

Stakeholder Networks Supplying Rural Tourism in The Mekong Delta, Vietnam: The Case of Thoi Son Islet, Tien Giang Province

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메콩델타지역 농촌관광의 공급자 네트워크: 티엔장쑤 티이션 섬을 사례로

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Abstract : Tourism in Thoi Son Islet has been the advanced model for rural tourism in the Mekong Delta region since the 1990s. The continuously rising number of tourists, however, has also created problems that affect sustainable rural development. To understand these problems, this research analyzed how rural tourism has been operated through the methodology of a stakeholder network. After investigating the network among key stakeholders (Ho Chi Minh travel agencies (HCMTAs), local travel agencies (LTAs), and local residents, the result showed that in the current model, HCMTAs and LTAs have played the role of connectors, working as hubs to shift tourists (demand) to match local residents (supply), with the networking being dominated by signed contracts (formal networks). The networks between LTAs and local residents are both formal and informal. Inter- and intra-networks among local residents are dominated by informal networks of established working relationships based on networks of family, friends, and neighbors. Moreover, this research has found that there is no cooperating network among LTAs. Among owners of tourist sites was not also found cooperating network. The primary motivating factor for these stakeholders is price competition; this has led to a disproportionately small share of revenue for local stakeholders, with most tourism revenue going to HCMTAs. Additionally, because of the high competition among local stakeholders, this results in local stakeholders having little or no negotiating power when conducting business with HCMTAs. Meanwhile the Tien Giang Tourism Association is inefficient in fostering cooperation among local stakeholders to increase their negotiating power.

Key Words : rural tourism, stakeholder, network, Thoi Son Islet, Tien Giang province, Vietnam

요약 : 베트남 특히 메콩델타지역은 1990년대 이후 지속적으로 관광객 수가 증가해 왔으며, 특히 티이션 섬은 이 지역의 대표적 농촌관광지 중 하나로 주목받아 왔다. 이 연구는 농촌지역에서 관광개발이 이루어질 때, 관광 자본의 성격(역외/역내)에 따라 공급자들이 어떻게 네트워크를 형성하는지를 밝히고자 하였다. 분석 결과, 티이션 섬의 주요 관광

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공급자는 크게, 호치민시의 여행사, 지방 여행사, 지역 주민 및 행정기관으로 나타났으며, 이 중, 호치민시의 여행사와 지방 여행사는 관광객(관광 수요)와 지역 주민(관광 공급)을 이어주는 중심적 연결자로서 기능하고 있다는 것이 밝혀졌다. 또한, 호치민시의 여행사와 지방 여행사간의 네트워킹은 서류상 계약(공적 네트워킹)이 지배적인 반면, 지방 여행사와 지역 주민간의 네트워킹은 서류상 계약(공식 네트워킹)과 구두상 계약(비공식 네트워킹)이 동시에 존재하였다. 한편, 지역 주민간의 네트워킹에서는 가족, 친구, 근린관계에 기반한 비공식 네트워킹이 지배적으로 나타났다. 한편, 지방 여행사간 또는 터이션 관광의 최종 목적지이며 지역 주민들에 의해 운영되는 과수 농원(tourist sites) 간에는 어떠한 협조적 네트워킹도 나타나고 있지 않다는 것이 밝혀졌다.

이러한 공급자 간의 네트워킹의 일차적 동기는 가격 경쟁이며, 그 결과 터이션 섬 관광 수입의 대부분이 호치민시의 여행사로 누출되며, 지역내 공급자에게는 일부분만이 돌아가는 수입 분배의 불균형이 나타났다. 즉, 지역내 공급자들의 치열한 경쟁이 호치민시의 여행사와 관광 업무 체결시 교섭력을 발휘할 수 없게 하고 있었다. 최근 지역내 관광 공급자들의 연합조직으로 관광협회가 설립되었지만, 주요 공급자가 아직 가입하고 있지 않으며, 지역내 공급자들의 교섭력을 높이는 데는 역부족인 것으로 보여진다.

주요어 : 농촌관광, 공급자, 네트워크, 터이션 섬, 티엔장쑤, 베트남

1. Introduction

The decline of traditional rural industries such as agriculture, mining, and forestry has required rural communities to explore alternative means to strengthen their economic base (Long, *et al.*, 1990). As a result, rural communities have investigated alternative industries to strengthen and diversify their economies (Byrd, *et al.*, 2009), with tourism being identified as a primary industry with the potential to assist local communities in developing economic diversity (Long, *et al.*, 1990). In these areas, rural tourism may represent a sustainable form of development (Bramwell, 1994; Lane, 1994). However, the sustainable development of rural tourism is not an easy task, requiring the involvement of different stakeholders (Joshi, 2012). Hardy and Beeton (2001) argue that without a full understanding of how sustainable tourism is perceived by the different stakeholders who live in, use, and manage the tourism resources, there is a risk that sustainable tourism will not occur. In other words,

without stakeholder support in the community, it is nearly impossible to develop tourism in a sustainable manner (Gunn, 1994).

Vietnam is an agricultural country in which over 70% of the population lives in rural areas (the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), 2008). Varieties of rural tourism such as ecotourism, community-based tourism, agritourism, and handicraft tourism have developed since the Doi Moi¹⁾ period of 1986. Recently, however, the term *rural tourism* has seen a resurgence of recognition in official documents, such as the *Strategy of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2011–2020*, issued by MARD(2009). This evidence suggests that the Vietnamese government recognizes the necessity of rural tourism in the process of modernizing and industrializing rural areas.

Regarding the important roles played by all stakeholders involved, Vietnamese government officials and researchers have both shown great concern for sustainable rural development. Specifically, the Vietnamese state established policy in the

2000s on networking between four main types of stakeholders—“farmers, scientists, government, entrepreneurs” (Decision 80/2002/QĐ-TTg of the prime minister). However, this networking has concentrated mainly on agricultural products, ignoring rural tourism. Moreover, previous research has rarely focused on analyzing the stakeholders involved in tourism development in Vietnam’s rural areas. Along with these features, this paper aims to reveal how rural tourism in the Mekong Delta has been operated from the standpoint of stakeholder networking.

This paper applies the analytical framework of the stakeholder network. Freeman (1984) defines a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objective.” Regarding tourism, there are four main tourism stakeholder perspectives: local government officials, entrepreneurs, residents, and tourists (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003). From the supply side, Hall and Page (1999) divide these groups into the private and public sectors. The private sector’s involvement in tourism is most likely to be motivated by profit, as in the case of tourism entrepreneurs (Shaw and Williams, 1994); the public sector involves the government at various levels and may become involved in tourism for a multitude

of economic, political, social, and environmental reasons. This paper analyzes three main stakeholders from the supply side of rural tourism: local residents, entrepreneurs, and governmental institutes. The process of analyzing the stakeholder network involves three modules: stakeholder identification, stakeholder analysis, and stakeholder network analysis (Figure 1).

