a small business, the initiative represented the first organized effort to leverage local cultural resources for sustainable economic development while preserving their authenticity.

Setting up the café introduced basic hospitality skills and small infrastructure upgrades that later supported further tourism activities. More importantly, it showed that cultural tourism could be a real alternative to leaving the village for work. The café's early success helped build local capacity, confidence, and awareness of tourism markets, laying the groundwork for wider community involvement and growth in CBT.

Ms Hương's return and café expansion

Ms. Hương's return to Lo Lo Chai in 2024, after completing her university studies in Hanoi, marked a key moment in the village's journey toward empowerment. Her decision to come back reversed the common trend of rural brain drain, where educated young people often leave their hometowns permanently. With formal training, knowledge

of sustainable tourism, and strong ties to her community, she was well-positioned to lead local development efforts from within.

Under her leadership, Cực Bắc Café was expanded and renovated, combining traditional design with modern hospitality standards. The café blended cultural authenticity with visitor needs, offering a tourism experience that stayed true to Lo Lo values while appealing to the market. Ms. Hương explained: "We wanted visitors to feel our culture, not just see it. So, we kept the old design, but made it comfortable enough for guests to stay." The café became a hub where hospitality skills, cultural preservation techniques, and business knowledge were shared informally among community members. The use of local architecture and building methods highlighted the village's heritage in a way that respected and preserved it, rather than turning it into a commercial product.

4.2 Community-wide diffusion of CBT and gender dynamics

The café rapidly evolved beyond its role as a tourist destination, becoming a central hub within the community. It generated employment and income while providing a practical model for other families to emulate. Observing the success of Ms. Hương allowed community members to develop skills and confidence, frequently more effectively than through formal training programs. This peer-to-peer learning encouraged broader participation in tourism.

The café's success sparked broader adoption of CBT across the village. More families opened homestays, small restaurants, and cultural activity offerings, gradually building a community-owned tourism network. This growth was driven by local interest rather than outside intervention. A Women's Union representative confirmed: "After seeing the café do well, several families in our village started thinking about how they could participate too. We organized small sessions to share what we learned." Tourism has played a notable role in cultural preservation. By assigning economic value to traditional performances, crafts, and architecture, it has encouraged families to maintain cultural practices and reignited young people's interest in skills they once considered outdated.

Tourism has also reshaped gender roles in the village, although not without challenges. Women now comprise approximately 80% of participants in tourism-related activities, assuming primary responsibilities in managing homestays, performing cultural presentations, and producing handicrafts. One woman participant stated: "Before tourism, I stayed at home most of the time. Now I earn my own income and people listen when I speak about village matters." These new opportunities have brought income and increased social recognition.

Despite these gains, traditional gender norms still limit women's access to leadership positions and business ownership. While women are the majority of tourism

workers, most decision-making roles remain in the hands of men. This highlights the tension between growing economic empowerment and persistent cultural expectations, suggesting that deeper social change is needed to achieve full empowerment.

The Lo Lo Chai case illuminates the critical role of individual catalysts in community empowerment processes. Ms. Hương's unique combination of cultural authenticity, educational credentials, and entrepreneurial vision enabled her to bridge traditional community values with modern tourism requirements. Her success created a replicable model that other community members could adapt to their own circumstances, demonstrating how individual empowerment can generate collective transformation when properly supported and contextualized within community needs and capabilities.

4.3. Community empowerment in Lo Lo Chai: A theoretical analysis

Examining Lo Lo Chai's transformation through the lens of community empowerment reveals how individual efforts can lead to broader community change. The village's shift from economic hardship to tourism-based development highlights how empowerment can emerge naturally when local strengths meet supportive external conditions.

Participatory ownership as a foundation for transformation

The Cực Bắc Café case shows how genuine local ownership can drive community-wide empowerment. The founding family led the process by keeping control over key decisions while working with external partners for technical support and resources. This balanced approach demonstrated that communities need not choose between local autonomy and external support rather empowered communities can leverage external resources while preserving decision-making authority.

The café's success created a strong demonstration effect. By observing the real economic value of their cultural assets, community members began to view tourism as a practical opportunity rather than a distant idea. This hands-on learning stimulated local interest in tourism and fostered a demand for training and business support initiatives originating within the community itself, rather than being imposed by external programs.

The village's transition from a primarily agriculture-based economy to one that includes tourism marked a significant economic change. Importantly, this change was driven by local choices, enabling residents to continue farming while earning additional income from tourism. This additive approach supported existing livelihoods, preserving both food security and cultural practices.

Social learning networks and capacity development

The knowledge transfer mechanisms operating within Lo Lo Chai reveal the sophisticated ways communities build collective capacity through peer learning. Ms. Hương's knowledge of hospitality, sustainable tourism, and business management became a shared resource for others in the village. By adapting external knowledge to local needs, she played a key role in helping others build relevant skills.

