

Status of Sustainable Travel in Vietnam Progress and Recommendations

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1. Overview:

Over the past decade, Vietnam has made notable progress in promoting sustainable tourism practices and developing sustainable tourism products.

1.1 Policy and Strategy Development:

Green Growth Strategy: Vietnam adopted a Green Growth Strategy in 2012, which recognized sustainable tourism as a key sector for economic development while minimizing environmental impacts.

National Action Plan on Sustainable Tourism Development: In 2017, Vietnam launched the National Action Plan on Sustainable Tourism Development for the period 2016-2020. This plan aimed to enhance the sustainability of the tourism sector through various initiatives and actions.

1.2 Community-Based Tourism and Local Engagement:

Community-Based Tourism Initiatives: Vietnam has encouraged the development of community-based tourism projects, particularly in rural and remote areas. These initiatives empower local communities by involving them in tourism activities, promoting cultural heritage, and sharing economic benefits.

Homestays and Local Experiences: Homestays have gained popularity, allowing tourists to experience local culture, traditions, and daily life while generating income for local families. Additionally, community-led tours and activities have been developed to showcase traditional crafts, agriculture, and local cuisine.

1.3 Environmental Conservation, Wildlife Tourism

Biodiversity Conservation: Vietnam has taken steps to preserve its rich biodiversity. Efforts include establishing protected areas, such as national parks and nature reserves, and implementing conservation projects to protect endangered species and their habitats.

Marine and Coastal Protection: Initiatives have been undertaken to protect marine ecosystems and coastal areas, including coral reef conservation, mangrove restoration, and responsible tourism practices in coastal destinations.

- **Wildlife Conservation:** Efforts have been made to protect Vietnam's wildlife and combat illegal wildlife trade. Conservation projects, rescue centers, and education programs have been established to raise awareness and preserve endangered species, such as primates, turtles, and pangolins.
- **Responsible Animal Encounters:** A shift towards responsible wildlife tourism has been observed, encouraging ethical interactions with animals and promoting animal welfare. This includes initiatives that discourage activities like elephant riding and promote wildlife observation in their natural habitats.

1.4 Sustainable Infrastructure and Certification

Public Awareness Campaigns: Educational campaigns and initiatives have been launched to raise public awareness about sustainable tourism practices, environmental protection, and responsible behavior among tourists and local communities.

Training and Capacity Building: Efforts have been made to enhance the capacity of tourism stakeholders, including tour operators, guides, and local communities, through training programs and workshops on sustainable tourism principles and practices.

Sustainable Accommodations: Vietnam has witnessed the growth of eco-friendly resorts and accommodations that incorporate sustainable practices. These establishments focus on energy and water conservation, waste management, and integration with the natural environment.

Certification Programs: Various certification programs have been introduced to recognize sustainable tourism practices in Vietnam. For example, the Green Lotus Label by the Vietnam

National Administration of Tourism and Green standards by Quang Nam Province Tourism Authority.

2. Covid-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably had a severe impact on the tourism industry globally, including Vietnam, and has slowed down the momentum of sustainable tourism initiatives. Prior to the pandemic, there were numerous activities and efforts being undertaken to promote sustainable tourism and its associated benefits. However, the onset of COVID-19 disrupted the industry, resulting in significant challenges and setbacks.

One of the major consequences of the pandemic was the financial strain on businesses in the tourism sector. Many enterprises, including sustainable tourism ventures, faced immense difficulties and some even went bankrupt due to travel restrictions, lockdowns, and a decline in visitor numbers. This unfortunate situation has had a detrimental effect on the progress that had been made towards sustainability.

Even for the businesses that managed to survive, the current situation remains challenging. The ongoing impact of COVID-19, including ongoing travel restrictions and uncertainty, has resulted in a decreased flow of tourists, making it difficult for these businesses to generate income. This financial struggle poses a significant hurdle to overcome, as it hampers the ability of these businesses to invest in sustainable practices and initiatives.

Moreover, the pandemic has shifted priorities and created a sense of urgency for the tourism industry. While sustainability remains crucial, the immediate focus for many businesses is on recovery and survival. This shift in focus, coupled with limited resources, can hinder the advancement of sustainable tourism practices and slow down progress in achieving sustainability goals.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the resilience and determination of the tourism industry in Vietnam and its commitment to sustainability. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, there are ongoing efforts to revive the sector and gradually reintroduce sustainable tourism practices. As travel restrictions ease and visitor confidence is restored, it is anticipated that sustainable tourism initiatives will regain momentum and contribute to the recovery and long-term sustainability of the industry.

Moving forward, it is crucial to address the existing challenges and support the tourism industry in its efforts to rebuild and reimagine tourism in a more sustainable and resilient manner. So the collaboration among stakeholders, financial assistance, targeted policies, and public support are vital in overcoming the setbacks caused by the pandemic and advancing the sustainability agenda within the tourism sector. By working together, we can definitely hope for a brighter and more sustainable future for tourism in Vietnam.

3. Current Status of Vietnam Tourism Post Covid-19

Phased Recovery and Travel Restrictions:

Vietnam has efficiently adopted a phased approach to reopening its tourism sector, with a strong emphasis on prioritizing the safety and well-being of both visitors and local communities. Since March 2022, the government has implemented travel restrictions and entry requirements, including mandatory quarantine periods, testing protocols, and the need for vaccination certificates. These measures have been put in place with the aim of revitalizing domestic and international tourism, while ensuring the protection of public health.

Domestic Tourism:

Domestic tourism has played a significant role in the recovery of the tourism industry in Vietnam. As travel restrictions eased domestically, many Vietnamese travelers have been exploring local destinations, contributing to the revival of tourism activities.

