

COMMUNITY ENTERPRISES AND THE GRASSROOTS ECONOMY IN DRIVING COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTH TOURISM A CASE STUDY OF PHU TOK, BUENG KAN PROVINCE*

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Abstract

This research article aims to: 1) examine the potential of community-based health tourism at Phu Tok tourist attraction in Bueng Kan Province, and 2) analyze the role of community enterprises in driving the grassroots economy through tourism development. The study employed a qualitative research methodology. Data were collected from 60 key informants, including community enterprise members, homestay operators, community leaders, local administrators, the Wat Jetiyakhiri committee, and tourists. Research instruments included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. Data were analyzed using content analysis.

The research findings are as follows:

1. Phu Tok demonstrates strong potential for community-based health tourism, as its distinctive natural landscape and sacred cultural setting enable embodied outdoor recreation experiences through moderate-intensity physical activities, integrating physical health, mental restoration, and spiritual well-being.

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2. The Ban Na Kham Khaen Herbal Community Enterprise plays a significant role in supporting tourism-driven economic activities through herbal product development and health services; however, current management is constrained by fragmented governance, limited stakeholder integration, and unequal benefit distribution.

The study makes a conceptual contribution by proposing a staged community-based health tourism framework, describing a transformation pathway from health-promotion tourism to integrated wellness tourism and, subsequently, to non-competitive sport-for-health tourism. This framework highlights participatory governance and the integration of natural, cultural, and biocultural resources as key mechanisms for achieving sustainable health, economic, and social outcomes at the community level.

Keywords: Community Enterprises, Grassroots Economy, Community- Based Health Tourism, Local Economic Development

Introduction

In recent decades, community-based tourism (CBT) has gained increasing attention as an effective approach to promoting local economic development and improving the livelihoods of rural communities. This tourism model emphasizes community participation in tourism management, local control of resources, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits among community members (Murphy, 1985; Scheyvens, 1999). By integrating local cultural assets, natural resources, and traditional knowledge, community-based tourism can serve as an important mechanism for strengthening local economies and fostering sustainable development.

Within the broader framework of local economic development, the concepts of the grassroots economy and creative economy have been widely recognized as important drivers of community development. These approaches

emphasize the utilization of local resources, cultural heritage, and indigenous knowledge to generate economic value and expand economic opportunities at the community level (UNCTAD, 2010). In many developing countries, community enterprises have played a crucial role in stimulating rural economic activities through the development of local products, cultural services, and tourism-related businesses (Natsuda et al., 2012). Recent studies also highlight that community enterprises can strengthen local economic resilience and contribute to sustainable rural development when they are effectively integrated with tourism and local value chains (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; OECD, 2020).

In addition, health tourism and wellness tourism have emerged as rapidly growing segments of the global tourism industry. Increasing awareness of health, well-being, and sustainable lifestyles has encouraged tourists to seek destinations that provide relaxation, wellness experiences, and nature-based activities (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). Recent research suggests that health tourism has become an important strategy for rural tourism development, particularly in areas with natural resources, traditional medicine, and local cultural practices that support wellness experiences (Hall, 2020; UNWTO, 2021). Integrating health tourism with community-based tourism therefore presents new opportunities for rural communities to diversify tourism products while simultaneously strengthening local economic systems.

Bueng Kan Province in northeastern Thailand possesses significant tourism potential due to its unique natural landscapes and cultural heritage. Among its key attractions, Phu Tok, located at Wat Jetiyakhiri, has become an important religious and natural tourism destination. Despite the increasing number of visitors to this site, the connection between tourism development and the grassroots economy of local communities has not been systematically examined. In particular, the role of community enterprises in transforming local resources and cultural assets into economic opportunities through health-related tourism activities remains underexplored.

A review of existing literature indicates that many studies on community-based tourism primarily focus on tourism management, community participation, and socio-cultural impacts. However, limited research has examined how community enterprises function as a key mechanism for driving the grassroots economy through community-based health tourism, particularly in rural areas of northeastern Thailand. This research gap highlights the need for further investigation into how local enterprises and tourism activities can be integrated to strengthen community economic systems and promote sustainable development.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the potential of community-based health tourism at the Phu Tok tourist attraction in Bueng Kan Province and to analyze the role of community enterprises in driving the grassroots economy through tourism development.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the potential of community-based health tourism at the Phu Tok tourist attraction in Bueng Kan Province.
2. To analyze the role of community enterprises in driving the grassroots economy through the development of community-based health tourism.

