

Intrinsic barriers to and opportunities for community empowerment in community-based tourism development in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam

Abstract

Despite community empowerment being a crucial component of sustainable tourism, true community empowerment is in fact hard to achieve and still eludes many countries. Few studies have looked at determining factors that may inhibit or encourage empowerment processes for local people. In response to this gap, this article explores intrinsic barriers to and opportunities for community empowerment in community-based tourism development in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam. Drawing on empirical data, results show that intrinsic barriers to community empowerment derived from their dependence on government, especially in top-down political systems such as in Vietnam, and the framing of knowledge associated with formal education. Findings also reveal opportunities to enhance community empowerment if community power were acknowledged, and locals were able to exercise that power. Such recognition has the potential to transform experiences of/about local people, to empower them by shifting the focus to a paradigm that starts from within local people themselves, and their community, to using their inner strength - a significant power that they could use to enable them to achieve what they desire in tourism, and to make real change occur. The paper concludes with the implications of this analysis for community empowerment and sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: CBT, local people's power, sustainable tourism development, global south, tea tourism.

Introduction

Community-based tourism (CBT) has been seen as an effective model to promote the development of sustainable tourism (López-Guzmán, Sánchez-Cañizares, & Pavón, 2011; Simons & de Groot, 2015) because of its contribution to economic development and social and environmental protection of the destinations (Polnyotee & Thadaniti, 2015). While CBT is expected to bring meaningful benefits to communities involved (Manyara & Jones, 2007), local communities need to act as key stakeholders because their support and participation are pivotal

in its successful implementation (Muganda, Sirima, & Ezra, 2013). Scholars argue that CBT appears to embrace community empowerment (Dolezal, 2013; Stone, 2015), and that empowered communities can contribute to the development of successful sustainable tourism ventures (Mendoza-Ramos & Prideaux, 2017).

Even though literature has insisted on the crucial role of community empowerment in sustainable tourism development (Cole, 2006; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Strzelecka, Boley, & Strzelecka, 2017), little emphasis has been given on how to (actually) achieve that (Joo, Woosnam, Strzelecka, & Boley, 2020). Twenty years after CBT became an essential part of sustainable tourism, it is still seen as a complex process with regard to the issues of power and empowerment of locals and their communities (Simons & de Groot, 2015).

Additionally, the ultimate CBT's goal of true community empowerment eludes many countries (Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Community empowerment is seen as highly idealistic and not in line with reality (Simons & de Groot, 2015). Locals continue to be in weaker positions and little involved in decisions (Choi & Murray, 2010; Felix, Brent, & Neil, 2017). Evaluations of CBT studies aimed at identifying factors that may inhibit or encourage empowerment processes for locals, therefore, are needed (Knight & Cottrell, 2016; Zielinski, Kim, & Yanes, 2018); especially to better understand why empowerment is hard to achieve and how empowerment could be enhanced. In response to this need, this paper draws on a case study on local tea tourism in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam, to: (i) identify intrinsic barriers to community empowerment in CBT development; and, (ii) explore opportunities for enhancing community empowerment.

This paper is structured as follows. First, key concepts concerning CBT developments and community empowerment are discussed. Second, the case study area is described, along with methods for data collection and analysis. This article then presents results and discussion on intrinsic barriers of community empowerment, and opportunities to empower locals in tourism activities. The paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of this analysis for the achievement of community empowerment and sustainable tourism development.

CBT developments and community empowerment

Interest in sustainable tourism practices has increased over the past decade with many moving away from mass tourism and seeking different kinds of experiences, including local customs, history and cultures (Williams & Lew, 2015). Notably, this shift in tourist preferences has given rise to CBT initiatives where tourism is often managed and owned by local communities. These initiatives may include accommodation services through homestays and

experiences relating to traditional cultures such as food and livelihoods (López-Guzmán et al., 2011). Because this creates opportunities to encourage the participation of, and support for, locals, it can also foster the development of those communities.

CBT also takes environmental, social and cultural sustainability into account, gives host communities a primary role in tourism operations and enables benefits to be transferred to the whole community (Beeton, 2006; Salazar, 2012). Consequently, CBT has been adopted in many localities around the world as an effective model for sustainable tourism development (Polnyotee & Thadaniti, 2015). Here, we highlight this argument by drawing on the sustainable tourism literature to elicit how sustainable tourism offers opportunities to enhance community empowerment, which in turn, can be operationalised via CBT.

Many scholars argue that a key component of sustainable tourism is its ability to contribute to community empowerment (Cole, 2006; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Sofield, 2003). Power and empowerment have also been identified as critical success factors for CBT projects (Simons & de Groot, 2015). Empowerment may be defined as ‘a process, a mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs’ (Rappaport, 1987, p. 122). Empowerment is therefore aimed at enabling individuals, or groups, to exert control over factors that affect their lives (Di Castri, 2004; Scheyvens, 1999). Empowerment has become a vital construct for understanding the development of individuals, and communities alike (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

While the sustainable tourism literature discusses a number of dimensions of empowerment, many studies consider empowerment under the single overarching dimension of political power (Cole, 2006; Farrelly, 2011; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2015). Political empowerment has the closest ties to Rappaport’s (1987) general definition of empowerment focused on ‘gaining mastery over one’s affairs’ (p. 122). Communities are politically empowered when they have a voice in how tourism is developed and managed in their communities (Scheyvens, 1999). They have the opportunity to raise questions, share their concerns, and participate in decisions about aspects of development that impacts their lives, and ultimately influence the direction of tourism development (Wicks, 2015). This means real community empowerment is not a mere inclusion of residents in tourism activities (e.g. community participation) (Scheyvens, 1999).

This understanding of what community empowerment entails may contest many reports of successful CBT initiatives (Snyder & Sulle, 2011). Several studies (Timothy, 1999; Tosun, 1998) revealed that locals do not get adequate benefits if they do not have opportunities to take

part in tourism decision-making. A necessary condition for sustainable tourism to occur is the participation of local residents in the decisions that affect them and their families and communities (Choi & Murray, 2010; Farrelly, 2011; Iorio & Corsale, 2014). Such participation needs to occur from the outset of CBT initiatives to enable communities to identify *their* own needs and pursue tourism development to satisfy *their* identified desires (Battadzhiev & Sofield, 2004; Lepp, 2007).

