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GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE OTOP INNO-LIFE TOURISM COMMUNITY ENTERPRISES: EVIDENCE FROM THE LOWER NORTHEASTERN REGION OF THAILAND

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Abstract

The objectives of this research article are to identify factors that influence the achievement of sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises and to offer the approaches in improving the achievement of sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises. The quantitative data were collected from 300 members of community enterprises in the lower northeastern region of Thailand. In addition, 16 in-depth interviews were conducted with the group leaders of community enterprises and the district development officers. The results indicate that the achievement of sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises in the mentioned area are at a high level. The factors influencing the achievement of sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises include development of tourism communities, development of tourist attractions, development of products and services, and marketing promotion. Therefore, in improving the achievement of sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises, all four factors need to be interconnected. The main goal is to create a community market to attract visitors, which, in turn, generates employment, increases income, and strengthens the grassroots economy. Nevertheless, entrepreneurs must receive vocational training to produce quality products and services.

Keywords: OTOP Inno-Life Tourism Community Enterprises, Tourism Community, Tourist Attraction, Product and Service, Marketing Promotion

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Introduction

How important is tourism to the economy of Thailand, a question that has been addressed in an article on Investorest.co in 2020, is certainly not a new inquiry. Readers are likely well aware of its immense significance to the country's economy. Research conducted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand since 1998, titled "The role of the tourism industry in the overall economy of the country," has long highlighted that the tourism industry is the largest service sector in Thailand. It plays a substantial role in generating foreign currency, trade balance, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employment, income distribution, and foreign exchange. The writer of the mentioned article from Investorest.co (2020) refers to revenue statistics from Thailand's tourism sector, which have exceeded one trillion baht annually since 2013. The SCB Economic Intelligence Center website since 2010 has emphasized that it is not just about revenue but that at least 1.2 million people in this country directly depend on the tourism sector for their livelihoods (Chupan, 2010). It has become a significant driving force (Jankomol, 2019) and has even been referred to as the "core of the national economy" (SCB Wealth, 2019). Data from the Data Innovation and Governance Institute (2023) and the Bank of Thailand website correspondingly point out that before the outbreak of COVID-19, this sector could generate up to 3 trillion baht, or roughly 18% of the national GDP. This revenue is divided into income from foreign tourists, around two-thirds, and domestic tourists contributing the other third. Additionally, it is an economic sector that provided jobs for over 7 million people, equivalent to around 20% of total employment in 2019 (Mahavanakul & Prasongsak, 2023).

Although TTB Analytics (2023) predicted earlier in the year that tourism revenue in 2023 is expected to increase nearly twofold from 2022 and could return to about two-thirds of pre-COVID-19 earnings, the economic concerns stemming from the impacts of COVID-19 that came to the forefront during the third quarter of 2021 are encapsulated by the article's title on Longtunman: "The Thai Economy Will Never Be the Same Again if Tourism Has not Recovered.". Krunghai Compass (2023) also estimates that foreign tourists in 2023 and 2024 will continue to recover to 27.1 and 36.6 million, respectively (approaching the pre-pandemic normal of 39.9 million in 2019). This aligns with the World Bank's report from mid-year, which suggests that the return of tourists in 2023 will be a significant factor for the country's economic expansion, increasing by about half from the previous year. However, risks from natural disasters and drought remain important impediments to sustainable growth, especially in the context of the post-COVID-19 world, which has fundamentally changed (Sathirathai, 2023) especially in terms of the behavior of tourists changing according to technology and innovation including the situation of the pandemic (Qun, Leelapattana, Trakansiriwanich, Waiapha & Sitthikun, 2022; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023). Therefore, "sustainability" has become the top priority, according to Sathirathai (2023), emphasizing that serious action is necessary for the survival of Thai society. The "10-Year Framework of Programmes on SCP" by the Technology and Informatics Institute for Sustainability (2019) stipulates that "tourism" needs to transform into "sustainable tourism," with tourism closely integrating with local communities. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (2018) suggests that communities must actively participate in the development of tourism to achieve "community-based tourism" (CBT), ensuring a balance between conservation and development, and aspiring toward sustainability in the future.