Literature Review

1. Community-Based Tourism

Community-based tourism (CBT) has been widely recognized as an important approach to promoting sustainable tourism development and enhancing the socio-economic well-being of local communities. The concept emphasizes community participation in tourism planning, management, and

benefit-sharing. According to Murphy (1985), tourism development should be based on community participation to ensure that local residents receive economic and social benefits from tourism activities. Community-based tourism also encourages local control over tourism resources and promotes cultural preservation.

Scheyvens (1999) further explained that community-based tourism can empower local communities economically, socially, and psychologically when tourism development allows local people to actively participate in decision-making and resource management. Through this approach, tourism can become a mechanism for strengthening community capacity and promoting local economic development.

Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of community participation and collaboration among stakeholders in achieving successful community-based tourism development. Sustainable tourism initiatives require strong cooperation between local communities, government agencies, and tourism stakeholders to ensure equitable distribution of tourism benefits and long-term sustainability (Dodds & Butler, 2020).

2. Health and Wellness Tourism

Health tourism and wellness tourism have emerged as important segments of the global tourism industry. Increasing awareness of health and well-being has encouraged tourists to seek destinations that provide wellness experiences, relaxation, and natural healing environments. Smith and Puczko (2014) defined health tourism as travel associated with maintaining or improving one's health and well-being through activities such as spa treatments, wellness programs, and traditional health practices.

Wellness tourism has also been recognized as an important strategy for rural tourism development, particularly in areas with natural resources and traditional knowledge related to health practices. According to Hall (2020), tourism destinations that integrate nature-based experiences with health and

wellness activities can enhance their competitiveness while supporting sustainable tourism development.

Furthermore, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020) reported that wellness tourism has become one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors globally. Integrating wellness activities with local cultural knowledge and natural resources provides new opportunities for communities to develop unique tourism products and attract tourists seeking authentic experiences.

3. Community Enterprises and Grassroots Economy

Community enterprises play a significant role in promoting local economic development and strengthening grassroots economies in rural areas. These enterprises are typically established by community members to utilize local resources and traditional knowledge in producing goods and services that generate income within the community.

In Thailand, community enterprises have been promoted as an important mechanism for supporting grassroots economic development. Natsuda et al. (2012) noted that initiatives such as the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) program have encouraged communities to develop value-added products from local resources, thereby enhancing economic opportunities in rural areas.

Community enterprises can also contribute to tourism development by transforming local knowledge and resources into tourism products and experiences. When community enterprises are integrated with tourism activities, they can create economic opportunities for local residents and promote income circulation within the community. This integration is particularly important in rural areas where tourism can serve as a catalyst for economic development and community empowerment (OECD, 2020).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the potential of community-based health tourism and to analyze the role of community enterprises in driving the grassroots economy through tourism development. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because the study focused on understanding local perspectives, community participation, and socio-economic dynamics related to tourism development within the community context.

The research aimed to examine how community enterprises contribute to economic activities associated with tourism and how local resources, cultural heritage, and traditional knowledge can be integrated into health tourism development in rural communities.

Study Area

The study was conducted at Phu Tok tourist attraction, located at Wat Jetiyakhiri in Bueng Kan Province, Northeastern Thailand. Phu Tok is an important religious and natural tourism destination known for its unique landscape, cultural significance, and spiritual heritage. The surrounding communities also possess valuable local knowledge related to herbal medicine and traditional health practices, which provide opportunities for developing community-based health tourism activities.

This area was selected because it represents a location where natural resources, religious tourism, and community enterprises coexist and have the potential to contribute to grassroots economic development.

Key Informants

The participants in this study consisted of 60 key informants selected through purposive sampling. The selection focused on individuals who were

directly involved in tourism activities, community development, or local economic activities in the Phu Tok area.

The key informants included: (1) Members of community (2) enterprises Homestay operators (3) Community leaders (4) Local administrative organization representatives (5) The committee of Wat Jetiyakhiri and (6) Tourists visiting the area

These participants were selected because they possess relevant knowledge and experience regarding tourism development, community economic activities, and local resource utilization.

Research Instruments

The study employed several qualitative research instruments to collect comprehensive data. These included:

1. In-depth interviews to explore perspectives of community leaders, community enterprise members, and local authorities regarding tourism development and local economic activities.

2. Focus group discussions to gather collective insights from community members and stakeholders concerning the opportunities and challenges of community-based health tourism.

3. Field observations conducted at the Phu Tok tourist attraction and surrounding communities in order to observe tourism activities, local products, community enterprises, and interactions between tourists and local residents.

These instruments allowed the researcher to collect rich and detailed information about the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of tourism in the study area.

