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Sustainable Enterprise of Community Health Tourism in Nan Province after Covid-19

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were to (1) analyze *the potential* of community tourism businesses in community development in Ban Mai District, Nan Province, (2) study the level of public and private *support* that affects the level of participation, and (3) develop a *health tourism network* as a tourism model that determines product development in the community. In this study, the researcher had 61 participants joining the study on a voluntary basis: 2 medical service representatives from two health tourism government agencies, 1 community chair or village headman, 8 herb growers and 50 traveling tourists. There were three research tools for data collection: questionnaires, participatory workshops and in-depth interviews. The researcher used mean and standard deviation for data analysis, followed by content analysis of interview data. The research results revealed that the community showed readiness for participation in solving problems collectively, and health service users were satisfied with health tourism in Ban Mai Phatthana District Nan Province. Overall satisfaction by mean values were: social and cultural souvenirs at 4.36 (SD=.413), location and environment satisfaction at 4.26 (SD=.352), and participation at 4.24 (SD=.472), respectively.

Keywords: *Community enterprise network development, sustainability, community health tourism, COVID-19 pandemic*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 situation in Thailand has gradually improved while other countries have continued to cope with severe outbreaks by their government's cycles of control to curb down the infection rate. Thailand has been ranked the first in Asia with a score of 73.2 out of 100 by the global COVID-19 index (GCI) in recovery from the pandemic among 184 countries worldwide. The global health security ranking of countries in 2019 read Thailand's GHS index in the 6th place out of 195 countries. In the country's attempt to gain confidence back from tourists, it has to create an advantage on the safety market in health tourism to stimulate the economy with the strategy of *medical tourism* used by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT).

The new normal currently focuses on a specific market especially in the health and wellness group which emphasizes quality rather than quantity, and aims at three types of tourism: *health tourism* in combination with *medical tourism* and *agricultural/ food tourism*. Such combination highlights the selling point of hygiene safety, the uniqueness of culture and food, the beauty of nature, and hospitality of Thai people. This is to add value by using a digital platform for the tourism industry in conjunction with health care.

In the past, Nan Province in the north of Thailand had strength in health tourism to create sustainable income to the community; however, the Covid-19 situation has hampered community enterprises due to lack of incoming tourists. As known, community enterprises have created a strong local community network contributing to local economic growth. Village community products cannot be sold now for the fact that the number of domestic and international tourists has dwindled. There has been a call for help from the local government and the ASEAN Community to promote the development of a unique village community way of life, the wisdom culture of the community, and village/ community attractions in support of health tourism in Nan Province.

It is interesting to look at the case of Baan Mai Phatthana District Moo 4 Nam Kian Sub District Phu Pieng District--a small community on the plateau--in Nan Province. There is a river flowing through the district. The local villagers work on their land and have a simple lifestyle. The community emphasizes local wisdom about the herbal plants locally called *Sumunprai* mainly grown for health tourism. People in the community do not use chemicals in their herb plant farms; they use herbs in daily life and make many quality herbal OTOP products. [OTOP: One-tambon (district)-one product.]

Using knowledge gained from the royal project of King Bhumibol, villagers learned about herbs processing and distributing channels of products and the district has become a learning center that attracts visitors from Thailand and abroad. Many hotels bring herbal products from the community to service their visitors. The community's conservation lifestyle appeals to tourists' interest in the use of OTOP herbal products in Thai massage. There has been cooperation between people and business groups in processing and production. The well-being of the local enterprises as guided by the National Economic and Social Development Plan No.11 (2012-2016) and No 12 (2017-2021), has come to a halt with the Covid-19 outbreak. And the time is now for the community to start anew in an attempt for a quick recovery back to health tourism.

Focusing on the development of the community's foundation in local wisdom to live by the principles of self-reliance along with the creation of network of community enterprises for community-based tourism management. For the community's autonomy in local enterprise management, it is necessary to establish *a health community tourism model* to guide Ban Mai Phatthana District, Nan Province toward effective tourism business operations on the local site and nearby areas.

The integration of the group serves as *an enterprise network*. The health tourism of Ban Mai Phatthana District, Nan Province still has problems with *readiness* of the community in *management*. Existing lack of systematic connections with the government and the private sector in the country cannot lead the community to fully develop its potential and conditions for strong tourism and effective services provided. It takes good cooperation among entrepreneurs and the government/ private sector to make possible participative and sustainable health tourism in this district under study.

