International Journal of Web of Multidisciplinary Studies
(Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Fully Refereed International Journal)
website: *https://ijwos.com*
Volume 03, Issue 11, November 2026
OPEN ACCESS
E-ISSN : 3049-2424
DOI: https://doi.org/10.71366/ijwos03112698694

THE ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND CULTURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN NGOC THANH, VIETNAM

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Article Info

Article History:
Published: 11 Nov 2026

Publication Issue:
Volume 03, Issue 11
November 2026

Page Number:
158-163

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Abstract:
This article examines the distinction between the role of local communities as heritage practitioners and their capacity to participate in tourism in Ngoc Thanh, Vietnam, where San Diu cultural heritage coexists with historical sites associated with the Ngoc Thanh revolutionary base. Drawing on a case-study design, the analysis uses descriptive statistics from a survey of 78 residents, supplemented by a separate survey of 81 visitors and stakeholder interview materials to contextualise tourism activities. Only 11.5% of surveyed residents reported regular participation in tourism. Frequently reported constraints included insufficient tourism-related skills (78.2%), limited knowledge of tourism operations (71.8%), and inadequate investment capital (67.9%). The findings distinguish the community's contribution to sustaining cultural practices in everyday life from its participation in delivering visitor experiences. The availability of heritage resources does not, in itself, translate into sustained engagement in tourism. The article advances a task-oriented approach to destination governance in which capacity-building is linked to identifiable service opportunities while safeguarding heritage practitioners' autonomy. The case contributes context-specific evidence to debates on the conditions shaping community participation in heritage-based tourism destinations.

Keywords: local communities; heritage safeguarding; cultural tourism; San Diu; tourism participation; Ngoc Thanh.

1. INTRODUCTION

Community participation is widely recognised as an important condition for sustainable tourism development. However, the concept encompasses distinct positions within the processes through which destination value is created and governed. Residents may sustain cultural knowledge, practices, and local memory without directly providing tourism services. Conversely, participation in tourism businesses does not necessarily confer decision-making authority over the content or uses of heritage. Conflating these positions risks misrepresenting community capabilities, participation rights, and heritage safeguarding outcomes.

Foundational studies have shown that opportunities for participation are shaped by organisational arrangements, access to resources, and power relations (Timothy, 1999; Tosun, 2000; Scheyvens, 1999). More recent research has further distinguished involvement in tourism activities from the ability to influence decisions and access benefits, including at heritage destinations characterised by strong governmental involvement (Hu et al., 2022; Dong & Nguyen, 2023; Li et al., 2026). Accordingly, the presence of substantial cultural resources within a community cannot, on its own, be taken as evidence of meaningful participation in tourism development.

Ngoc Thanh offers a relevant setting in which to examine this distinction. The locality encompasses San Diu cultural practices, notably Soong Co folk singing, alongside historical sites associated with the Ngoc Thanh revolutionary base. Field materials identify heritage practitioners, local service providers, tourism enterprises, and public authorities undertaking different activities, while the resident survey indicates relatively limited regular participation in tourism. This apparent divergence between cultural resources and levels of tourism engagement provides the point of departure for the study.

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The article addresses three research questions: (1) What positions do community members occupy in sustaining heritage and providing cultural experiences? (2) What levels of tourism participation, perceived constraints, and support needs are reported by residents? (3) What organisational conditions do these findings suggest for connecting cultural roles with opportunities to participate in tourism? The study contributes a case-based analytical distinction between heritage resources, service-delivery capacity, and participation in governance, and develops organisational principles that can be examined in practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. From involvement in tourism activities to participation in governance

Timothy (1999) demonstrated that translating participatory planning principles into practice depends on institutional and social contexts. Tosun (2000) distinguished operational, structural, and cultural limitations, thereby extending explanations beyond residents' individual characteristics. Scheyvens (1999) conceptualised empowerment across economic, social, psychological, and political dimensions. Taken together, these perspectives caution against treating residents' presence in tourism service provision as the sole indicator of the quality or depth of participation.