The two types of networks relevant to this analysis are formal and informal networks. Nee (1998) describes formal rules as those produced and enforced by organizations, such as the state and firms, to solve the problems of collective action through third-party sanctions.²⁾ More specifically, formal networks are dyadic, as with ownership, interlocks, formal exchanges, subcontracting, and reciprocity; joint activities in production, sourcing, R&D, and promotion consortia; or investment in third parties, like joint-venture trade associations (Axelsson and Easton, 1994). Informal networks, on the other hand, can include the informal transfer of information or social norms (Šavriņa, *et al.*, 2008). Litwin (1997) describes one type of informal network—namely, a friend-focused network of local actors based on trust relationships—that shapes exchange configurations in ways that are fundamentally non-competitive. Nee (1998) also describes the informal

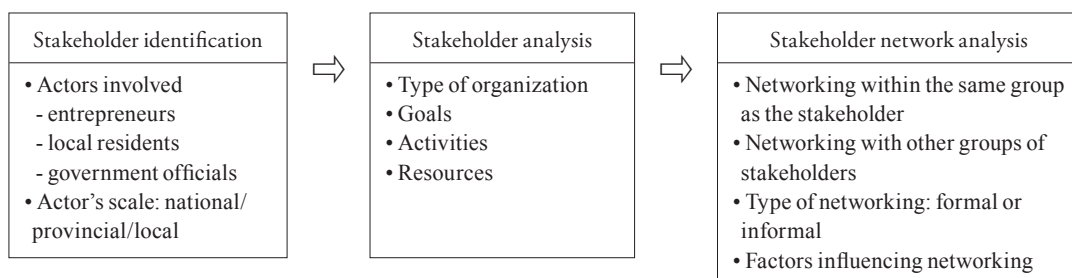


Figure 1. The framework for stakeholder network analysis

Source: modified based on Mrosek, *et al.* (2010)

norms that arise from networks and are reinforced by means of ongoing social relationships to the extent that network members have interests and preferences independent of what rulers and entrepreneurs want.

Both formal and informal approaches can be seen as complementary or alternative perspectives in the discussion of cooperation within a network (Lee and Cavusgil, 2006). Some research in institutions, organizations, and communities has shown that formal, contract-based cooperation, as well as informal, relation-based cooperation, occurs jointly or in substitution depending on the context and the subject of the research (Beritelli, 2011).

There are three primary reasons for selecting Thoi Son Islet, Tien Giang province, in this study. First, it is one of the long-standing models of rural tourism since 1990s in the Mekong Delta region. Sec-

ond, Thoi Son Islet—which belongs to the *Eastern cluster* (Figure 2) in the tourism development strategy of the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism (MCST)—provides an example of the typical model in use within the Mekong Delta region (MCST, 2010). Finally, this region's proximity to Ho Chi Minh City, the largest city in Vietnam, makes it the closest to a major concentration of city dwellers and foreign tourists, giving the region an edge in networking between local and urban stakeholders in supplying rural tourism to the area.

The field survey was conducted in August and September 2011. Two steps were applied when conducting the survey. The first step involved identifying tourism stakeholders in which key stakeholders were identified and listed from reviewing the literature on tourism stakeholders. This list was tested and revised following in-depth interviews with

Table 1. Methods for interviewing main actors

Actor	Semistructured questionnaire	In-depth interview	Group interview	Observation participation	Sample size
Ho Chi Minh travel agencies	○	○	×	○	24 HCMTAs (8% state, 52% limited liability, 16% one-member limited liability, 8% joint venture, 16% joint stock)
Local travel agencies	×	○	×	○	2 state-owned LTAs and 2 private LTAs
Farm households who have operated tourist sites at Thoi Son Islet	○	○	×	○	8 tourist sites (total number of tourist sites at Thoi Son)
Rowboat team	×	○	○	○	1 group + in-depth personal interview
Motorboat team	×	○	○	○	1 group + in-depth personal interview
Traditional music team	×	○	○	○	1 group + in-depth personal interview
Small shop owners	×	○	×	○	In-depth personal interview

local government officials, tourism entrepreneurs, and local residents. Next, all involved groups and subgroups of tourism stakeholders were interviewed to analyze their networking. The interviewees were asked to describe their tourism activities with regard to their resources, benefits, difficulties, and—most importantly—networking activities with other organizations and within their own organizations.

The in-depth interview was conducted with the governmental organizations such as Tien Giang Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism (TienGiangDSCT), Thoi Son Culture & Information Office, Tien Giang Investment and Trade – Tourism Promotion Center (TienGiangITTPC), My Tho wharf Board Management, and Executive Managing Board of Tien Giang Tourism Association (TienGiangTA).

2. Background of Rural Tourism in the Mekong Delta

Vietnamese rural tourism has developed throughout the country. However, the concept of rural tourism was recently mentioned in the *Strategy of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2011–2020 Stage*, issued by MARD(2009). The Mekong Delta is a region in Southwest Vietnam that includes 13 provinces: An Giang, Ben Tre, Bac Lieu, Ca Mau, Can Tho, Dong Thap, Hau Giang, Kien Giang, Long An, Soc Trang, Tien Giang, Tra Vinh, and Vinh Long. According to the census of April 1, 2009, the Mekong Delta is home to 17,178,871 people, with an area of 39,734 km², 65% of which is used for agriculture and aquaculture. The region

is a peninsula in which the east, south, and west border the sea (700 km of seaside), with the west also bordering Cambodia and the north bordering the Economic Zone of Southeast Vietnam. The Mekong Delta has traditionally been regarded as “Vietnam’s rice basket,” providing more than half of the country’s total rice product and 90% of the country’s rice volume for export. Moreover, the Mekong Delta also provides 70% of the country’s aquaculture products and 60% of its fruits.

With these advantages, the Mekong Delta has significant potential for developing rural tourism. Following the national tourism planning for the Mekong Delta issued by the MCST (2010) to promote the advantages of each region, the region has been divided into four clusters (Figure 2). These are the *Central cluster* (Can Tho, An Giang, Kien Giang, Hau Giang), *Ca Mau peninsula cluster* (Ca Mau, Bac Lieu, Soc Trang), *East coastal cluster* (Tien Giang, Ben Tre, Vinh Long), and *Dong Thap Muoi cluster* (Long An, Dong Thap). Each cluster possesses its own desirable traits. Specifically, the Central cluster has advantages in developing sea and border tourism, the Ca Mau peninsula cluster is famous for its Khmer culture, the Dong Thap Muoi cluster is teeming with salt-marsh forests, and the Eastern coastal cluster represents the atypical tourism model of the Mekong Delta and is the most developed cluster, with tourists visiting frequently to experience the rural life and cultural values of the region.