In 2019, Vietnam welcomed approximately 85 million domestic visitors throughout the year. As of May 2023, the country has already recorded more than 50 million domestic arrivals, and it is projected to surpass the numbers achieved in 2019, indicating a positive growth trend in domestic tourism.

International Tourism:

The international tourism sector in Vietnam has faced challenges with the growth of arrivals from traditional markets like the European Union (EU), the United States, and other regions being slow due to the double crisis. From January to May 2023, Vietnam welcomed 4.5 million international visitors, a decline compared to the 7.2 million visitors during the same period in 2019. This represents approximately 63% of the pre-pandemic international arrival numbers.

However, it is important to note that there has been a notable shift in market trends, with Asian markets such as Korea, India, Malaysia, and others emerging as key contributors to the recovery of the tourism industry. These markets have demonstrated stronger resilience and a preference for short-haul travel in the post-pandemic era. As a result, targeting these markets and adapting strategies accordingly can yield better outcomes for sustainable travel in Vietnam.

4. Status of Sustainable Tourism in 2022 & 2023

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the momentum of sustainable tourism in Vietnam, resulting in a slowdown and the discontinuation of certain activities. However, there are still several sustainable tourism initiatives that have remained active throughout the pandemic. Here are some examples:

- **Quang Nam Green Standards:** Quang Nam province has implemented green standards for its tourism industry, aiming to apply responsible tourism criteria to tourism sites, businesses, and communities. This initiative focuses on promoting sustainable practices and conducting responsible audits to certify businesses that meet the criteria.
- **Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Rural Homestays:** In destinations such as Hue, Pu Luong, and Ha Giang, some CBT and rural homestay operators have adapted their businesses to cater to domestic tourism, which experienced a surge in demand following the COVID-19 pandemic. These operators continue to provide sustainable experiences and contribute to local economic development.
- **Responsible Wildlife and Nature Tourism Workshops:** NGOs and organizations have conducted workshops and awareness-raising activities to educate the public about wildlife conservation and responsible nature tourism practices. These initiatives aim to enhance environmental awareness and promote responsible tourism behaviors.
- **Certification and Recognition:** Certification plays a crucial role in sustainable tourism. Quang Nam province, as mentioned earlier, has implemented certification processes to recognize businesses that adhere to responsible tourism criteria. Certification serves as an incentive for businesses to improve, sets examples for others, and acts as a marketing tool to showcase their sustainable practices to travelers.

These are some of the examples that highlight the ongoing efforts in Vietnam to promote and maintain sustainable tourism practices during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. While the overall impact of the pandemic on sustainable tourism has been challenging, these initiatives demonstrate the resilience and dedication of various stakeholders in the industry

5. Challenges Faced:

The primary focus in the recovery plan for all stakeholders involved in sustainable tourism is financial recovery, which remains a top priority from 2022 until now, with expectations for the recovery process to extend at least until 2024 for full recuperation.

For instance, the Quang Nam tourism green standard currently faces two main challenges. Firstly, there is a need for sufficient financial resources to further develop and raise awareness about sustainable tourism practices in the region. Secondly, the operational mechanism of the evaluation board is not yet fully established, lacking qualified human resources and support from local authorities.

While Quang Nam province stands as a leader in sustainable tourism in Vietnam, other provinces have either not prioritized sustainable tourism promotions, planning, and activities or have shifted their focus away from them. Consequently, the uncontrolled growth of tourism has resulted in environmental degradation, cultural losses, and economic imbalances.

For example, due to the significant increase in domestic arrivals in recent months, communities and businesses in various parts of Vietnam, like Pu Luong and Ha Giang, have swiftly invested in homestays and other services to cater to the needs of travelers. However, these homestays often lack an authentic cultural experience and resemble more like guesthouses. Additionally, local communities have not been working together to maintain cleanliness, leading to an unmanaged situation. Moreover, there has been a price war among villagers to attract more visitors, further impacting the sustainability of the tourism experience. Furthermore, local guides may lack proper training or sufficient knowledge to showcase the unique aspects of their homeland and culture to visitors.

6. Strengths & Weaknesses of Provincial Tourism Administration

6.1 Strengths:

- Policy Support: Many provinces are formulating policies and regulations that promote responsible practices. This includes the establishment of green standards such as Quang Nam, guidelines, and incentives to encourage businesses to adopt sustainable approaches.
- Call for Collaboration: Provincial administrations have actively engaged with various stakeholders, including local communities, NGOs, and private sector organizations, to foster collaboration and partnerships.

6.2 Weaknesses:

- Limited Resources: Financial limitations and limited human capacity. This can hinder the effective implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives, including monitoring and enforcement of regulations.
- Awareness and Education: There may be a lack of awareness and understanding among some provincial administrations regarding the principles and benefits of sustainable tourism. This can result in inadequate prioritization and allocation of resources towards sustainable tourism development.
- Inconsistent Implementation: While we can see some provinces with significant progress, there can be inconsistencies in implementation across different regions. This could be due: capacity, priorities, and levels of engagement from local stakeholders.
- Infrastructure and Planning: In most of the provinces in Vietnam, there are challenges in terms of infrastructure development and planning for sustainable tourism. This includes issues related to waste management, water and energy conservation, and the integration of sustainable practices into tourism infrastructure.

- Monitoring and Evaluation: There is a need for improved monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, this includes monitoring the environmental, social, and economic indicators to ensure that our goals are being achieved.

7. Strengths & Weaknesses of SME of Tourism for Sustainability Development

7.1. Strengths:

- Increasing Awareness: Many businesses in Vietnam have recognized the importance of sustainable tourism and are actively seeking ways to incorporate responsible practices into their operations, as we can see RTC Vietnam based in Hanoi or Impact Vietnam based in HCMC. This reflects a growing awareness among businesses about the environmental and social impacts of tourism,

- Responsible Supply Chains: Some businesses in Vietnam are working towards establishing responsible supply chains by sourcing local products, supporting local artisans, and prioritizing ethical practices. This helps to promote local economic development and preserve traditional craftsmanship.