More recent evidence reinforces this distinction. Research at a Miao ethnic heritage destination in China suggests that perceived empowerment may differ across economic and political dimensions (Hu et al., 2022). A case study in Da Nang highlights the significance of power relations and community voice in decisions concerning destination development (Dong & Nguyen, 2023). Li et al. (2026) propose understanding participation and responsible governance as interacting components rather than reducing participation to the number of people mobilised.

2.2. Communities as heritage practitioners and custodians

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) recognises the role of communities, groups, and individuals in creating, maintaining, transmitting, and managing intangible cultural heritage. From this perspective, safeguarding is embedded in cultural life and should not be equated with performances staged for tourists. Organised visitor experiences may broaden opportunities to present heritage, but they also require the involvement of knowledge holders in determining the content, format, and context of cultural practices.

At the destination-management level, research in Sukhothai indicates that community involvement in heritage conservation may coexist with limitations on participation in governance (Esichaikul & Chansawang, 2022). This suggests that cultural contributions, involvement in service delivery, and decision-making authority should be examined separately. These roles may overlap within individuals, but none can be inferred solely from the presence of another.

2.3. Analytical framework

The study adopts three levels of analysis. The first concerns the presence of cultural practices and heritage actors, for which relevant evidence includes types of practice, knowledge holders, and settings of cultural activity. The second concerns the capacity to participate in tourism service provision, assessed through reported participation frequency, constraints, and support needs. The third concerns positions in governance and access to benefits, which would require direct evidence on decision-making, agreements, and resource distribution. The available data directly support the second level, provide descriptive evidence for the first, and permit only an exploratory discussion of the third.

Table 1. Three-level analytical framework

Level	**Analytical question**	**Evidence used in the study**
Heritage practice	Who sustains and presents cultural practices?	Field materials and records of heritage actors
Tourism participation	How frequently do residents participate, and what constraints do they report?	Survey of 78 residents
Organisation and governance	What functions do different stakeholder groups perform?	Stakeholder interview summaries and activity records; decision-

		making authority not measured directly

Source: Authors' synthesis of the literature and research design.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design and sampling

The study employs a case-study design combining descriptive quantitative data with supplementary qualitative materials. The resident sample comprises 78 individuals aged 18 years or older who lived in the study area and participated voluntarily. Participants were recruited through criterion-guided convenience sampling, a non-probability approach. A separate visitor sample includes 81 adults who had experienced at least one activity or attraction in Ngoc Thanh; respondents were approached in person and through an online questionnaire. The two samples were analysed separately because the questionnaires and measurement objectives differed.

The fieldwork records include a matrix of 25 information-provider cases across four stakeholder groups: four public-sector managers, nine local community members and cultural practitioners, seven tourism enterprise representatives or guides, and five experts. These materials are used to identify stakeholder roles and functions rather than to calculate the prevalence of opinions across groups or reproduce verbatim quotations without verification against the underlying records. Differences between the number of documented cases and descriptions of interview sessions in the fieldwork records were not used to generate additional observations or infer thematic frequencies.

3.2. Data processing and triangulation

Resident survey indicators were summarised using percentages and a reported mean score. Participation frequency was classified into four categories, while constraints and support needs were reported as separate indicators; their percentages were not aggregated because respondents may have been able to select more than one option. The results tables present percentages for the resident sample, and arithmetic consistency checks were not treated as substitutes for respondent-level data.

The visitor survey was used to identify types of tourism activities recorded in the study. Activity-specific percentages were excluded because the denominators underlying the aggregated figures could not be established. Qualitative materials were considered across stakeholder groups and three themes: cultural practice, service participation, and organisational coordination. No causal hypothesis tests were undertaken, and the analysis does not infer levels of empowerment or the effectiveness of heritage safeguarding in the absence of direct measures.