However, in a majority of developing countries, decision-making and policies (including in tourism) have often been issued from the top with no input taken, or required, from the local communities (Salazar, 2012). Such restrictions obviously compromise their empowerment (Strzelecka et al., 2017). As a result, local communities only benefit via being employed by government-owned initiatives or encouraged to operate small-scale businesses, rather than being fully involved in the decisions (Tosun, 2000). CBT development can be encouraged by the government; community empowerment must be, however, from the bottom up since that is the very purpose of CBT development (López-Guzmán et al., 2011). It is no longer CBT if it is imposed.

Political empowerment should not be the only dimension, as well as the most important aspect of empowerment. Many scholars argue that empowerment has other dimensions: economic, psychological, and social (Boley, McGehee, Perdue, & Long, 2014; Joo et al., 2020; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Recognizing these aspects of empowerment enables a more comprehensive understanding of community empowerment in CBT.

Psychological empowerment, within a tourism context, occurs when tourism initiatives promote community confidence, self-esteem, and pride thanks to outsiders' recognition of the uniqueness and value of local culture, natural resources and local traditional knowledge (Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Scheyvens, 1999). The pride and self-esteem enhancement associated with psychological empowerment has been recognized as one of the most crucial non-economic benefits of sustainable tourism (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008), and an essential element of a successful tourism destination (Scheyvens, 1999). Psychological empowerment also occurs when tourism promotes a feeling of communities being able to assume their new roles in tourism (Ramos & Prideaux, 2014).

Social empowerment occurs when community members become bonded and work together for tourism development (Scheyvens, 1999). Boley & Mcgehee (2014) argue that social empowerment can be embodied from understanding residents' perceptions of how tourism either brings their community together or alienates them, or how it affects their

community's cohesion. Having a common goal of being successful in tourism may strengthen the connection within the community. Social empowerment therefore leads to increased cohesion and collaboration (Maruyama, Woosnam, & Boley, 2016). When local communities mobilize together and use collective power, this approach goes beyond individuals and their capacities and tap into what Russell (2017a) calls relational (plural) power. Relational power enables the capacities of individuals to be multiplied and may lead to cooperation which, in turn, facilitates CBT development. This can then generate community power - an important element for tourism development (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001).

Economic empowerment is evident when tourism brings economic benefits to the local community (Scheyvens, 1999). However, tourism may not bring any (or sufficient) benefits to local communities as profits commonly retained by external travel agencies (Chirenje, Chitotombe, Gukurume, Chazovachii, & Chitongo, 2013; Lacher & Nepal, 2010). To address this issue, some social enterprises (e.g. NGOs, travel agents) are now focused on achieving a balance between income and social mission (Alegre & Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016; von der Weppen & Cochrane, 2012), including promoting CBT and bringing benefits for local communities by ensuring locals receive a deserved and fair share of tourism revenues (Dahles, Khieng, Verver, & Manders, 2019).

The dimensions of empowerment are all interlinked in CBT. While this study seeks to explore the intrinsic barriers to and the opportunities for community empowerment, deeper insights will be achieved from a more thorough understanding of the links among different aspects of community empowerment.

The study area

Vietnam tourism has developed quickly. The UNWTO ranked Vietnam first in Asia in terms of tourism growth and sixth among the top 10 fastest growing tourist destinations in the world in 2017 (CNN Travel, 2017), as the number of international visitors increased 31.2%, compared to 10 million visitors in 2016. This positive growth brings opportunities for CBT development as international tourists are often main CBT visitors. In Vietnam, tourists can choose various CBT-related activities such as visiting traditional handicraft villages, exploring nature, experiencing a farmer's life or discovering the unique cultures of ethnic minorities. While Mai Chau (Hoa Binh Province) and Sa Pa (Lao Cai Province) are pioneers and becomes main CBT destinations in Vietnam, other localities such as Thai Nguyen province have been also working hard to develop this form of tourism (Thai Nguyen Broadcast, 2015).

Thai Nguyen province located in North Vietnam, adjacent to Hanoi, is considered the economic and cultural center of the Northern mountainous provinces. Thanks to its climate and quality of soil, Thai Nguyen has developed tea cultivation for one hundred years, and is known as the ‘Capital’ of Vietnamese Tea (Thai Nguyen Online Trade, 2014). The tea villages are in lush natural scenery, quiet rural areas, with mild climate, and are home to 30 ethnic groups. This led Thai Nguyen to develop CBT associated with tea growing and local cultures.

The CBT model adopted in Thai Nguyen comprised an urban partnership and economic development program between Thai Nguyen city, Vietnam and the city of Victoria, Canada, for new rural construction (Thai Nguyen Broadcast, 2015). Canadian experts surveyed Thai Nguyen in 2011-12 to determine how they could support the city. As Thai Nguyen’s government was concerned with the tea area development, it was suggested the implementation of a pilot project for a CBT cultural village in Tan Cuong specialty tea production areas, and the project was implemented by the Cultural and Information Department under Thai Nguyen city’s People Committee in late 2012. The Canadians helped building the pilot project and provided training courses for locals in Tan Cuong. Courses focused on raising locals’ awareness of tourism benefits, tourism marketing skills, or skills in accommodation services (how to welcome guests, arrange accommodation, and prepare the menu and meals), and English lessons.