MARD (2009) describes the rural tourism strategy for the Mekong Delta, which is “the rural model of orchards which have connected with rural tourism and urban centers. Resident areas have been built as well, which have connected with agricultural activities such as orchard planting, vegetable

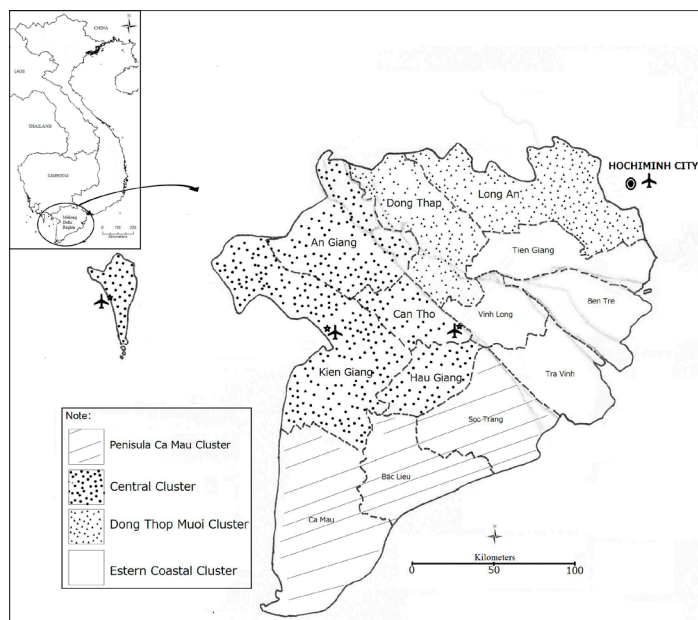


Figure 2. The four main tourism clusters in the Mekong Delta

Source: modified based on MCST (2010)

planting, fishing, and cultivating that combine with rural tourism. This is the model for conserving the culture of the South on the foundation of networks among orchard gardens, producing factories and services.”

Regarding tourism facilities, the Mekong Delta is still underdeveloped. In 2007, it had only 696 lodging facilities, representing just around 8% of the country’s total accommodations. There were few one-to-four-star hotels, representing only 8.1% of Vietnam’s accommodations in that category; the total rooms represented only 7.7% of those in Vietnam, with no five-star hotels in the region (Binh, 2008). In 2010, there were around 900 tourist accommodations, with 17,000 rooms and a total capacity of about 6.2 million tourists per year. In general, these are small-scale operations (averaging 20 rooms per accommodation), with just 19 three-

to-four-star accommodations (1,248 rooms); 656 tourist accommodations (11,334 rooms) have no star rating, accounting for approximately 70% of the total rooms in the region (VNTA, 2011).

Tien Giang is a province in the Mekong Delta with an area of 2,481.8 km², comprising 6% of the Mekong Delta. It stretches out along Tien River, 70km from Ho Chi Minh City to the south and 90km from Can Tho City to the north. The tourists who visit Tien Giang account for 12% of the Mekong Delta’s visitors, the highest percentage of tourists visiting the Eastern coastal cluster (MCST, 2010). It is safe to conclude, therefore, that tourism in the Eastern coastal cluster in general, and Tien Giang in particular, is representative of the typical tourism model of the Mekong Delta region.

Regarding economic structure, recent reports show that the agriculture and fishing sectors rep-

resent 44.7% of the area's GDP, industrial and construction sectors 28.3%, and the service sector 27.1% (TienGiangPC, 2009). Reflecting the current situation in the Mekong Delta, tourism facilities in Tien Giang have not developed much. For instance, there are no three-star or higher hotels, only 1 two-star hotel, 3 guesthouses, 19 small hotels/inns, 91 other lodging facilities without classification, and 22 dining facilities/restaurants (TienGiang DSCT, 2010)

3. Outlines of Thoi Son Islet and Tourist Behavior

1) Outlines of Thoi Son Islet

Thoi Son Islet is located in the Tien Giang province, accessible by a 30-to-45-minute boat ride on the Tien River from My Tho City, which is 70 km from Ho Chi Minh City. The total area of this islet is 1,211.64 ha, and it's about 1 km wide and 12 km long. It contains 1,513 households with 5,518 people³); this results in a density of 455 people per square kilometer. The islet is isolated and well concealed by the river; as a result, it has good conditions for developing agriculture while maintaining a daily lifestyle that reflects the typical characteristics of the rural culture of the Mekong Delta.

There is approximately 570 ha (47.1%) of orchard and garden land and 595 ha (49.1%) of waterway; the local residents primarily generate income from growing fruit. Hence, it is little surprise that agriculture remains the largest portion of the islet's GDP. In 2010, the agricultural sector generated

VND⁴) 344 billion, or 83.9% of the GDP; the commerce-tourism sector generated VND 66 billion (16.1%); and the industrial sector generated VND 54 million (0.02%) (ThoiSonPC, 2011).

In 2005, 44.7% of the population worked in the nonagricultural sector; that figure increased to 49.4% in 2010 (ThoiSonPC, 2011). Approximately 1,600 people, or 29% of the islet's population, work in the tourism sector as tourist-site employees, souvenir sellers, sellers of local specialty products, drivers of motorboats and rowboats, and so on. (ThoiSonPC, 2010).

Tourism development in Thoi Son Islet can generally be divided into two periods. The first spans the 1986–2001 period after the Doi Moi program. During this period, Tien Giang had only one state-owned tourism company—the Tien Giang Tourism Company, which was directly under the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNATA) and the Tien Giang People's Committees (TienGiangPC)—and this company functioned as the tourism managing board of Thoi Son Islet at the time. All tourism activities in Thoi Son Islet were exploited and managed by this company. The company set up networks with two local households, helping them to conduct repairs (countryseat, tables, chairs, plumbing, etc.) and maintain local country lanes. These two households, located in the Thoi Thuan hamlet, remain within the network to the present day. Since 2005, the Tien Giang Tourism Company has conducted equitization. In 2009 the company was equitized, and the tourist site of the company has since been renamed Thoi Son 1 at Thoi Thuan hamlet (Figure 3).

The second development period, spanning from 2001 to the present, has seen an increased number of tourists, many new local travel agencies, and new

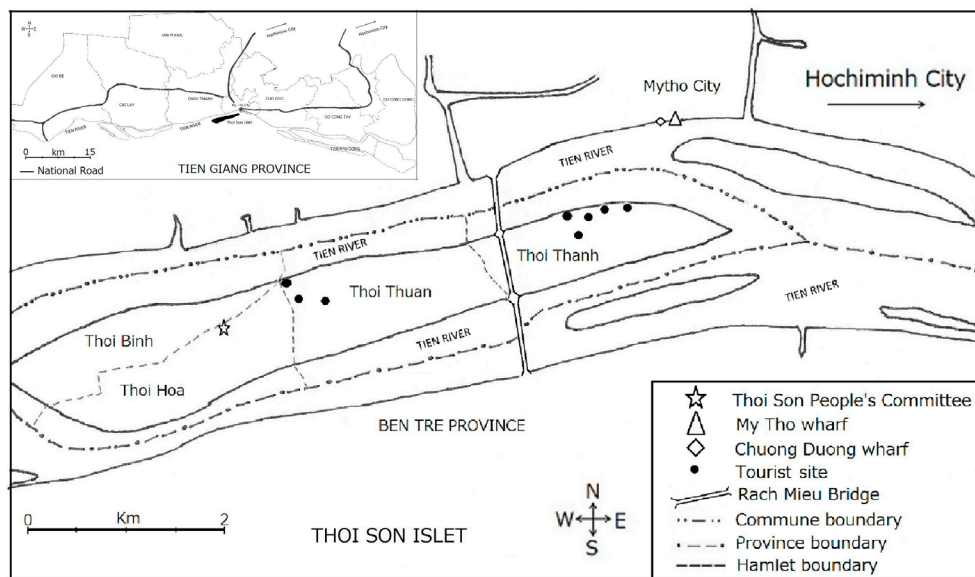


Figure 3. Location of the study area

tourist sites. In 2005 there were 518,615 tourists; by 2010 there were 960,991 (TienGiangDSCT, 2010). Twenty-six LTAs were established during this period according to the Tien Giang Department of Culture, Sport, and Tourism (TienGiangDCST). During the same period, many new tourist sites were founded and operated by local farm households, such as Chuong Duong, Cong Doan, Thoi Son 4, Thoi Son 5, Mien Tay, and so forth. These new sites are concentrated at Thoi Thanh hamlet (Figure 3).