3.3. Scope of inference

The findings describe survey participants and the case-study context; they are not statistically representative of all Ngoc Thanh residents or of the San Diu population specifically. Statements concerning governance arrangements are interpretive implications drawn from the comparison of evidence sources, not direct measurements of power or benefit distribution.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Distinct community roles within the heritage–tourism setting

Field materials identify San Diu cultural practices—including Soong Co folk singing, cuisine, dress, customs, and community activities—as elements of Ngoc Thanh's cultural setting. The information-provider records include a Soong Co club leader, a community representative associated with a heritage site, local food-service providers, and a homestay operator. This composition indicates that cultural knowledge and visitor-oriented activities are distributed across different social positions rather than concentrated within a single occupational group.

Importantly, cultural practitioners and tourism service providers may perform different functions. Heritage practitioners contribute to the continuity of cultural content, collective memory, and forms of practice, whereas service providers organise the space, scheduling, and practical arrangements required for visitors. The management and protection of historical sites associated with the Ngoc Thanh revolutionary base also involve relevant public authorities. Analysing the "community role" therefore requires distinguishing these functions rather than assigning responsibility for both heritage conservation and commercial tourism to a single actor.

This evidence enables the identification of relevant actors and cultural practices within the case. It does not, however, establish the effectiveness of intergenerational transmission or changes in the continuity of individual practices over time.

4.2. Frequency of residents' participation in tourism

Table 2. Frequency of residents' participation in tourism activities (n = 78)

Participation frequency	**Percentage (%)**
Regularly	11.5
Occasionally	30.8
Infrequently	39.7
Not at all	18.0
Total	100.0

Source: Resident survey conducted for this study.

Regular participation was reported by 11.5% of respondents, while 57.7% fell into the categories of infrequent participation or non-participation. A further 30.8% reported occasional participation. This distribution indicates that tourism was not a regular activity for most surveyed residents. These figures describe engagement in tourism services or activities, however, and should not be interpreted as direct measures of cultural practice, heritage safeguarding, or transmission.

4.3. Perceived constraints and support needs

Table 3. Constraints and support needs reported by residents (n = 78)

Resident survey indicator	**Result**
Insufficient tourism-related skills	78.2%
Limited knowledge of tourism operations	71.8%
Inadequate investment capital	67.9%
Demand for skills support	83.3%
Demand for financial support	76.9%
Perceived role of tourism (mean score)	3.62/5

Source: Resident survey conducted for this study.

Insufficient tourism-related skills were the most frequently reported constraint (78.2%), followed by limited knowledge of tourism operations (71.8%) and inadequate investment capital (67.9%). Demand for skills-related support reached 83.3%, exceeding demand for financial support (76.9%). These indicators suggest that respondents identified both service-delivery capabilities and access to resources as areas requiring attention. Nevertheless, descriptive survey data do not establish the independent effects of these constraints on actual participation behaviour.

The mean score of 3.62 out of 5 for perceptions of tourism's role is reported as a descriptive indicator. Without verification of the underlying questionnaire structure, it is not used to infer individual motivation or the reliability of a composite scale.

4.4. Functional differentiation among stakeholder groups

Visits to historical sites, engagement with local ways of life, and experiences of San Diu culture were among the tourism activities recorded in Ngoc Thanh. At the organisational level, public authorities were associated with cultural and heritage-site responsibilities; tourism enterprises and guides with itinerary development and service delivery; and residents with cultural knowledge, food provision, and selected local services. This functional differentiation indicates the presence of multiple actors within the visitor-experience value chain, but does not demonstrate the existence of a formalised co-governance mechanism or an agreed framework for benefit sharing.

Considered together, the findings point to a noteworthy pattern: the presence of multiple actors and cultural resources coincides with a low proportion of regular tourism participation among surveyed residents. This identifies an organisational issue warranting further investigation rather than demonstrating that any particular constraint caused the observed participation pattern.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Cultural resources do not necessarily translate into market participation

The central finding from Ngoc Thanh is the coexistence of cultural resources with potential relevance to visitors and relatively limited regular participation in tourism among surveyed residents. This provides case-specific descriptive support for the arguments advanced by Timothy (1999) and Tosun (2000): opportunities for participation depend on organisational conditions and practical capabilities, not simply on the availability of resources. Unlike studies designed to test explanatory mechanisms, however, the present evidence establishes coexistence rather than causation.