2. Literature Review

The ongoing trend in health tourism has been obstructed by the spread of COVID-19 from repeated outbreaks in many areas and thus put businesses involved in the tourism industry at risk of loss, particularly aviation. The supporting factor for the upcoming year

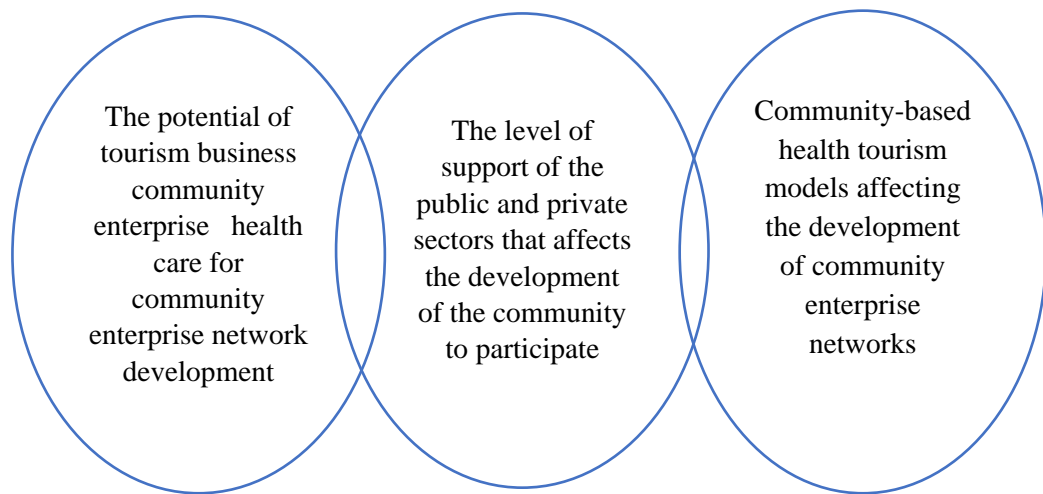
is the positive image of Thai public health in handling infection--as mentioned earlier--Thailand ranking the first in Asia and the sixth in the world. The beautiful natural scenery makes Thailand a popular tourist destination. Its potential development in health tourism lies in 2021 with expectation of 20.5 million arrivals--a decrease of 48% compared to 2019. Estimated revenue will be 9.8 billion baht down 49% compared to 2019 as a result of *New Normal* and the waiting time for vaccination against Covid-19. Due to change in people's behavior under the new normal, the original making of all markets has to change accordingly. Thailand needs to rely more on domestic travelers rather than those from foreign countries. Thai people will use their purchasing power in the country rather than abroad in settling with their domestic routes.

According to Hall (2011), health tourism refers to two types of health care activities one with a focus on *the curative course* for disease treatment, transgender surgery, dentistry surgery and other kinds of surgeries (Goodrich, 1987; Richter 1989; Smith & Puczko, 2014; Hmiouis & Haoudi, 2016). It is also called *medical tourism* of which the activities aim at health promotion and illness prevention. The second type is on the *promotive course* for *Wellness Tourism*. It is relevant to the surroundings, including lifestyle--physical, mental spiritual, tangible and intangible. Mueller & Kaufmann (2001) described wellness tourism as a holistic health care to achieve a well-being which is not just the body but also the mind and soul.

Smith, Deery, & Puckzo (2010) and Smith & Puckzo (2014) also stated that health tourism is related to "personal" and "living with others (social life)." Thai researchers Kanthawongwan, Aun-Thong & Kaosa-ard (2015) described the difference between *medical* and *wellness* tourism by using the characteristics of the traveler (customer's travel incentive) and destination (country/ place and activity) as criteria for differentiation. In addition to these two types of tourism, they have a link with health activities. The health care and prevention or promotion of health are called in integration as *Medical Wellness Tourism* or *Preventative Medicine* involving health rehabilitation and Ayurveda acupuncture. These activities require quality facilities and skilled personnel as in hospitals or clinic hotels or resorts. Various types of health promotion centers, such as spas and meditation centers can clarify the meaning of health tourism for the balance of the body and the mind. Tourism resources for health are to meet the travel objectives to nurture and promote physical, mental and spiritual aspects of health tourism. For tourists to choose their travel destination, they consider the atmosphere for relaxation, privacy, and landscape for outdoor activities (Pesonen & Komppula 2010). Historical places, tourist attractions, food and culture appeal to people for their touring choice. It should be noted that competition in health tourism destinations is rather tense and business operators have to make adjustments for winning their customers back to their offered itineraries and services. Natural resources and health incentives are expected by business operators to lure customers to visit and enjoy touring packages as relevant to the customers' preferences.

3. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



4. Research Objectives

The objectives of this research were to (1) analyze *the potential* of community tourism businesses in community development in Ban Mai Phatthana District, Nan Province, (2) study the level of public and private *support* that affects the level of participation, and (3) develop a *health tourism network* as a tourism model that determines product development in the community. It was expected that the results of the study can generate implications for the three identified research objectives.