2) Tourist behavior

Interviews with the owners of tourist sites and with travel agencies showed that domestic tourists are usually from Ho Chi Minh City and other provinces in Central and North Vietnam, and they usually visit during the summer season and holidays (Tet holidays⁵) and other national holidays).

Most foreign tourists are from Asia (Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Malaysia, China, Philippines, etc.), Europe (UK, France, Germany, etc.), and the United States, usually visiting during the winter season (October to April). On average, these tourists are 30–50 years old.

All owners of tourist sites said that 90% of tourists follow tour packages operated by travel agencies. All respondents (100%) said that the first priority of tourists is “following their tour company,” the second is “following a group,” and the third is “following their partner/family.” At Thoi Son Islet, tourists can sample local fruit and honey tea, tour green orchards and traditional houses, listen to traditional music, and take rowboats down small canals and motorboats on the Tien River.

To get to Thoi Son Islet, tourists from Ho Chi Minh City buy a tour package from an HCMTA that covers all fees for the tour. Tourists, then, need not pay additional fees in Thoi Son Islet. From Ho

Chi Minh City, tourists come to the My Tho wharf by bus, where the HCMTA will transfer tourists to an LTA to continue the tour. Because of the islet's proximity to Ho Chi Minh City, most tourists opt for taking a day-trip tour, spending 3–4 hours in Thoi Son Islet; afterward, tourists typically return to Ho Chi Minh City or continue to another province. Therefore, all tours offered by LTAs are day trips, which explains the lack of accommodations on the islet; as of 2010, there was only one household providing this service, noted mainly for poor service and a lack of clientele.

4. Identifying the Supplying Stakeholders of Tourism in Thoi Son Islet

Through the field survey, the supplying stakeholders in Thoi Son Islet were categorized into three groups: local residents, tourism entrepreneurs, and governmental institutes. The differences between public and private sectors were not significant in this specific tourist destination. Local and nonlocal dimensions were more important in terms of stakeholder networking and benefit sharing.

1) Local residents

Through in-depth interviews and field observation, five types of stakeholders were identified among the local residents: tourist-site owners, rowboat teams, motorboat teams, traditional music teams, and small shop owners. The characteristics of each stakeholder are as follows.

Tourist-site owners: The Mekong Delta fea-

tures numerous waterways. Before the 1990s, every household had a boat as its primary mode of transportation, akin to bicycles or motorbikes in present-day mainland Vietnam. Thus, households located by rivers or canals boast beautiful traditional houses and have advantages in operating as tourist sites. In 2010, there were eight tourist sites in Thoi Son Islet. Among these, Thoi Son 1 has the largest area at 150,000 m² and was designed as an ecotourism/resort area. The others are farm households, the area of each ranging from 3,600m² to 10,000m². Two tourist sites, located very close to Thoi Son 1 at Thoi Thuan hamlet, have been established since 1988. Income from tourism accounts for 50% of their total household income, meaning that in addition to tourism operations, they have retained their traditional agricultural activities. Five other tourist sites, concentrated in the Thoi Thanh hamlet, were established in the 2000s. Three of these rely solely on tourism for their household income, no longer concerning themselves with agricultural activities.

These tourist sites cooperate with LTAs to operate tourism activities. Results from the field survey show that the average price an LTA offers the owner of a tourist site is VND 4,000–5,000 per tourist. Each month or quarter, the tourist-site owners come to the LTA office to receive money based on the total number of tourists they recorded during that period.

Rowboat teams: The rowboat is a traditional and familiar image, one of the symbols of the waterway culture of Southern Vietnam. This attraction is, therefore, considered an important service and typical characteristic of the Thoi Son tour, in addition to being an icon of the Mekong Delta region. To operate a rowboat, one must submit his or her application to the Thoi Son People's Committee

(ThoiSonPC) since the ThoiSonPC gives priority to poor households for this job. This policy seeks to help solve the poverty problem on the islet by creating employment for poor households.

Rowboats are parked in the backyards of tourist sites, with each site having its own team of rowboats. Each team has a leader who makes a revolving schedule for each member, assigning and supervising drivers on clearing the canals and clearing rowboat parking every day. This leader is also the representative who works and negotiates with LTAs.

Motorboat teams: This is also one of the main services in the Thoi Son tour. Motorboats transfer tourists from My Tho wharf to Thoi Son Islet. Motorboat drivers are local residents who live in Tien Giang or other nearby provinces. The motorboats are parked at My Tho wharf, totaling about 17 teams. Like the rowboat teams, each motorboat team has a leader who schedules members and negotiates with LTAs.

Traditional music teams: The traditional music service, known as Vong Co in Vietnamese, which means “nostalgia for the past,” provides traditional music particular to Southern Vietnam. A traditional music team has six to nine members who play instruments and sing. Thoi Son currently has nine music teams with singers and players totaling approximately 100 people, over 80% of which are local residents (ThoiSonPC, 2011).

Small shop owners: These shops, located around countryside lanes, sell traditional handmade products and products made from coconut and bamboo trees, such as coconut candy, honey, and souvenir products. Coconut candy and honey are famed products of the traditional villages, and tourists can see the process of creating these products. These

shops are typically found surrounding and/or in front of the tourist sites, with the highest concentration being in the Thoi Thanh hamlet.

2) Entrepreneurs: Ho Chi Minh travel agencies (HCMTAs) and local travel agencies (LTAs)

There are two types of tourism entrepreneurs in Thoi Son Islet: Ho Chi Minh travel agencies (HCMTAs) and local travel agencies (LTAs). HCMTAs are located in the central market of Ho Chi Minh City, which has the largest concentration of urban citizens and incoming international tourists in Vietnam.

LTAs are located at My Tho wharf. There are 26 LTAs. Fifteen LTAs located at My Tho wharf specialize in the tour to Thoi Son Islet and other islets on the Tien River. Two LTAs are under the state control—Cong Doan (trade union in English), under the Tien Giang Trade Union, and Chuong Duong, under the Tien Giang Committee of the Communist Party.