Data Collection

Data were collected through fieldwork conducted in the Phu Tok area. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with key informants and organized focus group discussions with community members and stakeholders involved in tourism

activities. Field observations were also carried out to examine tourism facilities, community enterprise activities, and local tourism-related economic practices.

All interviews and discussions were documented and recorded to ensure accuracy of information. The collected data were subsequently transcribed and organized for analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using **content analysis**. This method was used to systematically examine the qualitative information obtained from interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations.

The analysis process involved the following steps:

1. Organizing and transcribing the collected data
2. Identifying key themes related to community-based tourism, community enterprises, and grassroots economic activities
3. Interpreting the relationships between tourism development and local economic systems
4. Synthesizing the findings to explain the role of community enterprises in promoting community-based health tourism and grassroots economic development.

The results of the analysis were then presented in a descriptive form to explain the patterns and dynamics of tourism and economic activities within the community.

Results

Potential of Community-Based Health Tourism at Phu Tok

The findings indicate that the Phu Tok tourist attraction in Bueng Kan Province has significant potential to develop community-based health tourism. The area is characterized by its distinctive natural landscape, religious significance, and cultural heritage. Phu Tok, located at Wat Jetiyakhiri, attracts a

considerable number of visitors due to its unique wooden stairways leading to the mountain summit and its reputation as a sacred religious site.

In addition to its natural and spiritual value, the surrounding communities possess local wisdom related to herbal medicine and traditional health practices. Local residents have long utilized herbal plants for health care and traditional remedies. This local knowledge provides opportunities for developing health-related tourism activities such as herbal learning programs, herbal product demonstrations, and traditional Thai wellness practices.

The combination of natural resources, religious tourism, and traditional knowledge creates favorable conditions for developing community-based health tourism in the Phu Tok area.

Role of Community Enterprises in Driving the Grassroots Economy

The study found that community enterprises play an important role in supporting economic activities associated with tourism development in the Phu Tok area. In particular, the Ban Na Kham Khaen Herbal Community Enterprise has been actively involved in producing and developing herbal products derived from locally available plants. These products include herbal drinks, herbal medicines, and other health-related items that can be offered to tourists as part of the local tourism experience. The activities of the community enterprise not only generate income for members but also contribute to the circulation of income within the community.

Furthermore, community enterprises serve as a mechanism for linking local resources, traditional knowledge, and tourism activities. By transforming local herbal knowledge into marketable products and services, community enterprises help create economic value and strengthen the grassroots economy.

Challenges in Tourism and Community Economic Development

Despite the strong tourism potential of the area, the findings reveal several challenges affecting tourism management and economic development within the community.

First, there is limited collaboration among stakeholders, including local authorities, community members, and religious institutions. The lack of coordination in tourism planning and management reduces the efficiency of tourism development.

Second, the distribution of tourism income within the community remains uneven. Some groups benefit more from tourism activities, while others have limited opportunities to participate in tourism-related economic activities.

Third, internal conflicts within the community have occasionally affected tourism management and cooperation among stakeholders. These conflicts hinder collective decision-making and reduce the overall effectiveness of community-based tourism development.

Development Approach for Community-Based Health Tourism

Based on the findings, the study proposes an approach for developing community-based health tourism in the Phu Tok area. The proposed approach emphasizes the integration of natural resources, cultural heritage, and local wisdom related to health and herbal medicine.

Potential tourism activities include:

- Herbal learning and herbal garden tours
- Demonstrations of herbal product preparation
- Traditional Thai massage and wellness services
- Community homestay experiences
- Local food and herbal product markets

Strengthening cooperation among community enterprises, local government organizations, and tourism stakeholders is essential for improving tourism management and expanding economic opportunities for local residents.

Through the integration of tourism activities and community enterprise development, community-based health tourism can become an important mechanism for promoting the grassroots economy and supporting sustainable community development.

Table 1 Synthesis of Research Findings on Community-Based Health Tourism and Grassroots Economic Development

Key Findings	Description	Economic Implications	Contribution to Grassroots Economy
Tourism Potential of Phu Tok	Phu Tok possesses distinctive natural landscapes, religious significance, and cultural heritage that attract tourists. The area also has local herbal knowledge that can support health tourism activities.	Tourism resources create opportunities for developing health-related tourism products and services.	Supports local income generation through tourism activities and community participation.
Role of Community Enterprises	The Ban Na Kham Khaen Herbal Community Enterprise develops herbal products derived from local plants and	Community enterprises transform local resources into economic products and tourism services.	Enhances community income circulation and strengthens local economic activities.