5. Research Methodology and Research Scope

This study used the approach of Participatory Action Research (PAR) by pursuing the core activities of feasibility studies, feasibility analysis and participatory workshops. The researcher carried out the main activities for feasibility study analysis of the participating community, followed by a workshop at Ban Mai Phatthana District, Nan province. In this study, the researcher had 61 participants joining the study on a voluntary basis: 2 medical service representatives from two health tourism government agencies, 1 community chair or village headman, 8 herb growers and 50 traveling tourists.

6. Data Collection

The researcher used three research tools: questionnaires, participatory workshops and in-depth interviews to collect data from 61 participants. Data collection was carried out after the literature review of documents, books, and research articles related to health tourism was completed.

7. Research Tools

A structured questionnaire on sustainable community enterprise network development in Nan Province's health community tourism after the COVID -19 situation, was created with Cronbach Alpha value at 0.92. The interview questions dealt with the *development potential*

of health tourism, health tourism entrepreneurs' *participation*, a *business model* based on the analysis of strengths/ weaknesses/ opportunities/ threats (SWOT). Schemes and questions for participatory workshops and in-depth interviews were also based on the three main points of the structured interview: development potential, participation and a business model.

8. A Data Analysis

The researcher used mean and standard deviation for data analysis on the community's readiness for participation in solving problems collectively, health service users' satisfaction with health tourism in the community, social and cultural souvenirs, and location and environment. The researcher also used content analysis of interview data obtained from the participants in the study.

9. Results of the Research

The results from the workshops on the development potential and the community's readiness were summarized according to the research objectives. It was found that the community has good development potential, such as organizing activities related to herbs knowledge transfer to tourists and herbs museums. As for the issues of participation and a desirable business model, the researcher summarized major points under SWOT analysis of strengths/ weaknesses/ opportunities/ threats as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: SWOT Analysis of Strengths/ Weaknesses/ Opportunities/Threats for Development Potential of the Community's Health Tourism Business in Ban Mai Phatthana District, Nan Province.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A group of people in the community has knowledge and expertise in herbs and a good understanding of therapeutic treatments. 2. People in the community have knowledge and understanding of health, such as relaxation massage and healing massage. People in the community have knowledge of their products and can explain to tourists. They can also be local guides. 3. Nan is a popular province for natural tourism; therefore, tourists seek health spots for one day, thus being attracted to health trips. 4. There are government organizations to help and support as well from upstream to downstream process in distributing herbs for the villagers to plant as well as identifying the herb purchase sources for processing into various herbal products. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not having an established network of medical tourism is a remaining issue for people to work on. 2. The community members are not very cooperative because they are afraid of the situation of the COVID-19 epidemic. 3. Community groups still lack channels to connect with tourists . There is still weakness in English language communication with foreign tourists. 4. People in the community are developing similar products that lack diversity. 5. Lack of public relations for health tourism. 6. In terms of providing health services, such as Thai massage or therapeutic massage, there are few service providers in the community compared to the number of tourists during festivals or when the government tries to stimulate the economy.

Opportunities	Threats
1. The trend of Thai health tourism will be increasing after the Covid-19 situation has passed—creating good potential for health tourism in Thailand with availability of good resources. 2. The situation of solving the epidemic problems in Thailand has been well recognized worldwide. 3. Awareness and caution of tourists about Covid-19 remain and the government has emphasized security measures to prevent this epidemic. 4. The situation of aging society has made matters more conducive to health tourism.	1. In Nan Province, a lot of new tourist attractions have been developed and tourists sometimes do not visit all tourist attractions due to fatigue from traveling. 2. Thai tourists still accept OTOP products. The community has too few types of OTOP products.

Table 1 shows SWOT Analysis of Strengths/ Weaknesses/ Opportunities/ Threats to identify development potential of the community's health tourism business at Ban Mai Phatthana District, Nan Province.

The second objective of the study was to study the level of public and private support that affects the level of participation in the community's health tourism enterprise at Ban Mai Phatthana District, Nan Province. Two representatives from the local tourism offices, 8 herbal producers, and 1 village headmen volunteered information that the government agencies and the private sector have supported the production of goods for distribution, and the creation of joint activities for sustainable self-development. In addition, the public sector has provided financial support in disseminating information on activities or projects to attract tourists to visit the promoted areas or projects, particularly the project on raising awareness for youths called Rak Ban Kerd [Love Your Homeland]. Connecting health tourism with agro-tourism and ecotourism is good for the community to be integrated into economic activities of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Lertnattee, Chomya & Sornlertlamvanich (2014). Herbal medicine for healthcare service is a signature product in this community. Healthcare practitioners including pharmacists need new knowledge of herbal medicine. It is advisable that a web-based supplement learning tool on herbal medicine should be introduced for collaborative learning of knowledge and planting skills for herbal medicine production using multi-lingual herb name labels with AEC endorsement. The community has collected new opinions from parties concerned for useful information on enhanced planting skills in herbal medicine enterprise.