3) Governmental institutes

Four governmental institutes were identified in connection with Thoi Son tourism at the provincial level and below:

Tien Giang Department of Culture, Sport, and Tourism: The TienGiangDCST is the stabilized agency of the People’s Committee, tasked with helping the TienGiangPC control culture, sports, tourism, and advertisements (apart from press and Internet advertisements). In the area within its jurisdiction, the TienGiangDCST carries out duties and authorities according to the commis-

sion of the People's Committee and the regulations of law.

Investment and Trade-Tourism Promotion Center: The TienGiangITTPC belongs to the TienGiangPC and helps it organize and promote activities related to domestic and foreign investment, trade, and tourism. Among its many tasks, the TienGiangITTPC determines the tourism capacity of the province in order to promote and participate in programs and tourism projects. It also promotes infrastructural development and takes advantage of cultural festivals, tourism, and natural potential to create a reliable tourism product for the province.

Culture and Information Office: At the district and communal levels, the Culture and Information Office belongs to the ThoiSonPC and is in charge of culture and information management. Culture matters are managed by the TienGiangDCST while information is managed by Tien Giang's Department of Information and Communication.

Tien Giang Tourism Association: The TienGiangTA was established⁶⁾ in 2007. The TienGiangTA is the occupational association for all individuals and organizations in the tourism domain within Tien Giang province. This organization operates as a nonprofit and is voluntary, self-governing, self-funding, and managed by the TienGiangDCST. The objective of TienGiangTA is to create networking, cooperation, and support among members in the areas of economics, professional training, and educational skills to bolster the quality of tourism services in the province. According to the report of the TienGiangTA (2011), there are 72 members, with one member serving as the TienGiangDCST's representative. The fee for membership is VND 800,000 per month; other

funding comes from the TienGiangITTPC. The general membership meets once a year, and an executive board consisting of nine members meets once every three months. After the board meeting, a report or series of suggestions is made and sent to the TienGiangDCST, TienGiangPC, and TienGiangITTPC.

The TienGiangTA allows members to participate in training activities at no charge. Training courses cover receptionist skills, tour guide training, customer service, food safety, and first aid for rowboat crews. Members can also visit other tourist destinations to gain invaluable experience. In 2010 the TienGiangTA collaborated with the TienGiangDCST to conduct tour guide classes for 27 people and reception/customer service courses for 32 people. In 2011, the TienGiangTA collaborated with the TienGiangITTPC to operate training courses in souvenir selling skills (28 participants) and first-aid skills for rowboat crewmen (134 participants).

5. Stakeholder Network Analysis

1) Cooperation among Ho Chi Minh travel agencies (HCMTAs)

In the interviews, 24 HCMTAs were asked, "Has your company cooperated with another HCMTA in operating the tour to Thoi Son Islet, Tien Giang province?"; 22 of the 24 agencies responded. Of those 22, 10 answered that they "had cooperated with other HCMTAs for conducting tours to Thoi Son Islet." The cooperation between them is based on signed contracts on an annual basis. Almost all of these HCMTAs are private enterprises (limited

liability enterprises).

Next, the same 10 HCMTAs were asked, “Which factors influence on cooperation between your company and your partner?” The answers were designed beforehand such as; quality, price, experience, enthusiasm/attitude, relation/friendship, depends on tour guide, other. These determinants were listed and then tested by in-depth interviews before conducting interviews with all 24 HCMTAs. And the interviewees were asked to choose all determinants. The results are shown in Figure 4.

It is clear from the result that *price* is the most important determinant in considering cooperation with a partner. The other significant determinants after *price* are *quality* and *long-standing relation*.

This kind of cooperation network has advan-

tages and disadvantages (Table 4). Among the 10 HCMTAs, all of them experienced the advantages listed in Table 4. As for disadvantages, four HCMTAs answered that there are no disadvantages in cooperation. The others experienced disadvantages as listed in Table 2.

Among the 24 HCMTAs, some prefer not to connect with other partners because they are large, state-owned enterprises with their own agencies throughout the country; they provide many services—such as transportation, logistics, hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies—leaving them to typically work within their own systems. These HCMTAs all agreed (100%) that this cooperation has no disadvantages, declaring it to be easier due to the use of similar systems.

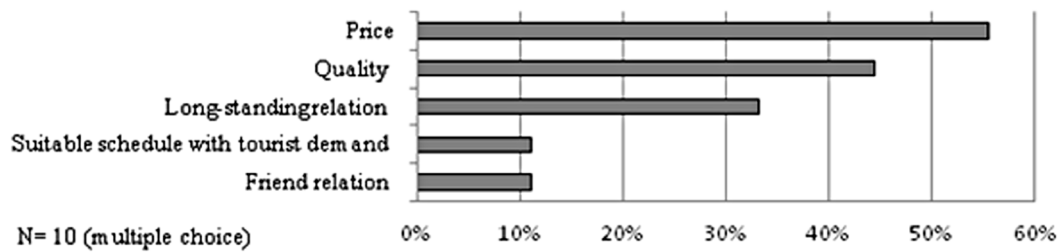


Figure 4. Key factors influencing cooperation networking between HCMTAs

Source: field survey

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of cooperation networking among HCMTAs

Advantages	Disadvantages/challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Win-win strategy • Having an order beforehand • Partnership prestige; customers do not complain • Retaining a certain number of tourists • Quality of service is good • Do not need to operate, but have a profit • Suitable tour program for customers • Reasonable prices • Having market share 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer buys tour package from one tour company but experiences the tour through another company • It is easy to lose customers • Rivals will understand your business strategy • Brand influence • Must pay commission • Risk for reducing prestige due to poor-quality services from partners

Source: field survey

In summary, in investigating cooperation networks among HCMTAs, we found that even though there are some disadvantages in networking, the cooperative network is popular for the Thoi Son Islet tour. One reason is that the market share of tourists coming to Thoi Son Islet is low compared to other famous destinations in Vietnam. With the small quantity of tourists for each HCMTA, it is difficult to build their own teams of motorboats and tourist sites in the local region because the quantity of tourists is neither stable nor consistent; thus, HCMTAs rarely exert significant effort for the Thoi Son Islet tour.

2) Between HCMTAs and LTAs

Networking between HCMTAs and LTAs includes signed contracts (formal cooperation) following the land-tour manner. The *land-tour manner* is a method of cooperation that involves an HCMTA transferring all its tourists to an LTA at My Tho wharf (Tien Giang province). After the

transfer, the LTA takes over all tour responsibilities in the local region, and the HCMTA finishes its duties or just plays the role of observer.

In Tien Giang, because of strong and frequent connections between LTAs and local services (motorboats, tourist sites, etc.), HCMTAs would have difficulty conducting their own tours from My Tho wharf to Thoi Son Islet, especially during the peak season.

When the 24 HCMTAs were asked, “Has your company cooperated with local travel agencies in Tien Giang province to conduct the Thoi Son tour?” all confirmed that they had land-tour contracts with LTAs. Respondents were then asked, “What are the key factors influencing cooperation between your company and LTAs?” The answers were designed as explained above. The results are shown in Figure 5.