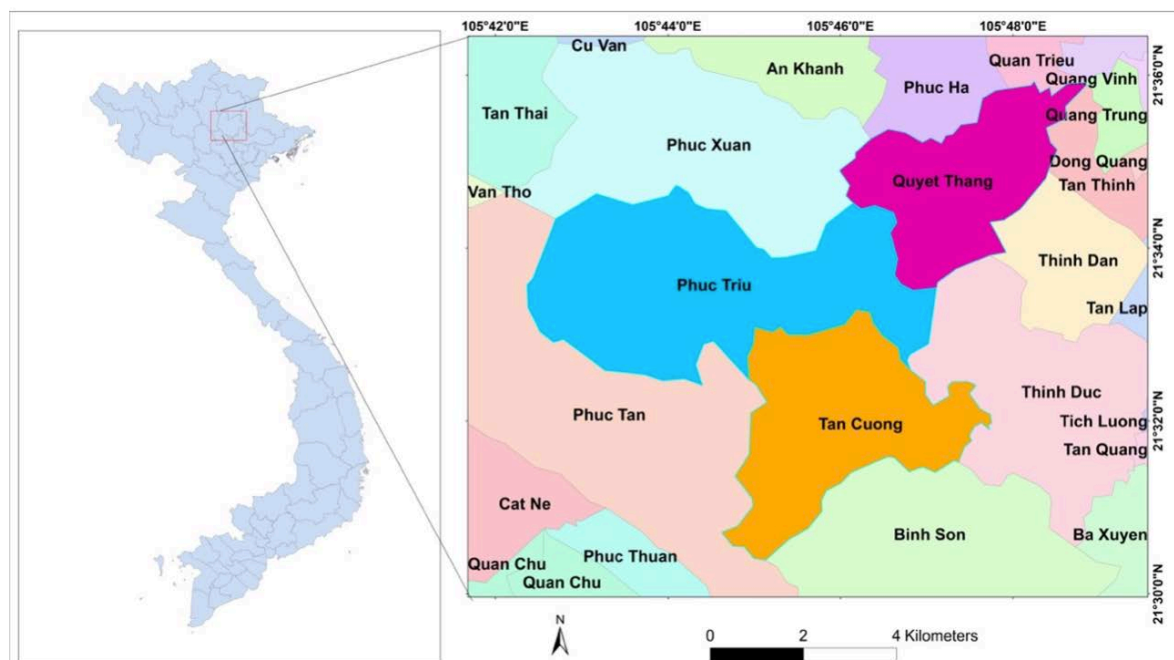


Figure 1: Location of the study areas (Tan Cuong, Phu Triu and Quyet Thang communes) in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam

Tan Cuong specialty tea areas are among the most famous in Thai Nguyen, their Tan Cuong tea brand, known as ‘No.1 tea’ (Le, 2012, p. 187), or ‘the most reputed tea’ (Bao, 2012, p. 172) of the country. Tan Cuong is one of the five national products registered under the geographic origin protection of the Department of Intellectual Property (Ministry of Sciences and Technologies). The certificate for Tan Cuong tea covers three communes: Phuc Xuan, Phuc Triu, and Tan Cuong, with a total area of 4,861.8 hectares. Tan Cuong commune covers 400 hectares; around 1,300 families grow and process tea (Bao, 2012).

The CBT project was implemented in three localities of Tan Cuong specialty tea areas, all subject of this paper, namely: Hong Thai 2 hamlet, Tan Cuong commune; Khuon 2 hamlet, Phuc Triu commune; and, Go Moc hamlet, Quyet Thang commune (see Figure 1).



Taking part in CBT in traditional tea production areas, tourists can visit green tea hills, be involved in picking tealeaves with farmers (see Figure 2), experience the crumpling and processing of tea according to traditional methods, listen to local traditional songs, and taste

local food specialties. Since this model was operationalized, community tourism became a new form of work option, and opportunities emerged for locals to develop a novel professional practice related to tea (Thai Nguyen Broadcast, 2015).

At the time of the study (July – October 2016), CBT development in Thai Nguyen was still in its initial stages. After the Canadian funded development CBT project ended in 2015, a few local households controlled the flow of mainly international visitors themselves from their connection with local tourism agencies. Tourist numbers, however, were sparse. Promotion of CBT activities was also lacking in the locality studied.

Methods

This study used a qualitative methodology as it allows studying people's experiences and other phenomena in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), from which social matters can be interpreted (Yin, 2011). Mixed qualitative techniques for data collection were used (see Figure 3). These included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, field notes and photography. This mixed approach was useful to provide a depth of subjective understandings, as ideas and opinions could be more clearly and deeply articulated. It also allowed a wider breadth of community responses (Creswell & Clark, 2011), and data triangulation, to community empowerment in CBT development in Thai Nguyen.

28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with three key groups: i) (All) eight local households who have already implemented some kind of home-stay/CBT services; ii) Seven households among tea growers who had not implemented home-stays or other tourism services; and, iii) Thirteen key informants (11 government officials and 2 stakeholders/experts) who worked on tea production management and/or CBT. Government officials were from different provincial, city and communal levels and were working with, and concerned about, the CBT development project. Other stakeholders included those who have expertise in tourism and consultants selected for their extensive knowledge and involvement in the CBT project and were identified from Thai Nguyen Province's Tourism Association and Victoria city (Canada). The interview questions explored the barriers for locals' participation in CBT; CBT impacts on local communities; local communities' roles in CBT development; and how and in what ways locals would like to participate in tourism development. Semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours and were audio recorded upon interviewee's permission.

Focus groups were formed in accordance with each commune in Tan Cuong specialty tea areas where CBT had already been implemented. Focus groups' participants were locals who

were identified based on information provided by interviewees following snow-balling principles. Three focus groups were conducted; each focus group lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and included 5-8 locals with experience in tea tourism and tea production. In all three focus groups, participants were from different age groups to maximize variety of views and insights. They were directed to talk on specific major topics as in the semi-structured interviews.