- Community Engagement: Some businesses in Vietnam actively engage with local communities, involving them in tourism development and empowering them to participate in decision-making processes. This fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that local communities benefit from tourism in a meaningful way.

7.2 Weaknesses:

- Limited Awareness: While awareness of sustainable tourism is increasing, many businesses still have limited understanding of the concept and its benefits, especially stakeholders serving the domestic markets of Vietnam. This can result in a lack of motivation to set into their strategy and to adopt responsible practices.

- Financial Constraints: Many businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), face financial constraints, especially after covid19, that hinder their ability to invest in sustainable practices and infrastructure improvements. E.g the upfront costs of implementing can be perceived as a barrier.

- Lack of Capacity: Many businesses may lack the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to implement responsible practices effectively. This includes challenges related to waste management, energy efficiency, and responsible tourism marketing.

- Regulatory Compliance: Compliance with sustainable tourism regulations and standards can be inconsistent among businesses. Many may lack understanding of the relevant regulations or may not prioritize compliance due to limited enforcement.

8. Suggestion for Sustainable Tourism in the Province & Community Level

8.1. Integrated Planning and Policy Development:

Provincial level can develop comprehensive tourism plans that incorporate sustainability principles and objectives. This involves setting clear goals for environmental protection, cultural preservation, community involvement, and economic benefits. It also requires collaboration among various stakeholders, including local authorities, businesses, residents, and NGOs.

Many provinces have established general economic development strategies, and now it is crucial to integrate sustainable tourism planning within their existing frameworks.

8.2. Better use Responsible Tourism than Sustainable tourism

It is more advisable to prioritize Responsible Tourism over Sustainable Tourism. While Sustainable Tourism is an important objective, its scope can be overwhelming for regional authorities, local businesses, and communities at a provincial level. In my opinion, adopting the term "responsible" would be more effective, as it emphasizes the need for every action and activity

undertaken by the mentioned implementing partners to align with their respective responsibilities. By focusing on responsibility, we can collectively work towards achieving the larger goal of sustainability.

8.3. Community Engagement and Empowerment

Engaging local communities in decision-making processes and actively involving them in tourism development can foster a sense of ownership and ensure that their voices are heard. Encouraging community-based tourism initiatives, where communities directly benefit from tourism activities, can contribute to sustainable development while preserving local cultures and traditions.

8.4. Capacity Building and Training

Investing in training programs and capacity building initiatives is crucial to equip local communities, tourism operators, and government officials with the necessary knowledge and skills to implement sustainable tourism practices. This can include training on environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, responsible tourism management, waste management, and community engagement.

Facilitate capacity building initiatives for local communities, provincial authorities, and businesses in responsible tourism by organizing learning trips to exemplary destinations in Vietnam or even internationally, such as Switzerland. These immersive experiences provide firsthand exposure to successful sustainable tourism practices, enabling participants to witness and learn from real-life examples.

8.5. Responsible Tourism Certification and Standards

Encouraging businesses to obtain and adhere to recognized responsible tourism certifications and standards can promote sustainable practices. These certifications can help guide tourists in making informed choices and provide a framework for businesses to improve their sustainability performance, *e.g Green Lotus for hotels in Vietnam, Green standards by Quang Nam.*

8.6. Conservation and Protection of Natural and Cultural Heritage

Implementing measures to protect and conserve natural and cultural heritage sites is crucial for sustainable tourism. This can involve establishing and enforcing regulations for visitor behavior, promoting responsible tourism practices, and investing in the restoration and preservation of key attractions.

E.g.: The bear conservation project in Bach Ma National Park is situated in a stunning location between Hue and Hoi An, making it an attractive destination for visitors.

8.7. Public Awareness and Education

Conducting awareness campaigns and educational programs to promote responsible tourism behavior among tourists and locals is essential. This can include initiatives to raise awareness about environmental conservation, cultural sensitivity, and the importance of supporting local economies and communities.

For instance, Cham Chim National Park, in collaboration with WWF, implements an education program aimed at raising awareness among nearby communities about water conservation and environmental protection. The program includes activities such as cleaning up rivers and canals, as well as promoting agricultural practices that reduce water usage and minimize the use of chemicals.

8.8. Collaboration and Partnerships

Building partnerships between local communities, businesses, NGOs, and government agencies is crucial for effective sustainable tourism development. Collaboration can foster

knowledge sharing, resource mobilization, and coordinated efforts to address common challenges and achieve shared sustainability goals.

9. Sustainable / Responsible Tourism Product Developments for SME

I would like to offer the following recommendations for local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to consider. It's important to note that strategies and actions should be tailored to the specific needs and capacities of each business or organization:

9.1. Market Needs & Product Differentiation

- Understanding Market Needs

It is crucial to have a deep understanding of the market needs, especially in the current context where domestic and Asian markets are prominent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By identifying the preferences and requirements of local and Asian travelers, businesses can tailor their products and services to meet their specific needs.

For instance, Ha Giang province has witnessed a significant influx of domestic travelers, particularly young individuals aged between 25 to 45, exploring the region over the past two years. In 2023, the number of visitors has increased by approximately 35% compared to the same period in 2022. Given the prominence of this demographic, it is crucial for product development efforts to cater specifically to the needs and preferences of these young travelers.

- Product Differentiation:

Instead of offering identical products, communities and businesses should strive to differentiate themselves by creating unique experiences. By diversifying offerings and incorporating cultural experiences, handicraft experiments, or other activities, they can provide a fresh and distinct experience for travelers.