Price and *quality* are clearly the two main influencing factors. The other two important factors are *experience* and *long-standing relationship*. Indeed, these factors—*experience* and *long-standing rela-*

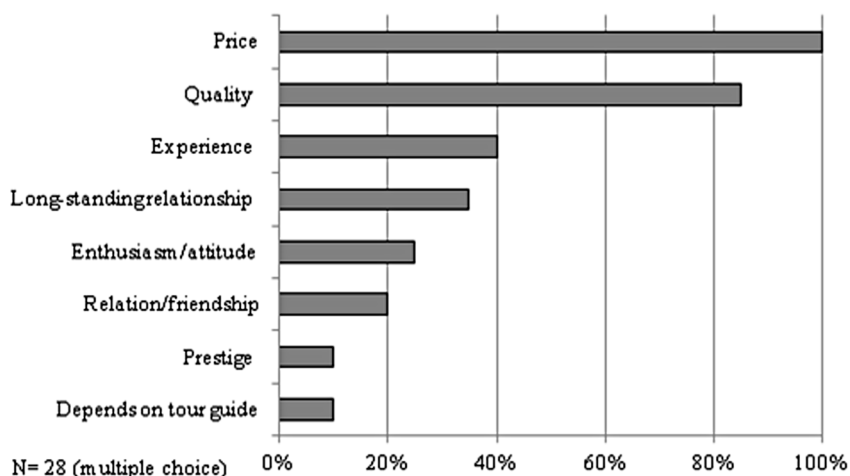


Figure 5. Key factors influencing cooperation networking between HCMTAs and LTAs

Source: field survey

relationship—are both required for HCMTAs to guarantee the quality of the tour. For example, a state-owned HCMTA said, “Long-standing relationships help us to believe in quality of tourism services,” and a private HCMTA said, “Experiences help us to believe each other.” A similar question posed to LTAs showed that they felt the same.

Besides these factors, certain norms are also followed. State-owned enterprises usually work mainly with state-owned enterprises, and private enterprises usually work with other private companies. For example, Chuong Duong LTA (belonging to the Provincial Party Committee) usually has a large quantity of tourists from other provincial committees of the Party. Cong Doan LTA (held by the Provincial Trade Union) also has tourists from other provincial trade unions. In addition, these two LTAs have been known to cooperate with state-owned HCMTAs, such as Saigon Tourists

and Viet Travel.

This cooperation network also has advantages and disadvantages (Table 3). The *win-win strategy* had the highest percentage for advantages. When interviewed about disadvantages, 36.36% answered *no disadvantages*. It is clear that the cooperation network between HCMTAs and LTAs is important, with the ultimate goal of a mutually beneficial relationship, or win-win relationship, between them.

A survey on the prices of Thoi Son tours from 14 LTAs at My Tho City showed that the land-tour price offered by LTAs ranges from VND 25,000 to VND 150,000 per tourist. The price of a Thoi Son tour from an HCMTA usually fluctuates between VND 300,000 and VND 650,000 per tourist.

In addition, among HCMTAs there are joint-venture HCMTAs (between foreign⁷) and domestic investors). Such an HCMTA charges higher prices

Table 3. Advantages and disadvantages of networking between HCMTAs and LTAs

(N = 28)

Advantages	Respondents citing (%)	Disadvantages/challenges	Respondents citing (%)
• Win-win	42.85	• No disadvantages	36.36
• Longstanding relationship; therefore, it is easy to cooperate	23.80	• Sometimes the quality is not good	27.27
• Reasonable tour prices	14.28	• Passive; depends on partners	13.63
• Guaranteed good quality	4.76	• A few of LTAs are good and each LTA supply only good one part of tour package but all. HCMTAs do not have many choices.	13.63
• Tours are frequent	4.76	• Middlemen increase prices; could be harmful for tourists	4.50
• Initiative in mobilizing motorboats	4.76	• Sometimes partners do not have enough enthusiasm	4.50
• Having characteristics of the locality, ensuring the cultural characteristics of the South	4.76		

Source: field survey

es. For example, if a tour operates for two tourists, the price is USD 70 per tourist; if the tour operates for four tourists, the price is USD 50 per tourist. In our sample, the foreign-owned HCMTAs had not cooperated with other HCMTAs; however, their methods of conducting tours to Thoi Son Islet were similar to that of other HCMTAs. These firms boast high prices, only focus on high-class tourists, and mostly provide services for small groups of tourists (usually less than five people). Therefore, they must spend a great deal for transportation.

An HCMTA's fees for operating a tour include transportation and other fees, such as car parking, insurance, water, tour guide, and LTA land-tour price. Transportation (car) fees make up the biggest portion of the tour operation, and the tour price differs greatly depending on the type of car (4, 7, 16, 24, 29, 35 seats).

The difference in profit between LTAs and HCMTAs, which was calculated based on the follow-

ing equation, are shown in Figures 6:

$$\text{HCMTA (selling price)} = \text{LTA land-tour price} + \text{transportation} + \text{fee/tax} + \text{profit \%}$$

$$\text{LTA} = \text{price from (motorboats} + \text{rowboats} + \text{tourist sites)} + \text{fee/tax} + \text{profit \%}$$

Figure 6 shows the differentiation in profit margins between LTAs and HCMTAs. These figures are based on calculation of the detailed accountant statement of one HCMTA and the land-tour price of one state-owned LTA. The profit per tourist was calculated according to the difference between net price and total cost. In Ho Chi Minh City, an example of one HCMTA's selling price for tourists is VND 450,000. The comparison between LTAs and HCMTAs in profit per tourist shows that LTAs hold a tiny amount of profit compared with their HCMTA counterparts. LTAs were shown to hold on average only 1%–4% in total profits.

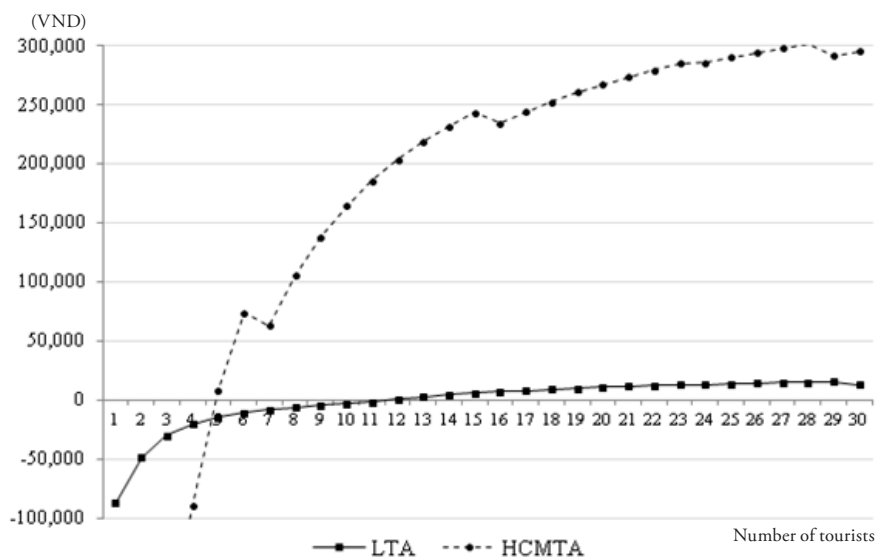


Figure 6. Differentiation in profit margins between LTAs and HCMTAs

Source: calculated based on the results of the interview.