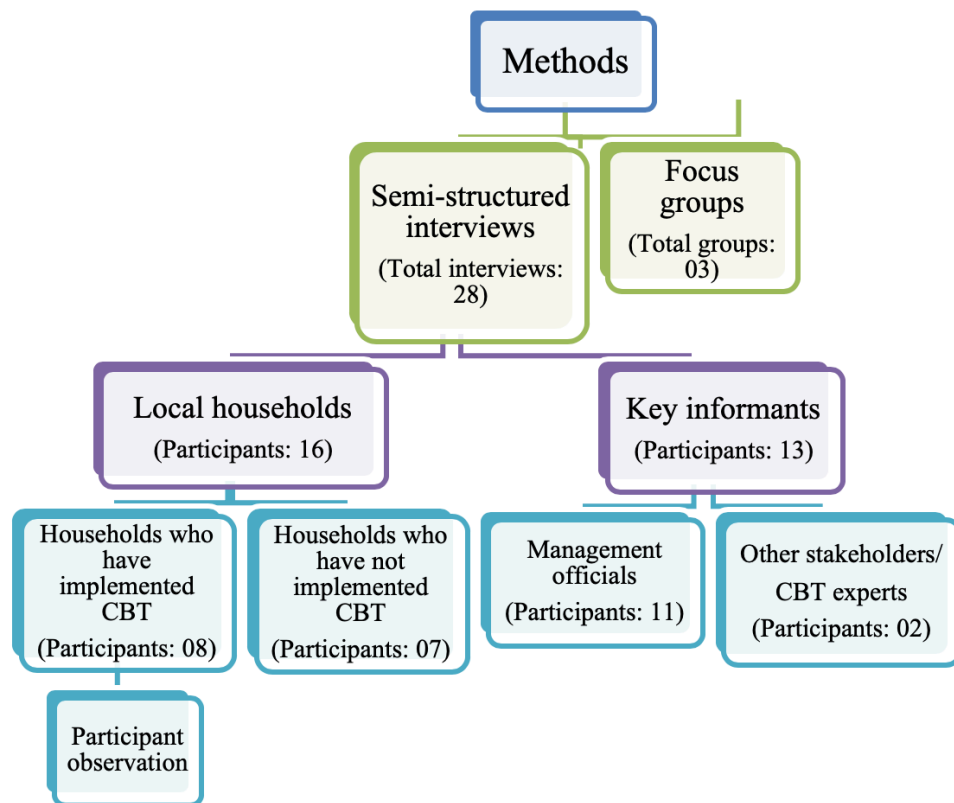


Figure 3: Summary of research methods for primary data collection

The first author also practiced participant observation of local daily activities over the course of a 3-month period to better understand the life of the local communities, to discover the way they saw it themselves, and to know the social contexts in which their behaviour occurred. It included, for example, being with local farmers harvesting tealeaves in the tea fields in the morning, processing tea at local households in the afternoon, and in attending CBT activities. Participants were fully informed about the research. Through many conversations, locals shared stories of tea plantation, their worries, and also their dreams. These participant observations helped the first author build up a relationship of trust and close rapport, from which people's beliefs, opinions, attitudes and interpretations could be explored.

The first author also comes from the Thai Nguyen province. She has visited these traditional tea production areas for both leisure and research purposes many times, therefore, she was familiar with the locality and the people inhabiting it. She speaks the same language and practices the local customs. Such commonalities enabled her to engage and be accepted in regular conversations with local people, even if the rural local communities and she did not possess the same identity. An emic perspective, i.e. the local point of view, a study ‘from within’, was therefore applied in the data interpretation and presentation.

During interviews, focus groups and participant observations, field notes were used to record time and place, remarks, and list questions about people and events for future investigation. Photos were taken to capture local people’s daily lives and CBT activities. It served as secondary evidence supporting the existing texts and findings.

After the fieldwork, primary data collected from interviews and focus groups were transcribed. NVivo 11 software was used to arrange contents from transcripts into separate themes. Categories were first established to investigate the barriers for local communities’ participation in CBT; CBT’s economic, social and environmental impacts; and, community participation as perceived by different groups of respondents (management officials, local communities, and CBT expert). Initial categories were then disaggregated into specific nodes in NVivo, including ‘dependence on government’, ‘lack of confidence’, ‘language constraint’, ‘perceived positive impacts’, and ‘perceived negative impacts’. Other emerging categories from the data were subsequently added, including challenges to and prospects of CBT and sustainable tourism development; power in tourism development; community empowerment; and the importance and recognition of local knowledge. Examples of specific themes coded are ‘desire for tea preservation’, ‘local power’, ‘mobilization power’, ‘tea experts’, and ‘locals’ life experiences’. This enabled a more refined understanding of the relevant data about community empowerment in CBT development.

Results

Our findings point to a series of barriers to and opportunities for community empowerment in CBT development. These are discussed next.

Barriers to community empowerment in CBT development

Two key barriers to community empowerment were identified by our study: (i) communities’ dependence on government support for CBT development, and (ii) the framing

of valid knowledge primarily as the level of formal education obtained by community members.

Dependence on government support for CBT development

The first barrier found by the authors was that local communities majorly depended on, and expected the support of, the government to implement CBT. They believed that tourism could only happen under government direction. Without such direction, tourism development seems impossible. This was identified by many during interviews and focus group discussions as exemplified below.

Only local authorities could make tourism possible because this is outside of our control. (*Interviewee (I) 9, non-CBT household*)

We must have guidelines, plans to follow. (*Focus group (FG) 1*)

We must have top-down support, if the local people do it ourselves, maybe we can never achieve tourism development. (*I6, CBT household*)

This is in line with other studies which found that local communities are often thought to primarily build and enhance their capacity through attending government-led tourism training sessions (Felix et al., 2017). The important issue is that belief led people to rely on the government on a range of fronts, instead of relying on their own initiatives, as one local person expressed:

Tourism development must be from the top-down to get people from the bottom-up. Without a top-down orientation, we do not know how to implement or navigate from the bottom up. (*I3, CBT household*)

Lack of awareness of local knowledge

How knowledgeable people are is often measured by how long they attended formal education. Other ways of knowing are rarely considered. The general perception (even from locals themselves) has been (and still is) that rural people lack knowledge because they have not reached a high level of education:

We are just farmers and don't have a high level of education. We don't know how to do tourism. (*III, non-CBT household*)

Local people, especially those who live in rural areas, do not often recognize their local knowledge. While people may not have the overall knowledge that can be gained from formal

education, locals in Tan Cuong acquired other ways of knowing through their rural work experiences and life itself. The CBT expert was well aware of this. Levels of education do not reflect other ways of knowing necessary for locals to carry on with their lives, she expressed:

There is a common perception that rural people are poorly educated, but their education level is different from their level of knowledge and ability to protect themselves locally. Now if we move to the countryside, certainly we cannot live as well as they do. They know many things that we don't... Learning from life, learning from the very nature of the disaster that caused the experiences of life, are among many very valuable sources of knowledge. Nature teaches them so much that many times we should acknowledge that we can learn a lot from them.

(I26, CBT expert)

The participant observation reinforced the importance of recognizing local knowledge. Thai Nguyen's locals might not know about formal entrepreneurship arrangements or tourism businesses but they have, to some extent, been entrepreneurs their whole lives by creating mechanisms to sell their tea. Thai Nguyen's farmers have also directly engaged with tourists interested in gaining rural experiences, and hold in-depth understanding and knowledge of their locality and tea culture. Both, their local knowledge and experiences are valuable elements necessary for CBT development (Dolezal, 2013) and do not necessarily depend on their level of formal education. Promoting other ways of knowing (such as recognising and valuing local knowledge about tea growing and making in our case) creates opportunities for community empowerment in tourism development.

Opportunities for community empowerment in CBT development

Opportunities identified to enhance community empowerment in CBT development were primarily linked to local's knowledge of traditional tea cultivation developed over years and generations. These also include their specific skill sets; self-initiative, creativity and invention; self-learning through life experiences; and, their ability to recognise local issues and solutions.