For example, in rural areas of Vietnam, especially in the last 5 years, where homestays are prevalent, rather than solely focusing on providing basic bed and breakfast services, villagers can expand their offerings to include cultural workshops, allowing visitors to engage in local handicrafts or participate in community activities. This enhances the overall experience and adds value beyond just accommodation.

- Avoiding Price Wars:

Over-supply and price-cutting can diminish the quality of experiences and undermine responsible tourism practices. Instead of competing solely on price, communities and businesses should prioritize providing responsible and meaningful activities. By highlighting the unique aspects of their destinations or services, they can attract travelers who are willing to pay for authentic and responsible experiences.

For instance, in Mai Chau, some homestay owners offer overnight stays at unbelievably low prices, such as \$2.5 per night.

- Collaboration for Stable Growth:

Collaboration between local tour operators and other stakeholders is crucial for product development. By working together, tour operators in Hanoi, for example, can coordinate their trips to Ninh Binh and offer differentiated itineraries that showcase unique attractions and responsible activities. This approach ensures a variety of experiences for travelers and avoids overcrowding at popular sites.

- Quality Experience over Quantity:

Emphasize the importance of quality experiences over the number of visitors. By focusing on responsible activities, cultural immersion, and sustainable practices, businesses can create memorable experiences that align with the values of responsible tourism. This approach not only

benefits the travelers but also contributes to the long-term sustainability of the destination and its communities.

Many homestays currently offer only basic accommodations and breakfast, while tour companies primarily focus on transportation and accommodation arrangements. However, it is crucial to recognize that travelers are seeking lasting experiences.

For instance, when staying at a homestay, the host should allocate time to share their family background, life stories, and generations with the guests. Additionally, engaging travelers in activities such as working in the fields or participating in religious rituals can provide a unique sense of "home". Similarly, a tour company organizing a trip to Hanoi could arrange a visit to a war veteran during a coffee session, allowing the veteran to share personal experiences of wartime in Hanoi, going beyond a simple visit to a museum.

9.2. Consider changes into the existing products

Consider adapting existing products to incorporate responsible elements, rather than solely focusing on creating new products. Sustainable tourism should not be limited to a niche market; it should be integrated into the mainstream tourism industry. By assessing the market needs and expectations, businesses can identify successful products and make modifications to align them with responsible tourism practices.

Instead of starting from scratch, enhancing existing products allows for cost-effective and resource-efficient improvements. By integrating responsible elements into well-selling products, businesses can cater to the demands of conscious travelers without the need for extensive resource allocation. However, it is crucial to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated for marketing these responsible enhancements, as effective communication is essential for showcasing the added value to potential customers.

This approach allows for a gradual shift towards sustainable practices while capitalizing on the existing market demand. By continuously monitoring market trends and customer feedback, businesses can make informed decisions and adapt their products to meet evolving expectations. This ensures that sustainable tourism becomes an integral part of the mainstream industry, appealing to a wider range of travelers and driving positive environmental and socio-cultural impacts.

9.3 Responsible Travel Supply Chains

It's important to choose good suppliers for good sustainable tourism products. Here are some key considerations when selecting suppliers and partners:

- Local Sourcing: Prioritize local suppliers and businesses that are deeply rooted in the destination. By supporting local enterprises, we contribute to the local economy, create jobs, and foster community development.

For example, Footprint Travel has implemented measures to demonstrate that the proportion of revenue from travelers being directed towards local communities has been consistently increasing. In 2019, this percentage rose from 10% to 17%, showcasing our commitment to enhancing the economic benefits and positive impacts of tourism on the communities it operates in.

- Ethical Labor Practices: Choose suppliers that uphold fair labor practices, provide safe working conditions, and respect workers' rights. Ensure that employees are treated fairly, receive fair wages, and have access to benefits and training opportunities.

- Sustainability Criteria: Evaluate suppliers based on their commitment to sustainability. Look for suppliers who implement environmentally friendly practices, minimize waste and pollution, and support social and cultural preservation.

- Environmental Responsibility: Assess suppliers' environmental practices, such as waste management, energy efficiency, water conservation, and sustainable sourcing of materials. Choose suppliers that demonstrate a commitment to minimizing their environmental footprint.
- Social and Cultural Considerations: Consider suppliers that actively engage with local communities, respect local customs, traditions, and cultural heritage. Seek partnerships that empower local communities, involve them in decision-making processes, and contribute to their social well-being.
- Certifications and Standards: Look for suppliers with recognized certifications or adherence to sustainability standards. These certifications can provide assurance of responsible practices and help guide your selection process.

For instance, in Quang Nam, approximately 40 businesses have adopted green tourism standards and undergo audits to become certified green providers. This not only demonstrates their commitment to sustainability but also makes them an excellent choice for other tour operators in Vietnam seeking reliable local ground handlers.

- Collaboration and Partnership: Foster long-term partnerships with suppliers that share your commitment to sustainable tourism. Collaborate on sustainability initiatives, share best practices, and work together to address common challenges and opportunities.
- Continuous Improvement: Encourage suppliers to continuously improve their sustainability practices. Engage in dialogue, provide feedback, and support suppliers in their sustainability journey. Consider regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure ongoing compliance and improvement.

