

## COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: A GOVERNMENT-GUIDED PARTICIPATION TO HERITAGE TOURISM IN TRANG AN – VIETNAM

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**ABSTRACT** – The present study examines the impact of community participation to sustainable tourism development in Trang An, Vietnam. We conducted an exploratory qualitative study and a quantitative survey on over 170 local residents and representatives from the government and the industry. In general, we found that the local communities in Trang An did participate actively to tourism development and their involvement improves their living conditions greatly in all sustainability dimensions: economy, culture, society, and environment. Our findings highlight the role of a government-initiated participation to guide the people towards the correct trajectory. We also suggest several solutions to improve the effectiveness of community participation with regards to the local context.

**Keywords:** Community participation, heritage tourism, sustainability, Vietnam, Trang An, management

## INTRODUCTION

Trang An Tourism Complex is built upon an area of more than 12 thousand hectares in the Ninh Binh province, Vietnam. It encompasses a local population of 47000 people within five communities. Nominated and awarded the title of world cultural and natural heritage site by UNESCO, Trang An is one of the most popular tourist sites in Vietnam. In 2010-2019 period, we observed an average annual increase in number of arrivals of 11%. Before the COVID Pandemic, in 2019, the site welcomed 7.56 million visitors, of which nearly 1 million comes from abroad, earned 3,670 billion VND (equivalent of 180 million USD) in revenue (Ministry of Communication of Ninh Binh, 2022). Such development transforms the local economy from traditional farming activities to supporting tourism services. Many families abandoned their farming jobs to work in tourism because of the higher incomes. They actively participate in a wide range of tourism-related activities, such as working in service sector, opening homestay, or trading supplies. As of 2021, only 15% of the local economy is agriculture-related, which

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also produces local specialties to satisfy visitors' growing demands (Trang An Management, 2021). This contributes greatly to improve the living condition of the people and to the prosperity of the area.

Tourism development is an effective method to promote and preserve the national heritage. Undoubtedly, the participation of the local community plays a major role in the development of the local economy, culture and environment. Community participation has been receiving attention from both practitioner and academic. UNESCO (2003) considered the local community as the most significant driver of cultural and natural heritage's promotion and preservation as many countries adopts the same point of view to develop sustainably. Unfortunately, the impact of community participation to the sustainable development of the local tourist site is yet to be fully understood. Because the extant literature is mostly realized in western countries, it would be questionable to blindly apply these findings to the context of Eastern countries such as China or Vietnam without considering the obvious differences in culture, social, or economy. Despite the proven effectiveness of community participation in supporting sustainable development, it still has to carefully adjusted to specific local context (Shani & Pizam, 2012). Certainly, there are evidences that community participation does not have the predicted impact due to different approaches of the local government. For instance, the Chinese government follows a centralized and profit-driven decision making towards cultural heritage management such that the local communities have little opportunity to participate (J. Li et al., 2020). The sustainable development therefore is tilted towards economic growth at the expense of environment or local culture (Zhai & Ng, 2013). The reverse is true in the west, where there are many instances of mismanagement, focusing too much on environmental perspectives without considering the social and economic repercussions (Gilmore et al., 2007).

Despite the growing literature on community participation in sustainable development, little research has been done in the Vietnamese context. Developing sustainable tourism in The Vietnam context is characterized with similar complicated conflicts of interest between development and conservation, as observed in Halong Bay (D. D. Nguyen et al., 2000). Failing to accommodate the local communities in the management process, long terms heritage conservation has been often compromised by economic development (Lloyd & Morgan, 2008). Moreover, it seems that community participation is only given lip service in the matters directly related to cultural and natural heritage (Bùi Hoài Sơn, 2013). When it comes to recognize the local community as having the right to determine the activities surrounding the heritage, there is a big gap in realities (V. H. Nguyen, 2012). There is also a lack of academic attention to this matter, as the majority of extant literature tends to overlook the impact of community participation to sustainable tourism in these heritage sites. This put the current findings of community participation to sustainable development into questions in the context of Vietnam, as the community could show little interest in participating to the development of the area, despite many efforts to include them.