	traditional knowledge		
Local Resource Utilization	Local herbal knowledge and traditional wellness practices are integrated into tourism activities such as herbal learning programs and herbal product demonstrations.	Local resources are converted into tourism experiences and value-added products.	Promotes sustainable use of local resources and community-based economic development.
Challenges in Tourism Development	Limited collaboration among stakeholders, unequal distribution of tourism income, and internal community conflicts affect tourism management.	Inefficient tourism management reduces the economic benefits that tourism can bring to the community.	Highlights the need for stronger community participation and collaborative management
Development Approach	Integrating natural resources, cultural heritage, and local wisdom to develop health tourism activities such as herbal tourism, wellness services, and community homestays.	Diversifies tourism products and expands economic opportunities for local residents.	Strengthens grassroots economic development and promotes sustainable community tourism.

The synthesis presented in Table 1 summarizes the key findings regarding tourism potential, the role of community enterprises, and the implications for grassroots economic development in the Phu Tok area.

Table 2 Economic Mechanisms of Community Enterprises in Driving the Grassroots Economy through Community-Based Health Tourism

Economic Component	Community Activity	Economic Function	Economic Outcome
Local Natural Resources	Utilization of herbal plants and natural resources in the Phu Tok area	Provides raw materials for health-related tourism products and services	Creation of value-added local products and tourism experiences
Local Wisdom and Cultural Knowledge	Traditional herbal knowledge, wellness practices, and community lifestyle	Transforms cultural and traditional knowledge into tourism activities	Enhances the attractiveness of community-based health tourism
Community Enterprises	Production and development of herbal products by the Ban Na Kham Khaen Herbal Community Enterprise	Acts as a local economic mechanism linking production, tourism, and local markets	Generates income and promotes local economic circulation
Tourism Activities	Herbal learning programs, wellness tourism activities, and homestay services	Expands tourism-related economic opportunities within the community	Diversifies local income sources and supports rural livelihoods
Community Collaboration	Cooperation among community members, enterprises, and local organizations	Strengthens tourism management and community participation	Promotes sustainable grassroots economic development

Table 2 illustrates the economic mechanisms through which community enterprises contribute to grassroots economic development in the context of community-based health tourism at Phu Tok. The integration of local resources, traditional knowledge, tourism activities, and community enterprises creates economic opportunities that support local income generation and sustainable community development.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the important role of community enterprises in supporting community-based health tourism and contributing to grassroots economic development in rural areas. The results indicate that the Phu Tok tourist attraction possesses significant potential for developing community-based health tourism due to the integration of natural resources, religious tourism, and local wisdom related to herbal medicine. These findings are consistent with previous studies that emphasize the importance of utilizing local resources and cultural heritage as a foundation for sustainable tourism development (Scheyvens, 1999; Murphy, 1985).

The study also demonstrates that community enterprises can function as an important mechanism for strengthening local economic systems. In the case of the Ban Na Kham Khaen Herbal Community Enterprise, local herbal knowledge has been transformed into economic products and tourism-related services that generate income for community members. This finding supports the concept that community enterprises play a significant role in promoting local economic development by linking local resources, traditional knowledge, and market opportunities (Natsuda et al., 2012). Through the development of herbal products and health-related tourism activities, community enterprises contribute to the circulation of income within the community and support grassroots economic growth.

Furthermore, the integration of health tourism with community-based tourism provides new economic opportunities for rural communities. Health tourism activities such as herbal learning programs, wellness services, and traditional health practices allow communities to diversify tourism products while maintaining their cultural identity. This finding is consistent with recent research indicating that wellness and health tourism can enhance the competitiveness of tourism destinations while simultaneously supporting sustainable local development (Smith & Puczko, 2014; Hall, 2020).

However, the results also reveal several challenges affecting the development of community-based health tourism in the Phu Tok area. Limited cooperation among stakeholders, including community members, local authorities, and religious institutions, was identified as a significant barrier to effective tourism management. Similar challenges have been identified in previous studies, which indicate that successful community-based tourism development requires strong collaboration, shared decision-making, and effective governance among stakeholders (OECD, 2020; UNWTO, 2021).

Another important issue identified in this study is the unequal distribution of tourism income within the community. While some groups benefit directly from tourism activities, others have limited opportunities to participate in tourism-related economic activities. This situation reflects broader challenges in grassroots economic development, where unequal access to resources and opportunities can hinder the overall benefits of tourism development.

Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening the role of community enterprises and improving collaboration among local stakeholders are essential for enhancing the contribution of tourism to grassroots economic development. By integrating tourism activities with local resources, traditional knowledge, and community enterprises, rural communities can develop sustainable economic systems that support both tourism development and community well-being.