9.4 Start small - do not be a perfectionist

In sustainable tourism, it is important to recognize that perfection may not always be immediately attainable. It is crucial to start from the needs and available resources, and understand that progress can be made incrementally over time. Here are some key points to consider:

- Prioritize Needs: Identify the most pressing sustainability needs and focus on addressing them first. This could include reducing energy consumption, implementing waste management practices, or preserving local culture and heritage.
- Start Small: Begin with feasible and financially viable initiatives that align with the available investment resources. This could involve implementing simple measures like water and electricity conservation, promoting responsible waste disposal, or engaging in community-based activities.
- Increase Improvements: Recognize that sustainability is an ongoing journey and improvements can be made gradually. As resources allow, invest in infrastructure upgrades, capacity building, and the adoption of more sustainable practices.
- Learn and Adapt: Continuously monitor and evaluate the outcomes of sustainable initiatives and learn from the experiences. Use this knowledge to make necessary adjustments and improvements to existing practices over time.
- Collaborate and Share Best Practices: Engage with other stakeholders, both within the industry and beyond, to share experiences, best practices, and resources. Collaborate with local communities, businesses, government agencies, and NGOs to leverage collective efforts for sustainable tourism development.
- Raise Awareness: Educate and involve the local community, businesses, and tourists in sustainable tourism efforts. Promote responsible tourism behavior, cultural sensitivity, and environmental conservation through awareness campaigns, workshops, and educational programs.

- Long-Term Vision: Maintain a long-term vision for sustainable tourism development. Set achievable goals and work towards them incrementally, recognizing that sustainable practices and investments require time and commitment.

Sustainable tourism is a journey that involves continuous improvement and adaptation. By starting small, leveraging available resources, and making gradual changes, it is possible to create positive impacts and pave the way for a more sustainable future in the tourism industry.

9.5. Financial incentives and support

Addressing the financial challenges faced by the tourism industry, particularly in the post-COVID era, is of utmost importance. Securing adequate cash flow is essential for developing and enhancing tourism products, particularly those that prioritize ethical and responsible practices. In this regard, it becomes crucial for local banks and authorities to extend their support to businesses and communities in order to facilitate the launch of new initiatives or investments in ethical and responsible tourism products. By providing financial incentives, loans, and guidance, these institutions can play a vital role in revitalizing the tourism sector and promoting sustainable practices.

10. Certification & Marketing Sustainable Travel

10.1 Certification

- Sustainable tourism criterias;

It is recommended that SECO and ST4SD actively support VNAT in developing comprehensive sustainable tourism standards. These standards should encompass various sectors, enabling their consistent application across different provinces, destinations, and businesses.

The sustainable tourism criteria should be tailored to accommodate small-scale units, ensuring their relevance and ease of implementation for diverse stakeholders. By designing criteria specific to these smaller units, such as local accommodations, tour operators, and community-based enterprises, we can enhance their capacity to adopt sustainable practices and contribute to broader sustainability goals.

Moreover, it is essential to establish different levels of sustainability within the criteria. This tiered approach would enable businesses to commence their sustainability journey at an achievable starting point. As they progress, they can incrementally advance to higher levels of sustainability, ultimately aiming for national or even international recognition. This staged progression empowers businesses to gradually improve their practices, fosters continuous improvement, and motivates their long-term commitment to sustainable tourism.

By actively collaborating with SECO, ST4SD, and VNAT, we can ensure the completion of robust and inclusive sustainable tourism standards for Vietnam. These standards, tailored for small-scale units and incorporating multiple levels of sustainability, will facilitate widespread adoption and contribute to the overall development of sustainable tourism in the country.

- Communication for the sustainable tourism criterias to the industry;

We need the effective communication in promoting and implementing criterias:

Clear and Concise Messaging: Use simple and accessible language to convey sustainable tourism criteria, for example, as mentioned earlier, responsible tourism seems to be easier for local provincial level as well as businesses. Avoid technical terms that may confuse or alienate our target audience.

Tailor the Message: Adapt communication to the specific audience we are targeting such as hotels or travel agencies. Customize the message to resonate with each group and address their specific concerns and interests.

Highlight the Benefits: Emphasize the positive impacts of adopting sustainable tourism practices. Illustrate real-life success stories and case studies to demonstrate the tangible benefits, such as cases of Quang Nam tourism stakeholders.

Engage Stakeholders: Encourage active participation and involvement from stakeholders in sustainable tourism initiatives. Create industry platforms for dialogue, such as public forums, workshops, and online discussions, to engage stakeholders and gather feedback.

Use Visuals and Multimedia: Utilize visual aids, such as infographics, photographs, videos, and interactive tools, to enhance communication.

Collaboration and Partnerships: Collaborate with local communities, businesses, NGOs, and government agencies to collectively communicate and promote sustainable tourism criteria.

Education and Training: Provide educational resources and training programs to raise awareness and build capacity around sustainable tourism. Offer workshops, seminars, and webinars for tourism operators, employees, and local communities.

Long-term Engagement: Sustainable tourism is an ongoing journey. Continuously communicate and reinforce the importance of sustainable tourism criteria. Regularly update stakeholders on new developments, best practices, and emerging challenges.

- Build a rating system to certify

Developing an independent rating system for sustainable tourism is a valuable suggestion to ensure fairness and impartiality.

Engage RTC's member travel agencies, who possess expertise and knowledge in responsible tourism practices. Establish a partnership to leverage their industry insights and experience in developing the rating system.

Support to establish an independent certification body, separate from the local authority, to oversee the rating system. This body should consist of experienced professionals with expertise in sustainable tourism, for example RTC Vietnam. Their role would include conducting evaluations, verifying compliance, and issuing certifications.

10.2 Marketing certification

When marketing a sustainable tourism certification, it's crucial to utilize various channels to reach a wide audience, please consider:

- **Website:** Create a dedicated website or webpage like RTC page, specifically for the sustainable tourism certification. Provide comprehensive information about the certification process, criteria, benefits, and how businesses can apply. Ensure the website is user-friendly, visually appealing, and optimized for search engines.