The present study, therefore, aims to fill this gap, by providing an overview that examine and discuss the impact of community participation on the outcome of sustainable development. We base our empirical findings on another well-known touristic site in Vietnam: Trang An, which parallels Halong Bay in many aspects, from the cultural and natural richness to the influx of tourists that pushes the local resources to the limit. We look to not only contribute to the relevant literature of community participation in tourism development but also provides practical suggestions to solve the current conflicts of interest in the area.

## **CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES**

### **Conceptual Background**

#### *Community Participation*

The local community is an inseparable element of any heritage tourism site. They often live within the perimeter of the heritage and are employed in related activities. Because of this,

local community participation plays a key role in determining the outcome of the development process (Bandura, 1994). Strangely enough, while the concept of local community has been widely examined in various studies (e.g., (J. Li et al., 2020; Mak et al., 2017), there is no official definition for this terms yet, partly because researchers used different wordings for the same concept, such as participatory tourism (Tosun, 2005), community resident support (Lee, 2013), or simply community participation (Mak et al., 2017). The definition of community participation in this study is adopted from the perspective of Lee (2013), in which the local residents take part in the activities related directly to the tourism development in their living area. This reflects most correctly the situation of Trang An's local communities since they live within the perimeter of the heritage site and are employed in the operation of the complex.

The participation of the local communities is not a binary concept but is rather a multi-dimensional one. Tosun (2005) proposes that community participation may exist in multiple forms (direct, indirect, ...) and at different levels (local, regional, or national) at the same time. In other words, the members of a community can support the local tourism development in various activities, each one has a different level of involvement and impact. It can be a simple vote to a development proposal (Tosun, 2005), a big enterprise actively shape the tourism activities in the area (Bui, 2020), or effort to dictate the development plan to protect interests (Muganda et al., 2013).

Tosun (2005) divides community participation based on how involved a community is to the development activities, from active, passive, to tokenism participation. Cole (2006) follows the same approach and categorizes these actions into "passive approach" and "empowerment". According to these authors, no single individual is exempted from the tourism development in the area if such person is a local resident. Every individual in the local community participate and contribute to the local tourism one way or another. This point of view seems illogical because any individual can choose to stay uninvolved to tourism. Considering the strong dependence on government's initiatives in Vietnam of the local resident (D. T. N. Nguyen et al., 2022), this possibility is even more likely, especially when the economy is large enough. Arnstein (1969) employed the ladder as a metaphor to describe different forms and levels of participation. He identified 08 levels in 03 groups, from the highest to the lowest involvement: "Citizen Control", "Tokenis" and "Nonparticipation". Unlike most authors, this categorization includes a nonparticipatory level and is widely employed in tourism research.

### *Sustainable Tourism*

The idea development objective for any heritage tourism is to balance between conservation and development to ensure sustainable growth. This sustainability, or better known as sustainable development, has caused waves of disputes among both academic and industry before getting recognized in 1987 – in the Brundtland Report by WCED. According to this report, sustainable development is an effort to meet all the current demands without jeopardize the ability to sustain the demands of our future generations (World Council for Economic Development, 1987). In tourism, according to World Tourism Organization, or UN-WTO, sustainable tourism development has to take into account the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts in the present and future, to balance the benefits of the stakeholders, including tourists, local communities, and enterprises (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2010). In theory, sustainable tourism development has to be harmonious between several dimensions: Economy – bringing prosperity to the local economy and financial profits for the stakeholders, Socio-Culture – respect equality, promoting peace and development, recognize and respect different culture, reserve cultural values, and finally Environment – Protect the natural resources, minimize pollution, and preserve biodiversity and natural heritage.

### *Community Participation and Sustainable Development*

The extant literature provides ample evidence to the link between Community Participation and Sustainable Development. The local communities' attitude and awareness are one of the critical factors influencing the sustainable development (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). Certain communities do not support tourism, even to the point of protesting against such activities and banning tourists, but many other regard tourism as a mean to elevate their economic condition (T. T. M. Nguyen, 2009). These communities also participate in the development process to protect their interest (Muganda et al., 2013), either voluntarily or under government initiatives (J. Li et al., 2020). The outcome of their participation is very well examined. There is a consensus that community participation has a positive impact on sustainable development in many different contexts, such as suburban tourism (Fong & Lo, 2015; Mak et al., 2017) or coastal destination (Birkié et al., 2019). In heritage tourism in particular, we also observe similar relationship between community participation and the sustainability of the management of touristic activities surrounding a heritage site (Y. Li & Hunter, 2014).