3) Among LTAs

There is no cooperative networking among LTAs but, rather, high-level competition. There are three reasons for this. First, there is the problem of competition between state-owned and private LTAs. The state-owned LTAs have good infrastructure, powerful position, systems of accommodations and restaurants, and beautiful travel offices; in addition, they have an advantage in the origin of tourists from their lineage organizations, such as other provincial parties, unions, and state-owned enterprises. One state-owned LTA set up its own wharf next to My Tho wharf, while the TienGiang-DCST requires all LTAs to set up their offices and operate their motorboat crews at My Tho wharf. Other LTAs have complained that “this LTA should play by the same rules as the other companies.” Enterprise laws are in place to “ensure equality of enterprises before law regardless of form of ownership and economic sector,” but in the case of Tien Giang, it seems that the unfair rule remains. Second, all LTAs—state-owned and private—generate the majority of their tourism revenue from domestic tourists. LTAs make money almost exclusively from operating tours within and nearby their provinces. However, the domestic tourism revenues of the LTAs are not very high. There are not enough resources or support for local residents to operate tours outside the province⁸⁾ Therefore, the LTAs’ tourism revenues come mainly from cooperation with HCMTAs for Thoi Son tours and for other islets around the Tien River (near Thoi Son Islet). For these reasons, having the cheapest price is the LTA’s business strategy. Third, there is the problem of copied tourism activities and services, which is one of the reasons for severe competition among

LTAs as well as among tourist sites. Because of similar tourism services and activities, LTAs can move on to a different tourist site if they do not feel their current partnership is working out. Similarly, HCMTAs may also want to take their business to a different LTA if their price was met or beaten. The situation has arisen not only on this islet, but also in other nearby provinces (Vinh Long, BenTre, etc.).

4) Between LTAs and tourist-site owners

There are formal and informal networks between LTAs and tourist sites. Each LTA connects with one major tourist site based on a written contract (formal network) and a verbal contract (informal network) with other tourist sites. The formal network guarantees that this tourist site will focus on serving a particular LTA’s tourists, especially during peak season.

The tourist-site owners cooperate at ease with LTAs because the more tourists their sites receive, the more income they will get. Moreover, the tourism revenue per tourist is the same for both formal and informal networks. From the site owner’s point of view, there is no differentiation between network types. From the LTA’s point of view, however, they have more choices and can aggressively pursue contracts because they have a formal agreement with one tourist-site owner who is ready to serve them at any time. In other words, LTAs have more negotiating power than tourist-site owners.

Because tourist sites take similar approaches and constantly overlap in supplying tourism services, tourist sites have little negotiating power when conducting business with LTAs; they cannot negotiate higher prices for their services. The same price is also the lowest price that tourist sites have offered

for LTAs—VND 3,000–4,000 per tourist.

5) Between LTAs and motorboats

To reach Thoi Son Islet from My Tho wharf, a LTA must find, build, and contract its own motorboat crew. Based on the survey of the managing board of My Tho wharf, the table below clearly shows each LTA having its own team of motorboats.

This is one major negotiating strength LTAs have that HCMTAs lack. However, this power cannot help increase the negotiating power or tour price of LTAs since all LTAs do not cooperate to establish a floor price, which functions as the lowest price an LTA is permitted to offer. This problem is expanded to the Tourism Association, which will be explained in the next section

6) Tourist-site owners networking with traditional music teams and rowboat teams

Informal networking is prevalent among tourist-site owners and traditional music teams as well as rowboat crews. Negotiations between tourist-site owners and rowboat teams are almost without exception carried out by verbal agreement, which is a

win-win strategy. Since the prerequisite for establishing a tourist site is that it is a good location for launching boats, each tourist site cooperates with a team of rowboats. For example, the Viet Nhat tourist site has a team of 10 rowboats, Chuong Duong's tourist site boasts 40 rowboats, the Cong Doan tourist site has contracts with 38 rowboats, and Thoi Son 4 has 60 rowboats. These rowboat crews also help tourist sites in cleaning the canal by collecting garbage and cleaning the parking place for welcoming tourists.

Another informal network exists between tourist-site owners and traditional music teams. Each music team connects with site owners to work at the site from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. every day. The music teams also help owners serve tourists by welcoming them, serving tea and fruits, talking to them, and so forth. They do not, however, receive payment from the owners or from local travel agencies but rely mainly on tips from tourists. One such musician said, "Tourists can spend whatever amount of commission/tip they want. After that, we divide equally the total amount of commission/tip among all members, including the owner of the tourist-site." The interesting point here is that the music team distributes its income to the tourist-site owner as well. This illustrates the mutual relationship between the two.

Table 4. Number of motorboats (at My Tho wharf) for some LTAs at My Tho wharf

Name of LTA	Number of motorboats	Name of LTA	Number of motorboats
Ben Tre	18	Viet Nhat	23
Green Trail	11	An Khanh	17
Tien Giang	15	Nam Bo	17
Sinh Thai Tien Giang	31	Cong Doan	22
Mien Tay	36	Song Tien	17

Source: field survey

Among local residents, close ties are usually formed from living near one another, as with the ties formed among neighbors, friends, and relatives. This friend-focused and family-based method of networking is most popular among rowboat, motorboat, and music teams. For example, a motorboat driver said during the interview, “When a person wants to join us, they have been usually referred by someone already with our team, and typically other family members or neighbors.”

In summary, the stakeholder network analysis shows that, in the current model, HCMTAs and LTAs have played the role of *connectors*, working as hubs to shift tourists (demand) to match local residents (supply), with the networking between these connectors dominated by signed contracts (formal networks). The networks between connectors and local residents are both formal and informal. Inter- and intra-networks among local residents are dominated by informal networks.

More specifically, the network between HCMTAs is one of cooperation, which is the formal type based on contracts between them. Among HCMTAs, private enterprises have usually cooperated with each other. *Price, quality, and long-standing relationship* are the three main determinants that influence their network. Other types of enterprises—such as state-owned enterprises—usually cooperate within their lineage organizations since they have branches throughout the country.

Second, the network between HCMTAs and LTAs is also a cooperative network via the land-tour process. All HCMTAs have such a cooperative network with LTAs. The most important determinants affecting their network are also *price* and *quality*. Other important factors include *experience* and *long-standing relationship*.

Because of the strengths and weakness of each stakeholder, upward and downward mobility for each stakeholder is not easy. For instance, LTAs find it difficult to move upward—like setting up offices in Ho Chi Minh City. HCMTAs’ perceived inefficiencies are not conducive to moving downward into the local regions. Therefore, the land-tour process is one of the best strategies for both HCMTAs and LTAs.