Conclusion

This study examined the potential of community-based health tourism at the Phu Tok tourist attraction in Bueng Kan Province and analyzed the role of community enterprises in driving the grassroots economy through tourism development. The findings indicate that Phu Tok possesses strong potential for developing community-based health tourism due to the integration of natural resources, religious tourism, and local wisdom related to herbal medicine and traditional health practices.

The study highlights the important role of community enterprises, particularly the Ban Na Kham Khaen Herbal Community Enterprise, in transforming local resources and traditional knowledge into economic products and tourism-related services. Through the development of herbal products and health tourism activities, community enterprises contribute to local income generation and promote economic circulation within the community. These activities demonstrate how community enterprises can function as a key mechanism for strengthening grassroots economic development.

However, the study also identified several challenges affecting the effective development of community-based health tourism, including limited collaboration among stakeholders, unequal distribution of tourism income, and internal community conflicts. These issues indicate that successful tourism development requires stronger cooperation among community members, local authorities, and related organizations.

Overall, the findings suggest that integrating community enterprises with tourism development can significantly enhance grassroots economic opportunities in rural areas. By utilizing local resources, cultural heritage, and traditional knowledge, communities can develop sustainable tourism activities that support both economic growth and community well-being. The study contributes to the understanding of how community enterprises can support

community-based health tourism and promote sustainable grassroots economic development.

Research Contribution and Conceptual Model

New Knowledge from the Study

This study contributes new knowledge by proposing a conceptual understanding of how community enterprises function as a driving mechanism for community-based health tourism that supports grassroots economic development. The findings demonstrate that the integration of local tourism resources, traditional herbal knowledge, and the management capacity of community enterprises can generate sustainable tourism activities rooted in community participation and local wisdom.

The study further reveals that community enterprises play a crucial role in transforming local resources and indigenous knowledge into tourism-related products and services. These activities not only enhance tourism experiences but also contribute to income generation, employment opportunities, and economic circulation within the community, which are fundamental characteristics of grassroots economic development. Therefore, community enterprises can be considered a key mechanism that links local resources with tourism activities and ultimately strengthens the grassroots economy in rural communities.

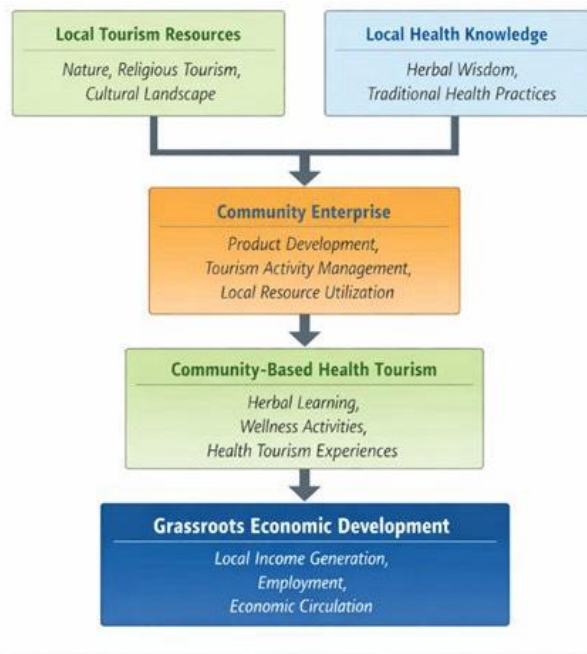


Figure 1 Community Enterprise–Driven Community-Based Health Tourism Model for Grassroots Economic Development

This conceptual model illustrates how community enterprises act as a key mechanism linking local tourism resources and traditional health knowledge with community-based health tourism activities. These activities contribute to grassroots economic development through income generation, local employment, and economic circulation within the community.

Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

Government agencies and local administrative organizations should support the development of community-based health tourism by strengthening community enterprises, improving tourism infrastructure, and promoting local herbal products and wellness activities. Such support will help enhance the role of community enterprises in driving grassroots economic development.

Practical Recommendations

Local communities should strengthen collaboration among stakeholders, including community leaders, religious institutions, tourism operators, and government agencies. Community enterprises should also develop health tourism activities that integrate local herbal knowledge, cultural resources, and wellness experiences to increase tourism value and generate income for local residents.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should examine the economic impacts of community-based health tourism on local households and community enterprises, particularly in terms of income generation and grassroots economic development. Comparative studies in different regions of Thailand would also help identify effective models for sustainable tourism development.

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