Knowing the art of making tea

Locals become tea experts when they share their unique knowledge and experiences in growing and processing tea. These include sensory experiences such as using their hands or observing the fire to feel/know whether temperature of the pan is correct to dry the tea so as to maximise its fragrance. For example, while pouring tea, a local woman defined a great cup of

tea as being ‘fragrant, and the taste is sweet and fatty’. The best tea is made from the top bud, the shorter it is picked the better, the sweeter taste it will have.

A CBT local man explained carefully how to make a good cup of tea. The important order is “First: water, second: tea, third: way of preparing the tea pot, fourth: pot”¹. Tea is very sensitive during processing but also when making a pot of tea. When he poured the tea, the tea water was clear, with a great smell, no broken bran: the tea was clean, fragrant. Their respect in carefully making tea, together with a profound knowledge of tea are what tourists look for, as well as their ability to manufacture products from tea, and knowing how to prepare local food, from local ingredients².

If only tealeaves are fried, the taste is very bitter, puckery and hard to swallow, but when fried with meat, it enhances the taste which is only slightly bitter. Potato soup is also cooked with tealeaves. All these recipes are thus linked to tea. (I4, CBT household)

Developing skills, self-motivation and self-learning through life experiences

Many locals develop skills, self-motivation and self-learning through real life experiences. Sharing their experiences about bettering their lives showed that the raw ingredient is their passion for their tea tradition. A CBT household talked about their difficulties in caring for tea plantations; from the straw that is added to the garden - which is no longer of high quality, the decline in soil fertility, and changes in weather patterns. Mastering the art of growing tea, therefore, requires ongoing life-long learning:

We always have to learn and innovate, even though our job has generations of tradition. Last year we did well but we are not sure this year. It requires extra effort and experience. Weather changes are unpredictable. That is why we must constantly learn. (I28, CBT household)

An exemplar of skills development, self-motivation and self-learning was provided by a local man who was not part of any official CBT project, but developed his own household into

¹ According to him, the best water to make a pot of tea is from the mountain, but it must be filtered by limestone, unspoiled, and untouched. The right water, right tea brand and the correct way of making tea will create a great cup of tea.

² Some of the local recipes are steamed chicken with tealeaves, tealeaves with sticky rice, spiced fish with tea-leaves, and salad with tea buds.

one (see Figure 4). His driving passion was traditional tea development. He introduced tea products to many regions, even brought his own raw ingredients and pans to process tea in those areas. He noticed that in many places, people invested in cafes to enjoy coffee, since coffee and tea are somewhat similar he wondered how tea culture could be promoted. He thus built a pergola to sit to drink tea with others or for business at his house. One time when sitting on a boat and enjoying drinking tea or coffee, he decided to make an artificial tea boat in which he planted tea trees, especially one ancient mid-land tea tree³. He brought it to a research Institute in Phu Tho province to obtain its scientific name. He carved it into the stone under the tea tree. He explained that he had to use the right technology to keep it alive. He really hoped to be able to introduce friends and delegations to the origin of tea trees when they come to Thai Nguyen.

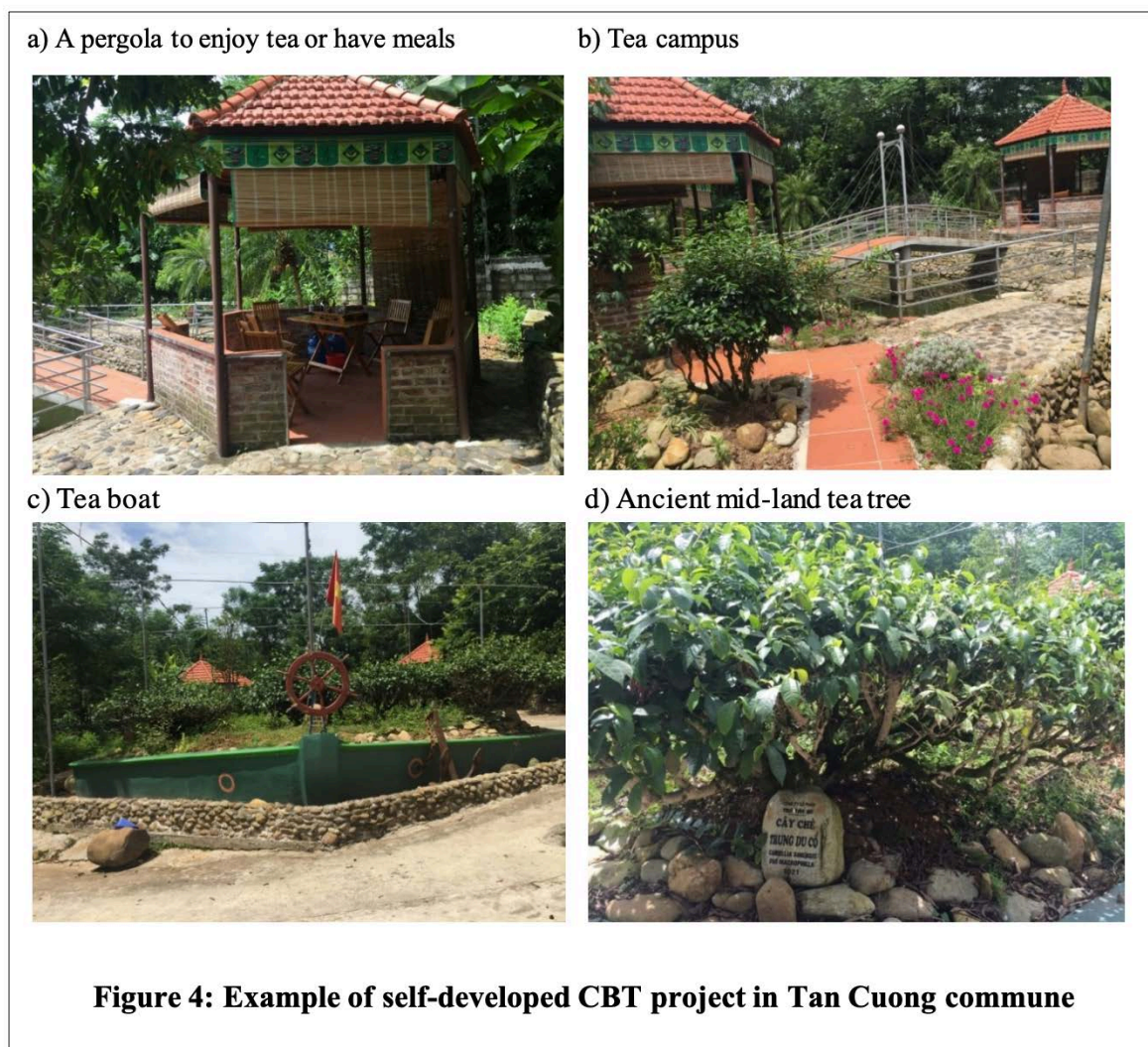
He shared that the income from tea is not high. Expanding his model requires more financing so he will have to expand gradually. He explained ideas for programs that locals could organize for tourists such as cultural arts, local singing and dance performances, and traditional games so tourists will want to stay overnight. His family organized programs for children from Hanoi to pick tea, process tealeaves using a traditional iron pan, have lunch made of dishes all related to green tea in Thai Nguyen. His house has now held over 10 tea experience tours. He accepts that most are family-oriented and experimental, and that it has not increased his family income yet; he did it by passion, knowledge and relationships with friends.