- **Social Media:** Leverage popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn to promote the sustainable tourism certification. Share engaging content, including visually compelling images, informative videos, success stories, and industry news. Use relevant hashtags and encourage user-generated content to increase visibility and engagement.

- **Labeled on online booking engines:** Engage in negotiations with various booking engines, including TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and others, to incorporate the sustainable tourism certification label on the listings of certified businesses or properties. This strategic partnership aims to enhance visibility and recognition for both the certified businesses and the certification programs. By prominently displaying the certification label on these platforms, travelers and other businesses can readily identify and promote the sustainable practices of certified establishments. This integration will not only benefit the businesses by distinguishing them as sustainable options but also contribute to raising awareness about the importance of sustainable tourism among a broader audience.

- Industry Events and Trade Shows: Participate in relevant industry events, trade shows, and conferences such as VITM, ITE.... Set up a booth or presentation to engage with tourism professionals, businesses, and potential applicants. Distribute marketing materials, collect leads, and network with industry stakeholders.
- Partnerships and Collaborations: Collaborate with travel agencies, VITA, sustainability organizations RTC, CBT..., and other key stakeholders to promote the sustainable tourism certification. Explore opportunities for joint marketing initiatives, co-branded campaigns, and cross-promotion to leverage their networks and increase visibility.
- Press Releases and Media Outreach: Develop press releases highlighting the launch, updates, and success stories related to the sustainable tourism certification. Distribute them to local and industry-specific media outlets. Develop relationships with journalists and industry influencers who can help amplify the message through interviews, articles, or blog posts.

11. Further Studies

11.1 Engagement of provincial tourism dept for sustainable tourism

The majority of provinces in Vietnam currently lack strategies for sustainable tourism development. Therefore, it is crucial to urgently integrate the development of sustainable tourism into their existing overall development plans and strategies. ST4SD's support for the integration will ensure that action plans for sustainable tourism are seamlessly incorporated, resulting in effective implementation.

By aligning sustainable tourism with the broader development framework of each province, it becomes an integral part of their growth and progress. This approach ensures that sustainability considerations are integrated from the outset, rather than being treated as separate or secondary objectives, we must make it an ongoing effort to ensure the enduring success of sustainable tourism initiatives, not just within the project.

Integrating sustainable tourism into existing development plans allows for comprehensive and coordinated efforts. It facilitates the identification of synergies and connections between sustainable tourism initiatives and other sectors such as infrastructure, transportation, education, and environmental conservation, etc.... This holistic approach fosters a more efficient use of resources and ensures that sustainable tourism is considered in all relevant decision-making processes.

Moreover, integrating sustainable tourism into provincial development plans sends a clear message about the importance of sustainability as a guiding principle for future growth. It encourages local authorities, businesses, and communities to prioritize sustainable practices and strive for long-term success that is in harmony with social, cultural, and environmental values.

11.2 Capacity building needs from provincial level

After engaging in discussions with various provincial tourism leaders, particularly those from Ha Giang, Hue, Quang Nam, Can Tho, and Dong Thap during our meeting in Ha Long as well as on the phone, it has become evident that there is a clear and pressing need for capacity building in tourism administration.

Firstly, to effectively promote sustainable tourism at the provincial level, there is a critical need to enhance capacity in sustainable tourism planning and management. This effort aims to equip provincial authorities with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to develop and implement sustainable tourism strategies and initiatives.

By strengthening their capacity, stakeholders from provincial administration of tourism can effectively assess the local tourism potential, identify sustainable tourism opportunities, and create comprehensive plans that align with broader development goals. This includes conducting market

research, understanding trends and preferences, and integrating sustainability principles into their destination planning and management.

Secondly, capacity building efforts should also focus on fostering collaboration and partnerships among relevant stakeholders within the province. This involves facilitating effective communication and cooperation between local government agencies, tourism industry players, local communities, and other key actors. By building strong networks and promoting multi-stakeholder engagement, provinces can ensure the collective commitment and active involvement of all stakeholders of tourism.

Capacity building should encompass training programs, workshops, and knowledge-sharing platforms that provide practical guidance on sustainable tourism planning, policy development, and effective management practices. Additionally, assistance in leveraging available resources such as existing NGO development funds or other funding opportunities, and implementing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms can also contribute to the long-term success of sustainable tourism.

Through comprehensive capacity building efforts, we can empower their officials with the necessary skills and expertise to integrate sustainable tourism principles into their development plans and effectively manage tourism activities to achieve our goals!

11.3 Provincial sustainable tourism planning

Same as we mentioned the need of support in planning above, ST4SD can not just say we help this and that as we do not know exactly what they already have and what not, so we must conduct a thorough assessment of each's overall development plans in advance. This assessment will help identify feasible opportunities, prioritize initiatives, and determine the appropriate course of action for each province.

We will need to gain a comprehensive understanding of their current priorities, resources, and potential challenges. This analysis will provide valuable insights into aligning sustainable tourism with the broader provincial objectives and identifying areas where synergies can be fostered.

Suggested tentative plans for most of the provinces will be like this:

- Assessment of their current development plans
- Integrate sustainability into their existing plans.
- Strategy and action plans
- Sustainable Tourism Criteria & Capacity Building
- Public Awareness and Education
- Stakeholders involved & resources available
- Implement the activities (prioritize the importances)
- Monitor, measure and certification.

Quang Nam province may not necessarily need to adhere to all the items listed in the suggested checklist above. The final decision on which elements to incorporate can be determined following a thorough assessment and evaluation process.

During the assessment process, it is crucial to prioritize the examination of Quang Nam province as a case study. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of both their successes and any potential challenges or failures encountered along their sustainable tourism development journey. By thoroughly examining Quang Nam's experiences, valuable lessons can be learned and shared with other provinces.