### **Proposed research model and hypotheses**

As seen in other Vietnamese tourism complex, while the whole local economy was boosted thanks to touristic activities, the growth opportunities for local community were severely limited, perhaps due to lack of political wills (Hampton et al., 2018). Past studies have found that even though the local residents were willing to participate in the development of the local economic activities, there are various entry barriers, such as the lack of government's encouragement, perceived level of participation, or the lack of capital and knowledge (Chan et al., 2021; Mak et al., 2017). These barriers derive from the social and cultural characteristics of Vietnam where people depend on the governmental initiatives and consider formal education as an indicator of knowledge (D. T. N. Nguyen et al., 2022). Given that tourism activities in Trang An were led by the government and brought many economic benefits to the local residents, we suspect a skewed perception of the local community regarding their participation to the development of sustainable tourism. In other words, the local community would not perceive themselves as having complete control over the development of tourism in their area and neither would stay completely indifferent to this process.

Furthermore, any community participates in the local sustainable development at multiple levels and forms at the same time (Arnstein, 1969; Tosun, 2005). And we know that the contextual characteristics of the local area can cause a distortion in how the residents participate in development activities, such as the lack of knowledge (J. Li et al., 2020) or political interference (Hampton et al., 2018). But while the local contexts can influence this process to a certain extent, as observed in China (J. Li et al., 2020; Mak et al., 2017), community participation is still regarded as the key for sustainable cultural heritage and tourism development (Cole, 2006; J. Li et al., 2020). Therefore, we suspect that the higher the level of participation, particularly in Tokenism and Nonparticipatory level, the better the outcome of sustainable tourism is perceived in all four dimensions, economy, culture, society, and environment. The following hypotheses are proposed:

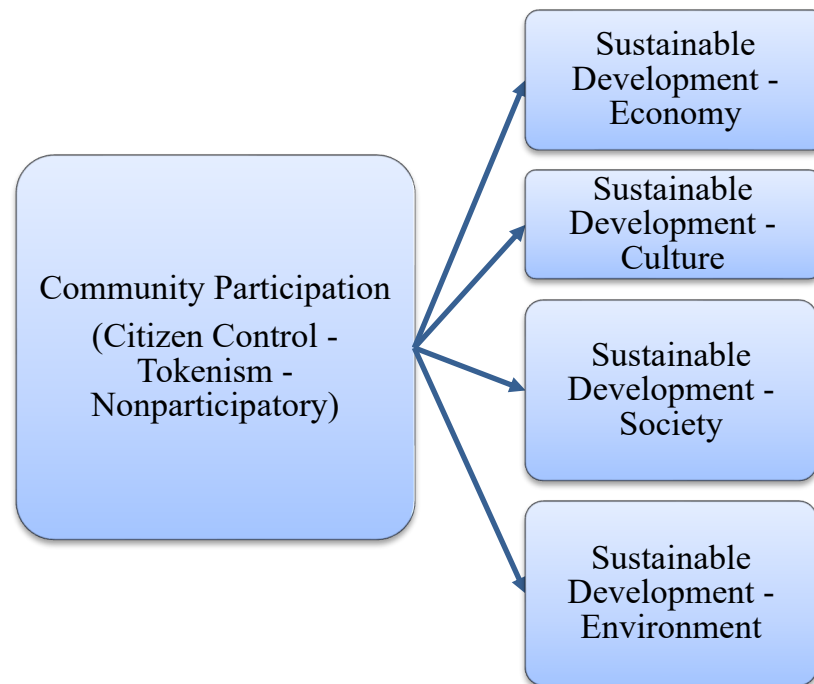


Figure 1: Research Model

Hypothesis 1: The higher the level of Citizen Control level of community participation, the more secured the sustainable development in terms of economy, environment, culture, and social.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the level of Tokenism level of community participation, the more secured the sustainable development in terms of economy, environment, culture, and social.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the level of Nonparticipatory level of community participation, the more secured the sustainable development in terms of economy, environment, culture, and social.