Intergenerational learning was also important. Young people began to value traditional practices more once they saw their economic potential in tourism. Unlike common trends where younger generations move away from tradition, this process showed how empowerment can connect cultural preservation with economic development. It also strengthened cultural identity while building individual skills.

Around the Cực Bắc Café, informal mentoring networks formed, allowing people to learn by observing and trying new things without high risk. Ms. Hương and the café family acted as central nodes in these networks, providing guidance and examples that neighboring households could adapt. Households engaged in hands-on learning by observing café operations, attending small peer-led sessions, and experimenting with their own initiatives in a low-risk environment. These relationships between the café mentors, neighboring households, and supporting community organizations such as the Women's Union facilitated both skill development and confidence building. This flexible, community-led learning proved more effective than formal training, helping more residents get involved in tourism activities with growing confidence and capability.

Strategic resource integration and creative innovation

The success of Cực Bắc Café highlights how communities can skillfully mobilize their own resources while drawing on external support. By blending traditional architectural styles with modern hospitality standards, the community has shown that combining local knowledge with market demands can lead to unique offerings that outside operators cannot easily replicate. This balance has given the village a strong, sustainable advantage in tourism.

Their use of social media and digital marketing represents how communities can adapt and reach global markets, even from remote areas. Importantly, this digital shift was driven by local initiative, not by outside training programs. This suggests that when communities clearly see the benefits of new methods, they will find ways to innovate on their own.

The economic transformation reflected in tourism's current 90% contribution to household income represents remarkable diversification achievement. However, this statistic also highlights empowerment's potential risks, over-dependence on single economic sectors can create

new vulnerabilities that require ongoing strategic planning and risk management. The community's ability to recognize and address these challenges will test the sustainability of their empowerment gains.

Leadership development and social influence dynamics

Ms. Hương and her family's emergence as community leaders shows how true empowerment can nurture new leadership without eroding traditional authority. Their legitimacy comes from real success, not formal titles, building accountability that strengthens local participation, unlike externally imposed leadership training programs that often fail to generate authentic community influence.

The role modeling effects extend beyond simple imitation, sparking shifts in identity and collective confidence. Many, especially women, found the courage to step into new economic and social roles when they saw success rooted in their own culture, far more motivating than distant success stories.

However, persistent gender barriers show that empowerment's benefits are uneven. While women's economic roles have grown, cultural norms still limit their rise to formal leadership. This highlights that true empowerment must tackle deeper power dynamics and structural barriers, not just focus on economic gains.

Sustainability challenges and empowerment consolidation

The ongoing challenges facing Lo Lo Chai reflect the dynamic nature of empowerment; achievements must be continuously reinforced and expanded to prevent erosion. The risk of cultural commodification poses particular threats to the authenticity that underlies the community's tourism appeal. Managing this tension requires sophisticated understanding of cultural boundaries and market dynamics that may exceed current community capacity.

The unequal distribution of leadership opportunities and decision-making power threatens the inclusive development that empowerment theory emphasizes. Addressing these inequities will require intentional strategies to expand participation beyond current beneficiaries while maintaining the momentum generated by early successes. This balancing act tests communities' ability to manage internal tensions while pursuing collective advancement.

The need for continued professional development and institutional strengthening reflects empowerment's evolving requirements. As tourism activities become more complex and market competition intensifies, the community will need to develop new capabilities while preserving the cultural authenticity and community cohesion that enabled their initial success. This adaptive

challenge will determine whether Lo Lo Chai's empowerment gains can be sustained and expanded over time.

5. Discussion and implication

The Lo Lo Chai Village case demonstrates how community empowerment can transform rural destinations through sustainable tourism development, offering three critical insights for leveraging local resources and capabilities.

Role Modeling as a catalyst for community transformation

The support from Mr. Ogura Yasushi for Ms. Diu Thi Huong's family to start a business based on indigenous cultural values, as well as the family's efforts to overcome initial difficulties and become pioneers leading the community in tourism development, exemplify the theory of tourism and regional development - Kankou Machizukuri. This theory has been applied in many rural tourism destinations in Japan to create a better new life while preserving traditional cultural values and promoting sustainable development [24]. Importantly, the Lo Lo Chai case adds an important dimension: the role model's influence was preceded by an exogenous catalyst, Mr. Ogura's early collaboration which aligns closely with the Kankou Machizukuri framework's emphasis on the interplay between endogenous local champions and exogenous facilitators [24, 26]. This hybrid dynamic distinguishes the Lo Lo Chai model from cases driven purely by internal or purely by external initiative.

The success of Ms. Dìu Thị Hương and her family illustrates how local champions can catalyze community-wide change through demonstration effects. Their transition from subsistence agriculture to CBT, initially supported by Japanese collaboration, provided tangible proof that alternative economic pathways were viable. The Cực Bắc Café evolved beyond a business venture to become a learning hub where hospitality skills, cultural preservation techniques, and business management knowledge were organically shared throughout the community. This peer-to-peer knowledge transfer proved more effective than formal training programs in building both competence and confidence among community members. Thus, this finding extends [22] empowerment framework by showing that role-model-driven empowerment can be effective without formal leadership training or institutional support. Instead, credibility earned through visible success as demonstrated by the café's growth proved sufficient to inspire community-wide participation. This is consistent with [25] observation that informal social networks, rather than formal programs, drive CBT adoption in ethnic minority villages.