For heritage-based tourism research, the distinction lies between two processes: reproducing cultural value through everyday community practices and organising that value into visitor activities with schedules, personnel, service standards, and access to customers. These processes may reinforce one another but require different capabilities. Consequently, the frequency of tourism participation should not be treated as a proxy for the community's contribution to heritage safeguarding.

5.2. Participation capacity must be connected to opportunity structures

The high proportions of respondents reporting skills, knowledge, and capital constraints provide a basis for identifying support needs, but not for ranking the causal influence of these factors. In the frameworks developed by Tosun (2000) and Reindrawati (2023), barriers to participation can intersect across operational, structural, and cultural domains. Skills training that is disconnected from actual service opportunities and channels of participation may therefore have limited capacity to generate sustained engagement.

For Ngoc Thanh, a more appropriate implication is to design support around defined tasks: presenting cultural content with community consent, preparing local food services, coordinating the timing of cultural experiences, or facilitating access to visitors. Each task should have an identified coordinating actor, specified capability requirements, and clear implementation conditions. This represents a governance proposal derived from reported needs rather than an intervention model whose effectiveness has already been tested.

5.3. Heritage practitioners' autonomy as a principle linking safeguarding and tourism

The UNESCO Convention (2003) places communities at the centre of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding. Applied to cultural tourism, this principle requires a distinction between community consent to present a cultural practice and its conversion into a commercial service. Practitioners should retain the ability to determine the setting, form, and extent of their involvement, including the option not to participate in tourism businesses.

Research on empowerment at heritage destinations suggests that participation in service provision and influence over decision-making may develop unevenly (Hu et al., 2022; Esichaikul & Chansawang, 2022). Because the Ngoc Thanh study did not directly measure decision-making authority, its contribution is to identify the need for consultation and negotiated arrangements rather than to assert that the community has been empowered or excluded from governance.

5.4. A three-stage approach to destination governance

The case evidence, considered alongside the literature, suggests a three-stage approach. First, potentially visitor-facing cultural activities should be identified in consultation with practitioners, including explicit recognition of practices that should not be commercialised. Second, skills and resource support should be linked to activities with identifiable

delivery partners, schedules, and responsibilities. Third, agreements should establish responsibilities, practitioner autonomy, recognition of contributions, and principles for benefit sharing. Subsequent monitoring could examine the number of participants, activity frequency, and feedback from cultural practitioners.

This approach does not assume that every resident should become a tourism entrepreneur. Rather, it seeks to expand appropriate and voluntary opportunities for participation while sustaining the community's existing settings of cultural practice.

5.5. Study limitations

The non-probability sample does not support statistical generalisation. The available indicators capture self-reported constraints but do not test their effects on participation frequency. Interview materials were not analysed at the level of independently verifiable excerpts within this article; governance-related statements are therefore restricted to a synthesis of stakeholder functions. Intergenerational transmission, decision-making authority, and benefit distribution require dedicated measures in subsequent research.

6. CONCLUSION

The Ngoc Thanh case demonstrates the analytical importance of distinguishing communities as cultural practitioners from communities as providers of tourism services. Among the 78 residents surveyed, 11.5% reported regular tourism participation, while constraints related to skills, operational knowledge, and capital were commonly identified. Field materials also document San Diu cultural practices and the involvement of several stakeholder groups in tourism, but the existence of cultural resources cannot be equated with sustained participation capacity.

The article contributes a differentiated perspective on community roles in heritage-based destinations by identifying cultural actors, describing service-participation capacity, and treating participation in governance as a distinct issue requiring appropriate institutional arrangements and empirical investigation. The principal implication is to connect capacity-building with specific service opportunities while respecting heritage practitioners' autonomy. The findings are relevant to the case under study and provide a basis for future research into participation mechanisms and benefit sharing; they should not be interpreted as causal evidence or as an assessment of long-term safeguarding outcomes.

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