## Empirical Studies

To explore the impact of community participation on sustainable development outcome, we conducted a small number of expert interview (3 participants) to develop a general understanding of how local residents take part in the tourism activities in their area. We examined the level of participation of the local community and their impacts on the sustainability of the tourism activities within the Trang An Complex. The results of this qualitative were used to propose an adjustment to Arnstein's Ladder of citizen participation (1969). Next, a quantitative survey was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses.

### Study 1 – Exploratory Qualitative Study

Since our objective was to understand the tourism activities at the local level, the insights from an expert would be ideal. We employed purposive sampling technique to target suitable participants in our qualitative study. The most suitable experts were those who manage directly the local. Being public servants speaking of their jobs, we assumed that our participants would also need approvals from their superiors before accepting to participate in our study. They would be the representative of the authority and therefore, we did not expect to have many participants. Invitations to interview were sent to local administration for approval and also for possible referral at the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2021.

In all, we recruited 06 participants, in which there are 03 experts in national tourism authority, 01 expert in the local tourism authority and 02 local representatives in our in-depth interview. All experts hold manager-level positions in the cultural and heritage management authorities in the Ministry of Culture and in Provincial Authority of Culture and Heritage. Our objectives were to first identified the level of participation of the local residents in the tourism activities according to the Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969). The interviews were conducted at participants' workplaces, with permission to audio record for transcription.

## Data Analysis

The informants were asked to describe the general situation of the area before and after the inauguration of the tourism complex and how residents participate in the tourism activities. We then coded the responses, identified the keywords relevant to Arnstein's Ladder's Levels and groups them into different themes. These results were then used to reflect on the participation of the local community and to complement our findings of the quantitative study.

## Findings

*The local people in Trang An actively participate in the development of the local tourism activities.*

Unlike other heritage site in Vietnam, Trang An is located within the habitation zone of the local population. According to the site management, in 2019, there are 47,000 people living within the heritage perimeter, with 20,000 in the core area, and the rest 27,000 in the buffer zone. In other words, the tourism activities in Trang An have a deep influence into their daily lives from the moment the project started. Most informants think they have a certain influence over the decisions related to local tourism development, evident by the fact that they are consulted before an important decision. Moreover, there is a strong belief that the final decisions of the government are strongly influenced by their decision.

"Everyone here participates in these meetings, before they (the government) want to use the land or to start a service, they have to consult the idea of the local people here" (Male 1, 54 years old).

This belief is reinforced by the fact that there are 65 people, out of 6500 employees in the tourism sector from the heritage area, hold management positions, as disclosed by the local authority. This suggests a fairly strong empowerment to the local people in their participation and reflects in a very enthusiastic when our informant discussed about their participation.

"We have participant from every household, they discuss fiercely because it relates directly to our livelihood" (Female, 43 years old).

The community participation is also driven by a strong sense of pride over the local area. This pride is based on their own perception of the living condition in the area, as well as on the feedback received from tourists.

"We feel so proud because the tourists love Trang An, their compliments make us very happy" (Male, 54 year old).

### *Improved living condition thanks to community participation*

Our informants all agree that tourism has brought prosperity to the area, with higher living condition, better social condition, lower crime rate, and a brighter future. According to the representative of the management board, the average income of the households living in the heritage area has been increasing over the year. At the time of the study, they report an average income per capital of around 5 millions VND per month (approximately 220 USD/month). The poverty rate also decreases from 15% in 2010 to under 3% in 2019, a 500% improvement rate in nearly a decade. Overall, the local authority reported a visible improvement in terms of social stability: "Social issues such as drug in several

communities in Truong Yen, Ninh Binh, Vietnam, has reduced significantly thanks to tourism development creating more jobs and involving the local in the process. We also witnessed a lower number of beggars in the tourist areas.” (Local Government in Trang An). Moreover, these changes seem to be the result of the local people’s active involvement in the process, as in environmental protection. The leading role of the government is very visible in this regard: “The Bureau of Tourism and the Local Tourism Board offered training, and the firms also implemented regulations requiring their employees to have suitable behaviors, for example, Xuan Truong (one of the major companies) even hired staffs to take care of the trees, now many boat drivers picked up trash on their own, unlike before (the representative of the Board).