By going to many places, meeting many people, and sharing ideas, I learned a lot. Since then I had an idea for the development of tea tourism. Why not introduce our locality to friends?... I tested with my friends in advance to make sure it is comfortable, sharing is easier. So family members and friends will "go through" the test (*laughs*), to find out whether it is reasonable, second whether the food is suitable, and third to calculate the cost of the experience. Then I know whether it will work or not. So I have things to adjust. Then I welcome the next delegation of visitors... At present, I only work at a small scale, when conditions change, I will definitely develop further. (*I4, CBT household*)

Like others, people in these rural areas have constantly striven for better lives. Their passion and dedication have led some locals to give advice, passing on local tea techniques to

³ One of the first trees planted in Thai Nguyen in 1921.

many other places. People have different kinds of knowledge, other ways of knowing, which can be tapped into to further empower local people to improve their lives.



The significance of the many stories shared is that they are citizens at the centre of their communities, using their capabilities, along with those of their neighbours to make changes possible. They have a dream of improving their lives and their locality by developing their traditional tea production, and a passion for their trade:

Recalling traditional tea history is meaningful, but history does not make us rich; rich is when we have a dream to be rich. I am still developing tea products. Our traditional tea history is to remember and strive. (I14, non-CBT household)

It comes from the so-called passion. When people are really passionate and devoted to something, they will find it very valuable. (I4, CBT household)

Many stories shared by respondents demonstrated their latent, yet vigorous power, having made many difficult things possible. One management official from Thai Nguyen

recalled about the International Tea Festival organized in the locality for the first time in 2011. He was worried because he knew for sure that the state budget for the festival was very small. His problem was how to make it become the largest cultural festival of the city. Locals provided additional funds, and prepared all folk activities, so the Festival was a successful event and subsequently organized one every two years.

It was good luck that at that time the local people helped us with all their heart.
(I16, management official)

Similarly, a management official from Tan Cuong mentioned that in November 2015, they wanted to prepare a ceremony for the community certification as a new rural area, but the commune had financial difficulties. This was a great event, an honour, a title that not all communes had achieved. They were embarrassed because of the limited budget allocated for the ceremony but upon discussing it with the locals, they were told to do it big and received their full support:

The economic contributions were not much but the spiritual support was great. People brought money, tea. The total value was no more than 100 million VND (US\$ 4,390) but at a difficult time, 1 million (US\$ 44) is of great value. We held the ceremony very successfully. (I19, management official)

Annually, local authorities together with locals prepare a Spring Tea Festival before the Lunar New Year⁴ to honour tea trees and local farmers. They gathered comments and ideas from locals in terms of the festivals size, content, form, and also how to make their contribution reasonable and sustainable to ensure the festival continues to be held in the following years:

They created a great motivation for us that we should not give up, we have to maintain the local festival, we have to do better and bigger, if there is difficulty, they will join hands with us to make it happen. (I19, management official)

The examples above show that by including the community in decisions that can affect local tourism development there could be significant benefits to the whole region, but this needed to happen more often:

Frankly, everyone wants to earn. If guests only come to my house, and benefit my family, if there is nothing for all the people to benefit from, will tourists really

⁴ The biggest holiday in Vietnam.

come if they don't feel totally comfortable? If the interests of the whole region have been taken into account, then people will respond and be more cheerful. (I1, CBT household)

If tourism is developed in a commune, local people have the number one role (*spoke slowly and stressfully*). We must be clear on that. Remember that “without local people's support, it is impossible but with people's support, a thousand-time difficult work can be done”. (I18, management official)

Discussion

The root of barriers for community empowerment

Considering the top-down government system in Vietnam, where government issues policies and decisions affecting tourism, it is unsurprising that locals expected to have significant government support to implement CBT. From the identification and representation of tourism resources and attractions, agencies responsible for tourism development, to the nature of tourism development, all emerge from a political process (Hall, 2002). Having lived under a highly centralized government, local communities tend to look at the government for directives and support.

Their dependence on government support and their perceived lack of formal education, however, may lower their own expectations of what they can achieve. When psychologists study power dynamics, they find that people in lower-power positions are more hesitant to share their views and often hedge their statement when they do (Sandberg, 2013). This matters as community empowerment cannot take place if local communities still have huge doubt about themselves, their ability and power. This may result in a lack of their own control and initiatives, whereas CBT objectives prioritize local self-determination. This is argued to be at the root of many of the barriers that they face and is one reason they avoid stretching for new assignments and challenges. One of the most important challenges to community empowerment is therefore actually within the local communities themselves. They become a source of challenges to the practical implementation of community empowerment and sustainable tourism because systemic structures have reinforced that they have both limited potential and capacity of entrepreneurship.

It is important to acknowledge that without outside influence the communities studied would not have known about tourism or implemented CBT (Scheyvens, 2002). Findings also align with the studies of Cole (2006) and Saufi et al. (2014) and confirm that locals' willingness

to participate in tourism development is still highly reliant on government stimulus, rather than the initiative of individuals in the host community. These findings are also consistent with those of Aref (2011), Wicks (2015), and Strzelecka et al. (2017) who found that despite acknowledging that sustainable tourism development must consider residents' needs and involve them in planning processes, empowering communities is challenging due to the top-down political culture as communities appear more reluctant, and indeed lack confidence to engage in democratic ways of decision-making. These findings reinforce observations made by Xu et al. (2019) that even though the social and economic structure of the local communities has been changed by tourism, the style of participation has changed little since tourism was initiated, because the power structure among the communities, local governments, and the tourism enterprises has not really changed.