11.4 Suggested product developments for each province:

Hà Giang:

Domestic tourists constitute the majority, with a focus on adventurous and thrill-seeking young travelers in the middle-income segment. Here are some suggested tourism products:

1. Adventure tourism: Long-distance trekking, mountain climbing, cycling, and kayaking.
2. Community-based tourism: Cultural experiences with ethnic minority groups, particularly Hmong communities, village crafts, and local cuisine.
3. Relax tourism: Unique, untouched locations closely tied to nature and culture.

Ha Giang province excels in combining adventure and community-based tourism, making it a unique strength. To determine the focus areas, it is essential to conduct thorough inspections and leverage the expertise of the ST4SD team, as well as available research on Ha Giang.

By carefully analyzing the inspections and incorporating the expertise of the ST4SD team and research findings, we can determine the specific areas within adventure and community-based tourism that should be prioritized in Ha Giang. This focused approach ensures that efforts are targeted and aligned with the province's strengths and the preferences of its visitors.

Cần Thơ - Đồng Tháp:

Domestic visitors make up the majority, but there has been a significant increase in international visitors in recent years. Here are some suggested tourism products:

1. Waterway tourism: Exploring the riverine landscapes, agricultural activities, and rural gardens.
2. Community-based tourism: Experiencing local crafts, traditional villages, and authentic cuisine.
3. Nature tourism: Discovering the region's natural attractions and biodiversity.

Can Tho, as a prominent tourism hub in the Mekong Delta region, is renowned for its waterway tourism. To leverage this strength, the focus can be placed on developing waterway tourism experiences, such as farming experience, community-based homestays and relaxing resorts. This approach ensures visitors have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the local culture while enjoying the beauty of the waterways.

On the other hand, Dong Thap province also benefits from its waterway resources but has the additional advantage of nature tourism, particularly with its national parks and diverse bird species. To create differentiation, it is important to emphasize the unique natural attractions and promote Dong Thap as a destination for nature enthusiasts.

By highlighting the distinct offerings of both Can Tho and Dong Thap, we can encourage visitors to include both destinations in their travel itineraries. This can be achieved by designing packages or promoting the seamless transition between the two provinces. Whether it's encouraging visitors to continue their journey from Can Tho to Dong Thap or enticing them to return to Dong Thap after exploring Can Tho, creating connections between the two destinations will enhance the overall visitor experience and prolong their stay in the region.

Quảng Nam - Huế:

Attracting both domestic and international tourists, with a larger proportion of domestic visitors. Here are some suggested tour products:

1. Cultural heritage tourism: Exploring UNESCO World Heritage sites and historical landmarks.
2. Community-based tourism: Engaging in village crafts, local cuisine, combining community-based tourism with agricultural activities.
3. Beach tourism: Enjoying beachfront relaxation and leisure activities.

Quang Nam, particularly Hoi An, has long been a popular destination for visitors, known for its cultural heritage tourism. Many successful heritage-focused products have been developed in Hoi An, and there is an opportunity to further enhance and refine these offerings to cater to the large number of visitors to the province.

Hue, on the other hand, also possesses a rich heritage but has not achieved the same level of success as Quang Nam. However, there is immense potential for Hue to develop its heritage tourism in combination with cultural community-based experiences, village visits, and even beach, river, and lagoon tourism. By capitalizing on these diverse attractions, Hue can compete with Hoi An and position itself as an essential part of visitors' travel itineraries in the central region of Vietnam.

To achieve this, it is crucial to focus on enhancing existing heritage tourism products in Quang Nam. By conducting market research and gathering visitor feedback, adjustments can be made to ensure the offerings are even more appealing and meet the evolving needs of tourists. This may involve refining the visitor experience, improving infrastructure and facilities, and incorporating innovative elements to keep visitors engaged and satisfied.

For Hue, a comprehensive development strategy should be formulated to leverage its heritage assets and combine them with authentic cultural community-based tourism experiences. This could include initiatives such as village visits, showcasing traditional crafts and cuisine, and promoting the region's natural beauty, including its An Bang, Lang Co beach, Huong rivers, and Tam Giang lagoons. By creating a diverse range of attractions and experiences, Hue can position itself as a compelling destination that complements the allure of Hoi An.

Overall, both provinces can further establish themselves as must-visit destinations in the central region of Vietnam, offering unique and enriching experiences for visitors.

Please note that the suggested tourism products provided are based on the limited information available post-COVID and desk study. To ensure their effectiveness, it is crucial to conduct on-ground inspections and engage in consultations with provincial and local stakeholders. This will allow for the development and customization of these products according to the specific characteristics and attractions of each province, taking into account the current circumstances and post-pandemic considerations.

11.5 Product development strategy & support from ST4SD

After conducting inspections to assess available and feasible resources and analyzing market needs, there are three steps to develop tourism products for these provinces:

- Eliminate or phase out products that have not provided value for a significant period of time.
- Enhance, modify, or expand existing products that possess greater potential for the market.
- Create entirely new products.

Based on the information provided and personal viewpoints, it is recommended to allocate more resources towards improving the current existing products. By doing so, substantial time and cost savings can be achieved. There are numerous adjustments that can be made to make tour products more captivating, appealing, and capable of delivering exceptional experiences to our clients.

Tourism revolves around the concept of experience and how travelers engage their six senses. The more we cater to these senses within our products, the greater value our clients will perceive and ultimately feel satisfied with the experience.

- Visual (sight): Showcasing stunning landscapes and unique architecture.
- Auditory (hearing): Incorporating music, performances, festivals, and music exchanges.
- Olfactory (smell): Offering culinary experiences, cooking classes, or food tasting tours.
- Gustatory (taste): Providing opportunities to enjoy tea, coffee, wine, and local delicacies.
- Tactile (touch): Including adventure activities like mountain climbing, thrilling cycling, etc.