### *The leading role of the government*

According to the management board, a large number of local people in Trang An have switched completely from farming to tourism since the tourism complex project started. This happens mainly because the involved enterprises heed the call of the central government to priorities employing the local people in their activities in all level of operation. Another reason for this transformation is because tourism related jobs are much better paid and more stable than agriculture jobs. This outcome is realized through a very long process in which the local government pushed forward their objectives in poverty reduction and economy development through engaging the local population.

Therefore, the observed changes in economic and living conditions are not natural but rather initiated and enforced by the government and the enterprises. The local people, as we interpreted, are not willing to follow these rules out of their consideration to the local area, but rather out of concern to their livelihood. Many informants, one of which is the government authority, reveal that the consequence of violation is often unemployment and banning from the tourism sector. Unfortunately, the heritage area does not offer many alternatives for employment, since farming is no longer a viable option due to these lands are now located in the preservation zone. Participation and cooperation are, therefore, strongly implied as essential for any households wishing to continue living in the area.

## **Conclusion**

Our exploratory study reveals that there exists, indeed, a strong level of community participation among the local residents in Trang An. The people do actively take part in the development of tourism at the local area, especially in the Trang An Tourism Complex, led by a company named Xuan Truong. While community participation is undoubtedly beneficial for the local’s sustainable development in tourism, it is always shadowed by a strong leading role of the local government and of the leading enterprises in the area. The strong present of economic consequence of non-participation is very evident across the verbatim. We can be certain that the highest level of participation in Arnstein’s ladder (1969) is virtually inexistent. This proposition will be verified and discussed in the subsequent quantitative study.

## **Study 2 – Quantitative Study**

We surveyed the local residents of Trang An, Vietnam to test the proposed hypotheses between community participation and sustainable tourism at the area. The respondents were residents within the core area of the heritage part of Trang An, mostly concentrated in three communities: Truong Yen, Ninh Hai, and Ninh Xuan. These communities were chosen because they are the most affected population by tourism development area. Trang An Tourism Complex claimed most of their farming but also employed these residents in exchange. Survey forms were distributed randomly to the local people in the designated areas at the end of 2021. Distribution of the survey was made thanks to the cooperation of the local

tourism authority. In total, we drew 165 valid responses from over 300 distributed surveys.

The collected responses were first screened and treated for missing data as well as weeding out any invalid responses. Afterward, the employed measurements, community participation and sustainable tourism indicator, were tested for validity and factorial analysis. Our final data was then analyzed by running independent t-test and regression to determine if and how community participation influence sustainable tourism development. We ran our analysis on SPSS software.

## **Measurement**

We adopted the scale of ladder of citizen participation of Arnstein (1969) to measure community participation in Trang An Tourism complex. This scale is constructed based on the same conceptualization and includes a nonparticipatory level, which is missing in many others (Cole, 2006; Tosun, 2005). The original scale has 8 items in total, corresponding to 3 level of participation from the highest to lowest: Citizen control, Tokenism, and Nonparticipatory in Arnstein (1969). Since our exploratory study suggests that the local participation is strongly incentivized to join a partnership with the government and that the people's opinions are often consulted, two items in the top level and in the lower level were replaced with additional items to better reflect the nature of the actual participation.

The measurement of sustainable development outcome was adapted from previous studies, such as that of Bossel (1999), Yoon and colleagues (2001), Nicholas and colleagues (2009), etc.... In accordance to its conceptualization, we measure the outcome of sustainable development in four dimensions: economy (8 items); culture (6 items), social (6 items), and environment (5 items). All questions were on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree"; 7 = "Strongly Agree"). All measurement were translated from English to Vietnamese and distributed in such format. No English version of the survey was made. A colleague of the authors in Europe translated the Vietnamese survey back to English to triangulate the accuracy of the translation.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Reliability Test*

We examine the Alpha Cronbach value of all measurements to test for their reliability. The results show that all measurement score higher than the suggested thresholds value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006). Both sustainable development scale and community participation scale score very good Alpha Cronbach values 0.83 and 0.93, respectively. They also have suitable corrected item-total correlation, with the lowest at 0.37 and highest at 0.91 ( $\geq 0.3$ ). Thus, all items can be included in the final analysis.