Riger (1993) warned that attempting to enhance a sense of empowerment can result in an illusion without affecting the actual distribution of power. This seems to be true as when talking about power, people often think of politics (Yang, Ryan, & Zhang, 2014). Questions remain whether the exercise of power is always one-sided (Cheong & Miller, 2000), and whether local communities have power to enable them to be full-fledged participants, and whether they can/do exercise it to be empowered.

Locals are at the centre of any community, especially in CBT development. Everything starts from people and comes back to people; without people changing, change will not happen. However, the question is how to encourage local people to participate in local tourism development when barriers within themselves still exist, and systemic structures have not changed to encourage their self-empowerment. Alice Walker observed 'the most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any' (quoted in Martin, 2004, p. 173).

To promote and enhance community empowerment, it is necessary to get rid of both internal and structural/systemic barriers. To address one of the most (and still) recognized concern in sustainable tourism development – community empowerment (Schmidt & Uriely, 2018), it is necessary to start from within local people themselves, and their community, but the system also needs to support this advancement. This is so that communities can make the most of other support from government and other stakeholders. Our findings advance the view of Russell (2016) that solutions to address the most difficult problems that communities are currently facing must start from the grassroots, from inside out, but with full systemic support that encourages and prepares them to become self-sufficient. To help people in a way that does

not harm them and their capabilities in their communities, starting with and supporting what is strong within them, and within their communities is the best solution.

Increasing awareness about and promoting local knowledge

Findings of this study indicate that locals do have important knowledge related to their expertise in traditional tea cultivation acquired over years and generations; their capabilities, creativity and invention, and self-learning through life experiences; and their ability to recognise local issues in order to participate and contribute their ideas to tourism development. This reveals opportunities to empower locals whom we seek to privilege in tourism development, if their knowledge is recognized, mobilized and integrated. This challenges the traditional understanding that locals, especially rural people in developing countries, lack knowledge and capacity to participate in tourism. Knowledge and experiences of locals represent their power. Because power is coercive from top-down in most situations, it is not easy to recognize that power also exists within each individual and communities.

Increasing locals' awareness about local knowledge and experiences in tourism development contributes to increase their psychological empowerment. When locals recognize that they do have power to contribute to tourism, together with the recognition of the uniqueness of their culture and natural resources, their self-esteem and confidence would be increased, resulting in them feeling more psychologically empowered. This is supported by Scheyvens (1999) who emphasized that a local community which has faith in the abilities of its residents, is relatively self-reliant and demonstrates pride in traditions and culture can be said to be psychologically powerful.

Thanks to local knowledge, some locals are owning and managing their tea businesses, which are the foundations to develop CBT. CBT is generating economic benefits and, to some extent, enabling them to feel economically empowered. It is also encouraging local business ownership and self-management, entrepreneurship and business leadership. These benefits are crucial in obtaining political empowerment and also enhance locals' self-esteem and confidence. Challenges remain however, to expand on the number of local households fully embracing CBT and a proper structure that creates an ongoing flow of tourists visiting the area to guarantee a robust income.

Significance of community mobilization

Every person has different gifts, skills and passions, so can contribute to the network of power relations (Russell, 2017a). Opportunities to empower local communities therefore also

come from mobilizing communities together using collective power in local affairs as stories about the locals gathered to support the tea festivals in this study demonstrated. Relational power can be seen as the primary energy source for social movements throughout the world. When mobilised, it helps produce sustainable and satisfying change (Russell, 2017a). Each household cannot do it alone, especially in CBT development; that is where relational power matters.

A multiplicity of power relationships could be combined towards the common goal of CBT development. It also means that locals or entire communities can be socially empowered. Maruyama et al.'s (2016) findings confirm that having the common goal of being successful in tourism may strengthen the connections within the communities and thus, lead to higher levels of perceived social empowerment. It is important to recognize that not only should managers empower locals, but support and instrument local communities to mobilize, and utilize their power within the community to support each other, so positive changes can be more easily achieved. Communities working together towards common goals and mobilization of local power provide the opportunity for social empowerment.

Paying better attention to social and psychological empowerment is important to enhance community empowerment. Our results support the findings of Strzelecka et al. (2017) who claimed the importance for the inclusion of non-economic constructs like psychological and social empowerment when considering community empowerment. It is evident that local residents are more influenced by the pride and self-esteem boost associated with psychological empowerment and the perceptions of increased community cohesion associated with social empowerment than by the economic promises of tourism (Strzelecka et al., 2017). Social and psychological empowerment need to precede political empowerment because when local people have the sense of being socially and psychologically empowered, they are more likely to politically engage and participate in the tourism decision-making process for their collective benefits, providing they have the structural avenues to do so.

Implications

Findings of this study have both theoretical implications for the sustainable tourism literature and practical implications for those involved with enhancing community empowerment. While the importance of community empowerment has been well documented in the sustainable tourism literature, less evident in this literature is empirical research that identifies factors that may inhibit or encourage community empowerment processes. Concerns about how to provide local communities opportunities to benefit from tourism development

have been also identified (Saufi et al., 2014). Arguably, the current study fills these gaps and expands the literature by looking into the barriers for locals to reach empowerment, while exploring opportunities to improve community empowerment.

The findings of this study advance a number of practical implications for empowering community. Empowerment should not just be treated as the outcome but also a part of the process of tourism development (Farrelly, 2011), so enhancing community empowerment requires the action of both locals and other stakeholders during this process. First, findings from this study indicated that intrinsic barriers of community empowerment are within locals themselves, but this may be a result of many decades of systemic barriers in the case study context. To solve this problem, it must first start with the people themselves with structural support and buy-in.

The appropriate perceptions of and about, and active attitude of locals, who directly implement CBT is extremely important. For tourism being developed in their communities, and to continue to improve their well-being, locals have to believe in their own abilities, and be supported to do so. They need to recognize that they can contribute, and add value, to CBT through different forms of participation. They actually have certain power and knowledge to participate in their local tourism development, which most of the time they have not realized or do not believe in.