Apart from sustainability, which has a profound role in the field of CBT (Srithong, Suthitakon & Karnjanakit, 2019), "innovation" (Senakhan & Pavapanunkul, 2022a, 2022b; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023) and "lifestyle" are the other two crucial aspects mentioned as essential conditions in the present year that both entrepreneurs and government agencies need to prioritize to expedite the recovery of the nation's tourism sector (Krunghai Compass, 2023). This is correspondent with the efforts initiated by the Thai government

since 2018, where CBT was integrated with innovation and lifestyle (innovation + lifestyle = “inno-life” (Komalamisr, Saengla, Phrakhrupariyattikittiwong, Chantamalo, Malawangso & Dhammawet, 2019)). This is culminated in the “OTOP inno-life tourism community” project by Community Development Department, Ministry of Interior (2018). More than 9 billion baht was allocated to stimulate the grassroots economy. This was achieved by developing tourism personnel, enhancing tourist attractions and amenities, improving tourism-related products and services, connecting local tourism routes, and promoting local tourism community markets. The goal was to increase income by an average of 10% in each of the 3,273 communities nationwide (Khaosod, 2018).

However, some studies indicate that this project has produced more positive outcomes in certain areas compared to before it was implemented (Daothong, 2021). In many regions, it has contributed significantly to community empowerment and satisfaction (Chaopraeknoi, 2019; Bootcharee & Lowatcharin, 2021; Jaihan, Nalao & Kidkhamsuan, 2023). Nevertheless, in some areas, there have been challenges both in terms of community understanding of the project and community participation, leading to weaknesses and sustainability issues (Swangkong, Tatiyanantakul & Subhimaros, 2022). This has raised questions about the cost-effectiveness of the project (Thai PBS, 2019), particularly when the State Audit Office of the Kingdom of Thailand (2020) published the report “Report on the inspection of the achievement and efficiency of the operation of the OTO inno-life tourism community project”. It is concluded that the implementation of the OTO inno-life tourism community project has not been successful and is not efficient due to at least two reasons; 1) the activities within the five main processes of the project had not effectively contributed to the development and promotion of genuine OTO inno-life tourism communities, and 2) many of the target communities that had been developed and promoted based on the project’s approaches still had certain factors that hindered them from becoming capable tourism communities. This resulted in increased public scrutiny, with some critics suggesting that it was an inefficient use of public funds (PPTVHD36, 2020a, 2020b).

However, since this project continues to operate up to the present day, the question that arises, and many parties are still collectively seeking answers through empirical data, is what the factors that influence the success of this project are (Phonginwong, Huadsir, Thipaksorn, Eaimviriyawat & Sawangtap, 2019; Woravat, Kanaphum & Kosonkittiumporn, 2019; Chotpittayanon, 2023). This will lead to proposals and strategies for the development of project operations for even greater success in the future (Thanawachiranun, Jaipeng, Rujivararat & Deeponpun, 2021; Khongphan, Taiwan & Sitthijirapat, 2023; Wattanakul, Ekiem, Panyadee & Techatunminasakul, 2023). Furthermore, to jointly answer the aforementioned questions in a more comprehensive and in-depth manner in terms of content and in a more general way in terms of the population (which has hitherto mainly been studied from one community or one province), this research article aims to identify the factors that influence the achievement of sustainable OTO inno-life tourism community project in the lower northeastern region of Thailand, and to propose strategies to enhance the achievement of sustainable OTO inno-life tourism community enterprises.

Literature Review

Achievements of Sustainable Inno-Life Tourism Community Enterprises (ACHI)

As a guideline for promoting, developing, and extending the implementation of the OTO inno-life tourism community project, the Community Development Department, Ministry of Interior (2018) has set goals for communities to be able to manage tourism and generate sustainable income. From a review of related literature of Anusuren and Lowatcharin (2019) and Nathamphloi (2019), it was found that we can consider the project achievement from at

least 3 elements: 1) Creating jobs in the community (JOBC), 2) Quality of work (QUAL) and 3) Value (VALU).

Factors Influencing the Achievements of Sustainable Inno-Life Tourism Community Enterprises

According to the synthesis of relevant literature, the researchers decided to select factors that are likely to have an influence on the achievement of sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises for this study. The 4 factors included:

1) Development of tourism communities (DEVE) which can be considered from the 3 components; 1) Community preparation (PREP), 2) Community business plan preparation (BUSI) and 3) Creating a storyteller (STOR) (Office of Community-based Tourism, 2018; Thailand Community Based Tourism Institute, 2021)

2) Development of tourist attractions (TOUR) which can be considered from the 3 components; 1) Good host's house (GOOD) 2) Potential development (POTE) and 3) Community charm development (CHAR) (Phayakvichien, 2014; Akarawong, Sangduen, U-soh & Gothamasan, 2019)

3) Development of products and services (PROD) which can be considered from the 3 components; 1) Community entrepreneur development (ENTR), 2) Upgrading product quality standards (UPGR) and 3) Logo design (LOGO) (Armstrong & Kotler, 2009; Nuansara, Teypinsai & Chutinathuwadon, 2021)

4) Marketing promotion (MARK) which can be considered from the 3 components; 1) Public relations (PUBL), 2) Product distribution (TROD) and 3) Network (NETW) (Bureau of Local Wisdom and Community Enterprise Promotion, 2017; Sermchayut, 2020)

Research Hypothesis

Therefore, this research sets out 4 research hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 is that DEVE, TOUR, PROD, and MARK have an influence on ACHI. Hypothesis 2 is that DEVE, TOUR, and PROD have an influence on MARK. Hypothesis 3 is that TOUR and PROD have Influence on PROD. Hypothesis 4 is that DEVE has an influence on TOUR, respectively.