An additional exploratory factorial analysis (EFA) was run with all 33 items to examine the suitability of the scales. Our KMO Bartlette tests are all in the 0.5-1.0 range and with t-value under 0.01, suggesting a substantial correlation in the data. One item, "cultural sustainable", fails the convergent and discriminant requirements when its average variance extracted is lower than 0.5. This item is therefore removed. The EFA output indicates 4 factors having total attracted variance of 53.09, suggest that they are capable of explaining 53.09% of the sustainable development scale, fitting the four dimensions as expected. All four factors scored a loading factor in the 0.83-0.88 range, higher than the required 0.5.

For the community participation, we also observe a very different result. The 8 items only converted into two 4-item factors, with loadings in the 0.73-0.96 range. Total extracted variance is 57.47, or they are capable of explaining 57% of the data. The KMO Bartlette test is also significant (Sig. = 0.000) and in good shape with  $0.5 \leq \text{KMO} = 0.830 < 1$ . In short, the community participation scale seems capable of explaining how local residents take part in the development process in the area but only in two variables instead of three. We renamed



these two factors as Community Participation 1 (CP1) and Community Participation 2 (CP2) to reflect the level of participation, with the latter implying a lower involvement of the local resident. We proceed to employ these variables in the analysis and discuss their results and implication. Because the qualitative study suggests that the first level of participation does not exist in practice, as well as our EFA showing only two factors, we decided to rearrange the hypotheses as such. Our hypotheses are now as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the level of CP1, the more secured the sustainable development in terms of economy, environment, culture, and social.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the level of CP2, the more secured the sustainable development in terms of economy, environment, culture, and social.

### *Correlation*

We check the correlation between the variables to examine their relationship. More specifically, we look at the Pearson values between the four sustainable development variables and two community participation variables. In general, our Pearson values are in the 0.240-0.5 range at Sig. < 0.01, suggesting positive correlation. "CP 1" correlates strongly with "Social" (0.49) and much less with "Economic" ( $r = 0.32$ ). As for "CP 2", it correlates strongly with "Environment" ( $r = 0.43$ ) and much less with "Economy" ( $r = 0.24$ ).

### *Regression*

We run linear regression to test each of the proposed hypothesis. At a time, one Community Participation dimension is inserted as independent variable and tested against each of the sustainable development dimension. There are 4 tests for each hypothesis. The results show significant effect of CP1 and CP2 on all four dimensions of sustainable tourism.

CP1 has a positive impact on all four dimensions of sustainable tourism development ( $B > 0$ ; Sig. = 0.000). The affected dimensions are economy ( $R^2 = 0.052$ ), environment ( $R^2 = 0.18$ ) culture ( $R^2 = 0.13$ ), and society ( $R^2 = 0.145$ ). CP1 seems to be able to explain a substantial portion of the environmental, social, and cultural aspects of sustainable development, but struggle with the economy. We have similar results for the impact of CP2 on the four dimensions of sustainable development. Our R values (0.24; 0.433; 0.337; 0.387) suggest a high degree of correlation within the regression model. All regression tests are significant at Sig. < 0.01. And very similar to CP1, the  $R^2$  of CP 2 demonstrates the same struggle to explain sustainably economic development. Only 8.1% of the dependent variable Economy can be explained by CP 2, while the other three are consistently placed in the 20% range.

	CP1		CP2	
	R2	Sig.	R2	Sig.
<b>Environment</b>	0.18	0.000	0.387	0.000
<b>Culture</b>	0.13	0.000	0.433	0.000
<b>Society</b>	0.145	0.000	0.337	0.000
<b>Economy</b>	0.052	0.000	0.24	0.000

*Table 1: Regression Results*

## Findings and Discussions

Our regression with CP1 shows that, as expected, the participation of the local community at higher level and the sustainable development in Trang An are positively significant in all four dimensions: economy, culture, society, and environment ( $\beta_1 = 0.323$ ;  $\beta_2 = 0.354$ ;  $\beta_3 = 0.496$ ,  $\beta_4 = 0.359$ , at  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, our first hypothesis is supported. This means that if the participation of the local community increases by 01 unit as per the ladder of Arnstein (1969), this will have an impact on the economic sustainable development to increase by 0.323 unit. Similarly, we will also observe an increase of 0.354 unit in culture sustainable development, 0.496 in social sustainable development, and 0.359 unit in environmentally sustainable development. The increase in CP 1 also means differently than a similar effect in CP2. That is CP 1 is of the higher level of participation, such as when the local residents are empowered to manage the area and can influence the direction of development, the living condition in the local area would be more stable and more secure. This can be reflected in lower crime rate and better public infrastructure.