When locals understand their power, feeling empowered, and believe that they can do something for CBT, they prepare and equip themselves to participate. They are less likely to remain passive participants. With their passion, drive and commitment for their communities, locals have the ability to change their communities, especially at a time when many different barriers and challenges may face them and their communities. As they constantly look for a brighter future, they must be the roots of what they await. They have significant talent, skills and ideas as the study demonstrated to deal with local challenges and can make the change they seek. Starting with what's strong enables them to get organised to address what's wrong and making what's strong even stronger (Russell, 2017a). Communities cannot know what they need from outside sources until they first know what they have themselves internally (Russell, 2017b), and this needs to be fostered by systemic structures.

Positive attitude towards local tourism development enables them to fully engage in the community work, in developing CBT, use their voices to what needs to be done or what kind of support is sought, identifying what they care enough to act upon and empowering them to take actions on those issues. They can then coordinate with the government and other

stakeholders for further development based on their traditional tea culture. That is where community empowerment can be achieved. It is argued that such an approach can also ultimately protect and affirm their central position in CBT development. This suggests a possible transformation to greater success for the whole community and more sustainable practices. These support the findings of Beeton (2006) and Zielinski et al. (2018) that the empowerment necessary for any successful community-based initiative requires that the community develops capacity, and gains confidence, control and the ability to influence decision-making.

Our study also identifies the importance of promoting collective responsibility in community empowerment and sustainable tourism development as the discussion on community mobilisation reveals. In other words, community empowerment requires cooperative relationships between the communities and the parties involved. The demands and expectations of locals in sustainable tourism development are numerous. They must constantly respond to the challenges of not only believing in their own ability, but also defining their strengths and building on their distinctive character and identity for tourism development. Other stakeholders, including government and non-government agencies involved in tourism must also commit to assist locals in turning these challenges into opportunities and enhance community empowerment. Each household or local person themselves cannot be expected to bear the load alone. Rather, creating the spaces for local power, asserting their power and supporting them in tourism development must be the responsibility of many, encouraging local people to be ambitious, to become leaders in their local tourism development, entrepreneurs in the tea field, and to act. Government and other key stakeholders need to stand with them in that ambition. In this domain, local governments with their political power and obligation for local development should play an essential role.

Locals must be provided with time, space, resources and support necessary to discover and connect local assets, to develop tourism, and ensure that CBT development reaches its full potential. A system of institutions, policies, and laws to provide mechanisms enables this to occur. It is important to acknowledge that locals might find it difficult to believe in their ability and power. They hence need varied supports to be encouraged and championed to revert this belief. Since there is nobody whose gifts are not needed, creating an environment within which everyone's gift is given and received is significant (Russell, 2017b).

To bring about the self-esteem and confidence for meaningful community participation and empowerment, public education is well placed to expand locals' knowledge and awareness

of tourism. They need first to understand tourism development processes and their role, recognizing their knowledge, their power, and learning about opportunities for collaboration in tourism development and how they can contribute to be able to participate in decision-making. Cole (2006) and Xu et al. (2019) provided convincing evidence that increasing residents' knowledge of tourism is one way to foster their empowerment.

For locals to feel politically empowered, community meetings involving all members of communities should be conducted by local governments, where all have opportunities to express their concerns and opinions about tourism development. Meetings also allow locals to meet with others and seek community mobilization to work toward their common goals. Locals feel socially empowered through increased feeling of community cohesion and collaboration (Boley et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The objectives of this paper were to explore intrinsic barriers to and opportunities for community empowerment in CBT development in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam. The first important finding from the study is concerned with identifying and discussing one of the most important challenges to community empowerment, which is actually within local communities themselves. This study confirms that a top-down approach still limits community initiatives and community empowerment.

To address this intrinsic barrier, another key lesson from this research suggests opportunities for community empowerment by acknowledging local power, enabling locals to realize the power they do hold, and enabling them to exercise that power. Results show that the power of locals is created from local knowledge - the communities' resources (capabilities, experiences, creativity and invention). These should be valued, recognized and incorporated fully in order to economically, psychologically, socially and politically empower them, and as a result, enhance community empowerment.

It is true that each community has its own different circumstances (Zielinski et al., 2018), no single set of suitable conditions can apply for CBT to flourish or fail (Beeton, 2006). However, there is increased agreement that a number of critical conditions define the success or failure of an initiative (Armstrong, 2012). It is first important to re-confirm that the power to act is within locals' hands providing that they have the structural avenues to exercise that power.

Every single community has resources, capabilities, creativity and invention. As Russell (2016) claims, we need to find the 'hidden treasures that exist in each community'. This study

provides an example of this effort. Empowering locals means using their knowledge and ability to know what work needs to be done or what kind of support they really need for local tourism development planning. The focus now must shift to their inner strength - a significant power which they could use to contribute to local tourism development and deal with difficulties in achieving sustainable tourism. This has the potential to transform their experiences and their future generations in local tourism development. It is also the basic condition for social change as communities cannot be viewed as powerless in a world in constant evolution and change (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001). Local communities can mobilize, forge bonds, build powerful community agency, and utilize their power to support change. CBT based on their traditional tea culture could then progress more significantly and sustainably from grassroots.

Despite the attention of scholarship and for all of the emphasis on local empowerment as a key success indicator for achieving the goal of sustainable tourism development, the gap still exists. It is due to the fact that evidence is often absent in many countries. We need to go beyond research indicating that local empowerment is necessary. While we have considerable knowledge in many areas of CBT development, tackling the conventional wisdom is a much bigger challenge.

This study brings the potential to create new patterns from existing knowledge on community empowerment in sustainable tourism development and provide an important space in which local's knowledge and capacity can be recognized and validated. This research also responds to the scarcity of existing academic scholarship pertaining to the power of locals, the power of community within tourism development and bringing this in in discussing community empowerment. While the findings confirm the conclusions of Cheong & Miller (2000) and Russell (2017a), this study offers an opportunity for on-going dialog about community empowerment, and local power in tourism development. More research in these areas is needed to enlarge this knowledge and enrich the literature, and to provide inputs from evidence to inform policy development and implementation for community empowerment and sustainable tourism development. Barriers and challenges for community empowerment of different local communities in the current contexts of tourism could be further examined.

To conclude, this study contributes to finding better ways to serve communities around us, to bring about positive and transformative change in them. The potential for locals to be empowered is absolute. The challenge lies in getting to the place where local knowledge and community empowerment are not just claimed to exist but really integrated and become the foundations of local tourism development.

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