The integration of external support with local investment exemplifies effective resource mobilization strategies. The

initial Japanese partnership provided crucial technical knowledge and financial support, which the family leveraged with their own creativity and investment to develop authentic tourism products. This collaboration enabled infrastructure improvements, attracted additional tourism investment, and diversified income streams to the point where tourism now generates 90% of household earnings for participating families. The model demonstrates how communities can access external resources while maintaining ownership and control over development trajectories.

Empowerment through grassroots capacity building and its limits

The empowerment process in Lo Lo Chai extended beyond economic benefits to encompass capacity development across multiple dimensions. Community members acquired service delivery, management, and marketing skills through informal mentoring and experiential learning rather than external training interventions. This grassroots approach is consistent with [20] emphasis on psychological and organizational dimensions of empowerment, and with [12] finding that social capital built through tourism participation reinforces community resilience. The dramatic increase in women's participation in tourism to 80% demonstrates CBT's potential to transform traditional gender roles, though leadership positions remain predominantly male, indicating incomplete empowerment processes.

The informal mentoring networks that formed around the café exemplify what [4] describes as community-level empowerment: individuals gaining the confidence and skills to participate meaningfully in collective tourism development. Ms. Hương noted that several families approached her for guidance after observing the café's operations, suggesting that peer-to-peer knowledge transfer operated more effectively than formal training in this context.

Women's participation reaching 80% demonstrates CBT's potential to expand economic roles for women, consistent with findings of [22] on ecotourism and local empowerment. However, the persistence of male-dominated decision-making structures indicates that economic empowerment alone does not translate to full social empowerment. This aligns with [13] observation that CBT can reproduce existing social inequalities if structural barriers are not explicitly addressed. The Lo Lo Chai case highlights the need for targeted interventions such as women's leadership training and governance reforms to move beyond economic participation toward genuine decision-making inclusion.

Despite notable progress, several challenges continue to affect long-term sustainability. Turning culture into a commercial product can weaken the traditions that draw tourists. Gender bias still limits women's access to leadership positions, even though they make up much of the workforce. Involvement of external investors can create unequal benefit sharing, and limited access to formal training restricts skill development. These issues show that empowerment remains uneven and underline the need for ongoing efforts to achieve more inclusive development.

Policy implications for community empowerment in the context of Vietnam

Currently, Vietnam has enacted a range of preferential policies to promote CBT, particularly in mountainous and ethnic minority regions. In October 2024, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism issued the Master Plan for CBT Development in Vietnam. However, to effectively empower local communities and women, especially among ethnic minorities in remote mountainous areas such as Lo Lo Chai, the government needs to prioritize targeted interventions. These include investments in management and entrepreneurship training programs for local communities, with a particular emphasis on women, alongside heritage conservation initiatives. Promoting local role models and community champions can catalyze broader participation and collective action. Additional measures such as financial support for women-led startups, digital transformation in CBT management and the promotion of innovative tourism products are crucial to ensuring both sustainable development and the preservation of cultural heritage within these communities.

Vietnam has enacted preferential policies to promote CBT, including the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism's 2024 Master Plan for CBT Development. To effectively empower local communities, the government should prioritize: (1) management and entrepreneurship training, particularly for women; (2) heritage conservation initiatives linked to economic incentives; (3) promotion of local role models and community champions; (4) financial support for women-led enterprises; and (5) digital transformation in CBT management. The Japanese experience with Kankou Machizukuri offers a relevant model: positioning tourism as a tool for regional revitalization while preserving cultural values. Vietnam can draw on this approach to strengthen locally-driven CBT initiatives.

6. Conclusion

The Lo Lo Chai case demonstrates that community empowerment can drive meaningful change in rural communities through CBT. A local role model's visible success, initially facilitated by an external catalyst, inspired community-wide participation through informal networks rather than formal programs. Local leadership, collective participation, and strategic resource mobilization combined to create a replicable model for sustainable tourism development.

As a women-led enterprise, Cực Bắc Café demonstrates the potential of empowering local actors to drive tourism development while preserving cultural heritage and building social cohesion. The application of Kankou Machizukuri as an analytical lens reveals how the interplay between local champions and external facilitators can generate sustainable rural development outcomes.

To ensure sustainable growth, the Vietnamese government should implement targeted policies supporting capacity building, digital transformation, and access to finance, especially for women and marginalized groups. Future research should examine how role-model-driven empowerment processes unfold across diverse cultural and institutional contexts and whether the Kankou Machizukuri framework can be applied to other Southeast Asian CBT cases.

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