For CP2, our hypothesis is supported with the four regressions being significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ). CP2 seems to have positive impact on sustainable tourism development in Trang An in all dimensions (economy, culture, social, and environment with  $\beta_5 = 0.240$ ,  $\beta_6 = 0.377$ ,  $\beta_7 = 0.387$ , and  $\beta_8 = 0.432$ , respectively). This means that if the community participation in CP2 increases by 01 unit, then the local sustainable development would increase by 0.24 unit in terms of economy, 0.377 in culture, 0.387 in social, and 0.432 in environment. There seems to be a stronger effect in terms of environment in comparison with other dimensions.

In short, having a strong and active participation of the local community would be very beneficial for the sustainable development of tourism in Trang An, Vietnam. The regression indicates that all dimensions would have a strong increase should the level of community participation is raised in the higher category. This means that to achieve a well-balanced sustainable development, the community has to actively tackle the local issues as an inherent member in all level, from high management to simple labor. However, this is not realistic, especially in the context of Vietnam where the people rely on the government's initiatives and the authorities have very strong influence, leading to a somewhat tokenism response from the local. In this case, a certain portion of the local community participation would be less active and only to maintain an expected level from the authority.

Evidence of government-led development can also be found in the contrast between the qualitative interviews and the quantitative results. In the interviews, the local respondents expressed much concerns regarding their economic wellbeing, suggesting that greater participation should have driven economic development the most. However, both community participation indicators were found to correlate the least with economic goals while the locals' concerns with monetary issues dominated the verbatim. Unlike the other tourist sites where economic development were prioritized over environment (Chan et al., 2021; Hampton et al., 2018), Trang An appeared more balanced. Given that the authority often addressed all aspects of development when they were questioned, we can safely assume a certain degree of governmental influence here. Because the local community still depends on governmental initiatives, such interference would have the strongest effect in the attitude and behaviors of the local people regarding the environment, as observed in the results. Combined with our findings in the qualitative phase, it highlights the effective role of the government and the local enterprise in directing environment-related behaviors. The lowest impact of CP2 on economic dimension also reminds us that to bring prosperity to the area, we need a strong involvement of the people in all aspect of the development.

## CONCLUSION

The present study shows that at each level of community participation, we would have a different outcome depending on how involved and active the local residents decide to be. Even though the effect may differ between individuals, the overall impact seems to be positive. It

also suggests the importance of the governmental initiatives in directing the local community to the right direction. This has meaningful impact on the less developed areas in Vietnam, where the local has not developed the right attitude towards tourism and sustainable development. We contribute to the ongoing discussion of community participation in sustainable tourism in pointing out that the option of non-participation may not exist in practice due to the local political context. We argue that such a forced approach is not necessarily negative, as concerned by Li and his colleagues (2020). It can be beneficial in the beginning as a mean to push the sustainable development towards the right direction.

Our results suggest a stronger focus of the government and/or local authority in taking charge to shape the sustainable development in their area by engaging the local population. In theory, it is best to involve the local residents by letting them take part in all aspects of the development, from simple labor to management. The government needs to frequently consult the people before making any decision as well as keep them up to date during the whole process. This also serves to avoid potential conflicts of interest because the livelihood of these people depends on the development of the area. In practice, engaging the local communities can be challenging because they may or may not possess the correct behaviors and/or attitude towards sustainable development. As our informants reported, the local communities only cooperated to protect the environment out of fear of financial repercussion in the beginning. After witness the positive transformation of the area, both in terms of economic and environmental means, they begin to develop a pride and start to act towards the sustainable development of the local tourism.

In any case, the current study still lacks rigor in terms of empirical evidences. Because the main subject was community participation and sustainable development, we did not explore further the interaction between the government and the local people. With the interest results found across two studies, future efforts to examine community participation should be made to clarify how government interact with the local people in order to achieve their goals of sustainability. We believe that by continuing to support and empower the local community to participate in the tourism service in Trang An, this site will become a role model in heritage management and contribute strongly to the prosperity of not only the local heritage zone but to the nation as a whole.

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