Research Methods

Population and Sample

The research design for this study is a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research. The research population for the quantitative research includes members of the OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises in the lower northeastern region of Thailand, covering four provinces: Nakhon Ratchasima, Chaiyaphum, Buriram, and Surin. The total population consists of 2,022 individuals. Boomsma & Hoogland, 2001 recommended that the sample size was determined based on structural equation modeling principles, using maximum likelihood estimation. The recommended sample size for this method should be equal to or greater than 200 individuals. Additionally, Schumacker and Lomax (2010) suggest using Rules of Thumb for structural equation modeling, with 10 to 20 individuals per observed variable. In this research, there are 15 observed variables; hence, the sample size of 300 individuals was chosen. The survey findings indicate that the majority of respondents are female (80.00%), with ages between 51-60 years (36.00%). Most have completed their education at the high school/vocational level (33.67%), and their monthly income falls within the range of 5,001-10,000 Baht (40.33%). In the qualitative research component, the key informants include leaders of the OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises and district development officers in the area, totaling 16 individuals.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The research utilized quantitative research tools, including a self-developed structured questionnaire for data collection. The questionnaire's content was thoroughly examined for appropriateness, content validity (with item-objective congruence values ranging from 0.67 to

1.00), and reliability (with a Cronbach’s alpha value of .975). Statistical analysis was performed to describe the data’s characteristics and to establish structural equation models to analyze the relationships between different variables. The data analysis was conducted using the LISREL program. For the qualitative research component, structured interviews were used as a research tool. The data collected from interviews were analyzed by categorizing opinions, identifying key themes and subthemes to support the findings from the quantitative research, and to create the approaches for enhancing the sustainability of the OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises.

Research Results

The results of the descriptive data analysis of various variables found that development of tourism communities ($\bar{x} = 4.14$), development of tourist attractions ($\bar{x} = 4.03$), and marketing promotion ($\bar{x} = 4.09$) including achievements of sustainable inno-life tourism community enterprises ($\bar{x} = 4.12$) are at a high level. Meanwhile, development of products and services ($\bar{x} = 4.29$) is at the highest level. This means the situation of the OTOP inno-life tourism community project in the lower area of the northeastern region which is the case study this time is at least at a fairly good level. Especially in the development of products and services, which is one of the important activities that the Community Development Department gives special importance to and can push for concrete results, it is at a very good level. The details appear in Table 1.

Table 1 Results of descriptive data analysis on achievements of sustainable inno-life tourism community enterprises and related factors

	Mean	S.D.	Level
Achievements of sustainable inno-life tourism community enterprises	4.12	0.45	High
Development of tourism communities	4.14	0.46	High
Development of tourist attractions	4.03	0.43	High
Development of products and services	4.29	0.47	Highest
Marketing promotion	4.09	0.57	High

The results of the hypothesis testing indicated that the quantitative data were consistent with all four hypotheses specified. There was a statistically significant one-way relationship between variables, with path coefficients ranging from 0.18 to 0.81 and t-statistic values ranging from 2.00 to 13.17. This suggests that as the independent variables increase in levels, the dependent variable also increases in levels. Further details can be found in Table 2.

Table 2 Results of hypothesis testing

	Path coefficient	t statistic	Results
H1: DEVE, TOUR, PROD and MARK have an influence on ACHI.			
1.1) DEVE --> ACHI	0.46**	3.49	Supportive
1.2) TOUR --> ACHI	0.55**	3.16	Supportive
1.3) PROD --> ACHI	0.23*	2.09	Supportive
1.4) MARK --> ACHI	0.18*	2.00	Supportive
H2: DEVE, TOUR and PROD have an influence on MARK.			
2.1) DEVE --> MARK	0.31**	4.56	Supportive
2.2) TOUR --> MARK	0.37**	3.82	Supportive
2.3) PROD --> MARK	0.34**	3.74	Supportive

	Path coefficient	t statistic	Results
H3: TOUR and PROD have an influence on PROD.			
3.1) DEVE --> PROD	0.49**	7.03	Supportive
3.2) TOUR --> PROD	0.46**	6.17	Supportive
H4: DEVE has an influence on TOUR.			
4.1) DEVE --> TOUR	0.81**	13.17	Supportive