Third, networking between LTAs and local residents is both formal and informal. However, this does not reflect much change in price for local residents. With both types of networks, LTAs have more options in choosing local residents’ services, and they are not in passive positions, especially during peak season. Another network exists among local residents, which is dominated by informal networks that establish working relationships based on the network of family, friends, neighbors, and so on. Moreover, there is neither a cooperative network among LTAs nor among owners of tourist sites for operating rural tourism. Among LTAs, as well as owners of tourist sites, the primary motivating factor is price competition; this has also led to a disproportionately small share of revenue for local stakeholders, with most tourism revenue going to the HCMTAs that coordinate it.

6. Conclusion

Tourism in Thoi Son Islet has been the original and advanced model of rural tourism in the Mekong Delta region since the 1990s. Nearing two decades of operation, the continuously rising tourism industry has also created problems affecting

rural sustainable development. To understand these problems, this research analyzed how rural tourism has operated on the islet through the methodology of a stakeholder network. After investigating the network among key stakeholders (HCMTAs, LTAs, and local residents), the result showed that in the current model, HCMTAs and LTAs have played the role of *connectors*, working as hubs to shift tourists (demand) to match local residents (supply), with the networking between these connectors dominated by signed contracts (formal networks). The network between connectors and local residents is both formal and informal. The networks among local residents are primarily informal. Moreover, this research has found that there is neither a cooperating network among LTAs nor among owners of tourist sites for operating rural tourism.

Promoting and advertising tourism of tourist sites rests fully with LTAs and HCMTAs. When asked about types of advertising or promotion, 100% of tourist-site owners said that “travel agencies have advertised their tour, in which they have information about this place.” Therefore, tourist sites do not perform any advertising or promotion activities, which are typically conducted by LTAs. Regarding the LTAs, they depend on land-tour cooperation with HCMTAs and focus on price competition to retain this trade link, paying little heed to the promotion efforts of HCMTAs. Hence, tourism promotion for Tien Giang province is dependent on the HCMTAs, the outsider stakeholders.

This may be one explanation for the weak negotiating power of local stakeholders, especially LTAs, when negotiating with HCMTAs. The negotiation power of HCMTAs stems from their ability to di-

rectly attract tourists from urban areas such as Ho Chi Minh City. LTAs lack the capital to establish representative offices in Ho Chi Minh City. Local government could play a role in advertising and promoting tourism activities in Ho Chi Minh City, which in turn could contribute toward increasing the negotiation capabilities of locals. However, this has not yet become a reality.

Currently, the Tien Giang Tourism Association (TienGiangTA) faces some big challenges. First, some members are consistently late in paying dues. Second, and more importantly, some concerns raised by the TienGiangTA to the TienGiangDC-ST have not been solved in a satisfactory manner. These concerns include low revenues for rowboat operators, conflicts between members inside and outside of the TienGiangTA that lead to severe competition among LTAs, and the injustice of one state-owned LTA engaging in unfair business practices.

To cope with the severe competition in the region, the TienGiangTA has conducted many meetings to call for cooperation to improve the negotiation power and tourism profits of local actors. One of many proposed suggestions is the establishment of a *floor price* for land-tour and tourism services. The popular opinion among stakeholders is that with floor-price regulation, local actors could offer their services to HCMTAs from this floor price or higher. Local profits could then increase, and tourism service quality would be improved. However, this suggestion has been dismissed as not currently feasible.

When interviewing LTAs about their attitudes on this matter, the consensus pointed toward mistrust among local actors. Most are afraid that the others will surely break the rules. They ask, “Even

through setting up the floor price, how do we manage the commission/tip or equivalent compensation that some local actors offer for Ho Chi Minh-based partners when they want to get a contract with Ho Chi Minh and compete with other local actors?” For these reasons, price competition among local actors will likely remain in place, and there is the very real possibility that it will become more complicated, forcing involved parties to operate illegally.

One reason LTAs cannot cooperate is the simple fact that not all LTAs participate in the TienGiangTA. Only seven LTAs currently hold membership. Notably, one state-owned LTA run by the Provincial Party—the strongest and most powerful LTA (they were mentioned earlier as having a wharf next to My Tho wharf)—has yet to become a member. The leader of the ecotourism branch of the TienGiangTA stated, “This LTA is the most complicated problem in this region. When we call them to engage in tourism association meetings, they have promised that they will show. However, even many years later, they try to delay or avoid engaging in dialogues. In actuality, participating in the Tourism Association is voluntary. By law, we cannot force them to join. Because of this, there is strong conflict brewing between members of this association and non-members.” He also had this to say about competition among LTAs: “Indeed, it is not by price pressure from HCMTAs; the LTAs have severe price competition within themselves.” As of this writing, however, the issue of one state-owned LTA’s passive refusal to participate has all but neutralized the TienGiangTA.

With regard to the scope of the study, this paper focused on analysis how the involving stakeholders have networked to operate and to supply rural tour-

ism in Vietnam as the case of Thoi Son Islet. Although the results were achieved and the structure of tourism network were thoroughly understood, far-reaching implications for future research are on the issues relating to the relationship between these different stakeholders’ network and sustainable development of the local region.

Notes

- 1) In 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party and government started economic reform programs, which were called Doi Moi. Major contents of these programs included the replacement of the central planning economic mechanism (during the stage of 1975–1986) with market-oriented mechanisms, acknowledgment of private property, and international/regional economic integration.
- 2) Third party is often used to refer to a person or entity who is not involved in an interaction or relationship. For instance, one party in an exchange relationship may violate an implicit agreement, hurting the exchange partner. The cheated partner is the second party in this case, while an uninvolved outside party who happens to know that cheating occurred is the third party (see Fehr, et al., 2004).
- 3) Commune People’s Committee, statistic dated July 1, 2010.
- 4) 1 USD = 20,618 (source: Vietnamese Ministry of Finance, September 2011).
- 5) Vietnamese Tet holiday, or Vietnamese Lunar New Year, is the most important and popular holiday and festival in Vietnam, which starts on the first day of the first lunar month and is the first season of the New Year.
- 6) Following decision 2728/QĐ-UBND, dated 2007 by the Tien Giang People’s Committee.
- 7) Following circular 89/2008/TT-BVHTTDL of MCST, which gives detailed guidance on Government Decree 92/2007/ND-CP for the Tourism Law for the travel sector, “capital of foreign-local joint venture travel companies will not be limited by the government.” According to the commitments of Vietnam as a member of the WTO, Vietnam has not undertaken to permit the establishment of 100%

foreign-owned capital travel agencies and tour operators yet. Foreign service suppliers are permitted to provide travel agency and tour operator services in the form of joint ventures with Vietnamese partners with no limitation on foreign capital contribution.

- 8) For example, one local resident living in Tien Giang province said, "When our family wants to have a Nha Trang or Da Lat tour (central of Vietnam), we usually contact HCMTA, then, they will operate all tours for us. On the day tour happen, their car will pick up us here. I choose HCMTA because I have thought that HCMTA will operate tour better then local one, since they are more professional."

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