- Intuitive (emotions, mental states): Ensuring that the overall experience stimulates the participating individual's emotions through the engagement of all the senses mentioned above.

It is important to note that many existing tourism products in Vietnam primarily focus on sightseeing beautiful landscapes while offering basic services such as accommodation and meals. However, it should be emphasized that visitors do not travel merely to eat and sleep, as they already have access to quality amenities at home. Their desire is to encounter experiences that awaken their senses, which they do not typically encounter in their daily lives.

So to determine which products and services require our support and modifications, it is imperative that we conduct thorough inspections beforehand.

What are the resources for product developments and how ST4SD can help?

The resources for product development depend on the specific tourism products each province aims to develop. Whether it involves the tourism destination itself, tourism infrastructure at the provincial level, or tourism products and services provided by local businesses, it would be beneficial to offer technical support from our project.

This support would assist them in analyzing tourism potentials and market needs, the main investors would be responsible for making decisions regarding their financial investments.

ST4SD will be along their side, providing ongoing technical advice for a duration of at least four years. This advice will focus on making necessary changes to existing products and or creating new products and services,

In addition, our project should facilitate field trips for them within Vietnam or even abroad, allowing them to learn from successful models in order to gain valuable experience and effectively manage their investments for sustainable development.

How important are marketing activities for provincial tourism?

Marketing activities play a crucial role in promoting destinations and products for all provinces. I'm not sure how much budget the project can allocate for this activity, but it is important to recognize that marketing is often a weakness for many provinces. They may lack proper campaigns and struggle to identify their target audience and effective promotional strategies.

Investing in marketing activities can yield significant benefits for provinces. Effective marketing campaigns raise awareness about the unique attractions and offerings of each destination, effectively reaching and engaging the target market. By identifying the right channels and promotional methods, provinces can effectively showcase their tourism products to potential visitors.

11.6 VTDI, Green standards & Certification

The Tourism Advisory Board (TAB), sponsored by the EU project, has developed the Vietnam Tourism Development Index. This index has aided 15 provinces (inclusive of Quang Nam, Hue, Can Tho) in fulfilling criteria related to policies, infrastructure development, tourism attractions, cultural preservation, nature conservation, and tourism products...

In my view, it is crucial for tourism businesses to adhere to sustainability guidelines, such as green standards and responsible tourism practices. By obtaining certifications like Tourcert or Travelife, businesses can attract buyers such as travel agents and direct travelers. Similarly, at the provincial level, the provincial government of tourism follows the VTDI criteria to enhance their tourism environment and compete at a higher level. This, in turn, helps attract more investors to their province, fostering overall economic and societal development.

By providing assistance and resources to support the development of VTDI, our project can help these targeted provinces gain valuable insights into their tourism potential, identify gaps

in infrastructure, attractions, cultural preservation, nature conservation, and tourism products. This knowledge can guide them in making informed decisions to prioritize investments, allocate resources effectively, and implement targeted initiatives that will boost their tourism industry.

Furthermore, by leveraging the VTDI, provinces can benchmark their progress against established criteria and standards, allowing them to measure their growth over time. This benchmarking process can inspire healthy competition among provinces and encourage them to continuously enhance their offerings and visitor experiences.

Support green standards for tourism businesses?

VTDI is for provincial level and to ensure consistency and promote sustainability at community, and business levels, it is essential to establish specific sustainable criterias, as outlined in section 10.1, it is crucial to create national green standards or modify existing ones, allowing for their introduction at the provincial level. Once implemented, provinces can then promote these standards to local communities and businesses.

During discussions with provincial tourism officers in Halong workshop, it became evident that while some were aware of the green standards applied in Quang Nam, many were unfamiliar with them and lacked guidance on how to initiate similar practices. Therefore, it is imperative that ST4SD invest our resources in helping to develop guidelines, applications, and certification processes. This will enable all tourism stakeholders to incorporate these standards into their strategic planning and strive to achieve them.

Certification plays a crucial role in bringing credibility, differentiation, and continuous improvement within the tourism industry. Therefore, allocating our resources to support certification initiatives in selected provinces is vital. This support enables provinces to showcase their competitiveness compared to other provinces in Vietnam or even within the region

Please see some of my ideas in section 10.1 above.

11.7 Involvement of HSLU and the main role of ST4SD in each

Research: HSLU can conduct research, by collaborating tourism experts and local tourism stakeholders, they provide valuable insights, expertise, and innovative solutions to address community needs and contribute to sustainable development.

Capacity Building: HSLU provides training and capacity-building programs to empower individuals and organizations within communities. These programs aim to enhance skills, knowledge, and resources, enabling community members to take an active role in their own development and sustainable growth.

ST4SD is a crucial connector between HSLU and provincial officers, as well as local businesses. It serves as a platform for understanding the specific support needed from different provinces and how HSLU can best assist during the four-year projects aimed at enhancing the capacity of the selected provinces and their communities.

Conclusion

Proper planning is essential for the implementation of sustainable tourism, similar to strategic planning in business. It must also involve collaboration among various stakeholders, training initiatives. Starting small, with a focus on responsible practices and consistency, is key. Gradually progressing towards higher levels of responsibility should be done with a defined timeline.

When developing tourism products, it is crucial not to copy from one another. Instead, the products should cater to the unique needs of visitors that they cannot find in their own homes. This approach ensures authenticity and enhances the overall visitor experience.

While certification is important for recognizing efforts, it is equally vital to have responsible travel guidelines or standards to follow. Investing in a certification mechanism that ensures fairness and transparency will build trust within society.