** = p-value \leq 0.01; * = p-value \leq 0.05

From the following reasons, regarding the approaches for improving the achievement of sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises in the lower northeastern region of Thailand, special attention must be given to development of products and services, development of tourism communities, marketing promotion, and development of tourist attractions. One concrete aspect is creating a community market which will create jobs, create more income, and strengthen the grassroots economy. It can draw more people into the village. However, personnel in the community still need to develop their potential in terms of knowledge, skills, and creativity to be able to produce quality and valuable products and services based on the available resources. At the same time, we must consider using additional technology to create attractions for tourists to return to travel as well. The details are shown below.

1) The development of tourism communities should focus on developing a skilled workforce that connects various aspects, including community readiness, business planning, and storytelling. There must be an emphasis on enhancing the skills, knowledge, and collaborative community data management of community members or staff. The development of tourism communities is a fundamental factor that impacts the sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises. Furthermore, apart from such an approach, it can be observed that the community leaders still lack expertise in the field of tourism.

2) The communities engaged in tourism must elevate the status of their tourist attractions and amenities to gain greater recognition and prominence. To be good hosts, communities should have a positive attitude, confidence, skills, expertise, knowledge, and a charismatic personality. Their interactions should be friendly, warm, and genuinely service-oriented, with a focus on delivering excellent service. To develop the charm of the community, they need to present their uniqueness to tourists. Additionally, communities should link their local attractions to cater to the needs of diverse target groups, requiring the development of different types of tourist routes.

3) Regarding the development of products and services, it has been observed that product producers or business operators often lack the knowledge and ability to develop their products. Even though some products are unique to the community, they may lack appeal or interest to attract customers as souvenirs. Some souvenirs might need to be designed to be durable, compact, and easy to carry in bags or luggage. Thus, it is suggested that business operators or product producers should explore and study the potential of the area. The adoption of technology, communication tools, online marketing, and various innovations will improve the quality of work.

4) Regarding the market promotion, business operators must have knowledge of using marketing innovations, such as digital and online markets. They should also create market networks connecting communities, villages, districts, provinces, regions, and the national level to establish sustainable trading. To promote this, business operators in the community should be encouraged to engage in activities that foster partnerships between product producers or entrepreneurs from various regions.

These recommendations aim to foster community-based tourism and make it sustainable in the lower northeastern region of Thailand.

Conclusion and Discussion

The research findings indicate that the achievement of sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises in the lower northeastern region of Thailand is largely influenced by the successful OTOP inno-life tourism community project. The results demonstrate that these projects have been relatively well-received by the local population, who perceive them as beneficial to the area. This includes the operations in various areas whether the development of tourism communities, development of tourist attractions, development of products and services, and marketing promotion to promote this project to come to fruition and create sustainability for the community tourism and the community in the future. This is consistent with previous research in many areas (Thanawachiranun et al., 2021; Chotpittayanon, 2023). However, although the results of this type of data analysis can reveal success in one aspect of public policy implementation, that is, creating satisfaction among people, it has not been clearly demonstrated in terms of achieving other indicators, such as an average increase in tourism income of 10 percent for each community. There has not yet been a clear evaluation in terms of economics. The happiness of the people in the targeted community must increase and the satisfaction of tourists must be at an appropriate level. It is also an area that previous research, even this research, has not paid any attention to studying yet. Therefore, future research on this project is recommended. It is necessary to move from the opinions of those involved in the operation of the organs of the operation to measuring the results according to the indicators that have been set since the beginning of the project. All will lead to the answers to the questions raised by the State Audit Office of the Kingdom of Thailand in 2020 regarding results and efficiency in terms of budget use whether it is worthwhile and appropriate for the government to proceed further or not. At present, the government needs to weigh up how to use the limited budget in which public policies that have been campaigned for.

The findings of development of tourism communities, development of tourist attractions, development of products and services, and marketing promotion are factors that influence the achievement of sustainable OTOP inno-life tourism community enterprises encompass that the approaches of Community Development Department, Ministry of Interior (2018) including previous studies (Aeknarajindawut, Boonphadung & Rungsawanpho, 2019; Daungprom, Srisunthron, T.srivong & Auyapitang, 2022) are on the right track. The emphasis should be given to mobilizing widespread community participation, not only at the level of community leaders and members of Community Enterprises (Sirayut & Bunjoon, 2021). The expansion of community networks (Poolsawat, Youngrod & Imdee, 2021) can reduce dependency on support from government agencies and turn to self-reliance for sustainability (Hemaphan, 2022).

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