The third objective of the study was to develop a *health tourism network* as a tourism model that determines product development in the community. From the participants' responses, the pilot project to identify a healthy community tourism model appeared to please the elderly members of the community. After trial, the model based on the results of SWOT shown in Table 1 could benefit about 20,001 baht per month for the community's members with a single status.

The evaluation results on *participation* and *satisfaction* showed that the customers of Ban Mai Phatthana District's tourism service and visitors of the garden herb processing and production were satisfied with the activities and social/ cultural location and environment. The results pointed to a significant relationship between destination attributes and tourists'

overall satisfaction with the cultural heritage products and experience. Such findings were consistent with what was reported by Muzaffer, Muzaffer & McCleary (2016) that assessed a cultural heritage destinations by using an expectation and satisfaction grid. This also indicated the rising trend of the cultural heritage tourism and its market based on tourists' satisfaction.

The evaluation results corresponded with the findings from Oviedo-García, Vega-Vázquez, Castellanos-Verdugo & Reyes-Guizar (2016) about the satisfaction dimensions of domestic tourists when buying souvenir products in relation to the overall satisfaction with the touring experience. They asserted that souvenir shopping satisfaction consists of four factors: internal attraction, service differentiation, service provision and external attraction. The last two influence the overall tourist satisfaction rates. Their implications shed light on understanding of tourist satisfaction among both scholars and practitioners of health tourism.

The evaluation results of the participation and satisfaction with health tourism by users of Ban Mai Phatthana Health Tourism Service, Nan Province, are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Results of the Participation and Satisfaction Evaluation by Users of Ban Mai Phatthana Health Tourism Service Nan Province (n = 50)

Participation and Satisfaction of Those who Use Health Tourism Services	Ban Mai Phatthana District Nan Province		
	X	S.D.	Interpret
Overall place and environmental satisfaction	4.26	.352	most
Distribution satisfaction	4.02	.454	More
Souvenirs of the society and culture	4.36	.413	Moderate
total participation	4.24	.472	Low
Overall service satisfaction	4.22	.425	Very low

The evaluation results of the participation in and satisfaction with health tourism by service users in Ban Mai Phatthana District, Nan Province showed that the overall social and cultural souvenirs $X=4.36$ ($SD=.413$), followed by overall site and environmental satisfaction $X= 4.26$ ($SD =.352$), and overall participation $X = 4.24$ ($SD=.472$), respectively.

10. Implications of Research Results

As mentioned earlier, health tourism is highly popular today and it has impact on specialized marketing target groups for Thailand to explore further in promoting this type of tourism. The results of this research were to generate implications for development potential, participation and satisfaction, and the use of relevant tourist activities and business model. It is important to create value for activities and social/ cultural souvenir products. This is in support of income distribution and tourism sustainability to increase competitiveness in the tourism industry in Thailand.

The researcher would like to highlight implications of this research in the following aspects:

10.1 It is time for the government to appoint an advisory agency with expertise and knowledge in health tourism for local tourism units. The appointed agency can communicate and coordinate with persons responsible for the community's health tourism. People in the community adhered to the past knowledge and lacking in management service skills can be coached or monitored with new dimensions of tourism management.

10.2 The government can assist local people with the sufficiency economy philosophy of health tourism in practicality. Based on the sufficiency economy philosophy, the community is supposed to be self-reliant with involvement of the community's members in collective ownership of the business with fair share of benefits. Health tourism is therefore to promote the creation of jobs and activities, and tourism products/ services appealing to tourists with emphasis on sustainability.

10.3 Government and private agencies can help with promotion of herb planting by providing seeds and needed resources to people in target communities under the national plan of health tourism.

11. Recommendations for the Community

The researcher would like to make the following recommendations for the community:

11.1 Baan Mai Phatthana Community should design community activities based on participation of the community's members. They can participate in brainstorming what makes best for tourism business operations. There should be measures for income distribution for the community's members and providing funds for local souvenir production.

11.2 The management of the community must be transparent with rules and regulations that are accepted by the community's members. There should be schedules for meetings to ensure participation on a regular basis to handle problems and shortcomings in current health tourism business operations.

11.3 Tourism management should consider cost reduction for more profit. The business pace of entrepreneurs should be in line with the community's lifestyle.

11.4 The community should provide health education to its young entrepreneurs. They can also work on public relations for tourists to buy Thai herb products with unique properties.

12. Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher has two points on recommending future research on (1) networking health tourism in the north of Thailand and (2) current/ foreseen issues related to sustainable community development and promotion of community health tourism. Future research is meant to find useful information for practical and effective health tourism business management and operations.

13. The Author

Phimchaya Jetjiroj is a lecturer at the Business Administration Rajapark Institute. Her specialization and research interest lie in the areas of management, entrepreneurial networks, sustainable community development, and health tourism.

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