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PROPOSING A COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM MODEL FOLLOWING A CIRCULAR ECONOMY APPROACH IN VINH LONG PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzes the current status of community tourism in the direction of circular economy (KTTH) in Vinh Long province, thereby assessing the advantages, difficulties and challenges in applying this model to improve tourists' satisfaction with tourism development in Vinh Long province. From there, the authors propose a model for developing community tourism in households and community cultural craft villages. At the same time, propose a number of solutions to promote the development of community tourism in the direction of sustainable KTTH, in order to optimize resources, minimize pollution while maintaining product value and regenerating natural systems to minimize environmental impacts and improve the socio-economic life of local people.

Keywords: *Community tourism, Circular economy, Sustainable development.*

1. Introduction

The circular economy (CE) is regarded as a key driver of Vietnam's socio-economic development. Its inclusion in the Party's policy documents highlights the importance of efficient resource utilization, minimizing environmental impacts, and responding to climate change and environmental degradation toward sustainable development.

Vinh Long province has issued several support policies, notably Decision No. 2265/QĐ-UBND dated November 4, 2024, by the Vinh Long People's Committee on the "Project for Developing Science and Technology Application and Technology Transfer to Promote the Circular Economy in Agriculture in Vinh Long Until 2030," and Plan No. 92/KH-UBND dated November 20, 2024, outlining the implementation of this project. With these orientations and supportive policies for CE development, the province aims to build a comprehensive circular economic ecosystem (Vinh Long People's Committee, 2024). The prospects for CE development in Vinh Long focus on:

- Recycling and reusing agricultural by-products: Encouraging closed-loop production models that utilize rice straw, organic fertilizers, and livestock waste.
- Developing modern supply chains: Integrating logistics to optimize transportation, reduce costs, and improve the quality of agricultural products.
- Smart and high-tech agriculture: Transitioning from traditional production to ecological, organic, and digital agriculture.
- Regional cooperation within the Mekong Delta and Ho Chi Minh City: Strengthening partnerships with Mekong Delta provinces and Ho Chi Minh City to

promote technology transfer and introduce circular agricultural products to international markets.

- Mekong Delta regional linkage: Collaborating with Mekong Delta provinces to build sustainable value chains and share resources and technology. For example, cooperation with Can Tho, Dong Thap, and Tien Giang in handling rice straw and agricultural waste would allow Vinh Long to benefit from shared technologies and management experience.

- Developing sustainable value chains: Enhancing connections with enterprises, cooperatives, and universities practicing CE in the Mekong Delta and Ho Chi Minh City to build effective CE supply chains.

To promote sustainable tourism development in Vinh Long, the adoption of CE principles is considered a key solution to optimizing management processes, improving service quality, and expanding the market. Specifically, the province needs to develop specialized training programs for tourism staff and officials on CE knowledge, thereby creating a dynamic and innovative workforce that stays updated with sustainable development trends. At the same time, investments in upgrading infrastructure are necessary.

However, these advantages may become limitations when the locality has not yet developed distinctive tourism products to attract visitors. Facilities and infrastructure remain insufficient, and development has not matched existing potential. In particular, advancing sustainable tourism in Vinh Long continues to pose significant challenges.

2. Theoretical framework and research methods

2.1 Theoretical Framework

A community is understood as a group of cultural subjects and residents living within a specific geographical area who share common social characteristics and collectively preserve cultural heritage regarded as their cultural identity (Bui Thi Hai Yen, 2012). Community-based tourism (CBT) is a form of tourism developed on the foundation of community cultural values and managed, organized, and benefited from by local residents. In this context, a tourism product is defined as a combination of services that utilize tourism resource values to meet visitor needs. Community-based accommodation facilities and food service establishments provide lodging and dining services, respectively, to visitors within CBT areas. A community-based tourism service business unit refers to an entity that satisfies all legal requirements for operating travel services, is responsible for bringing tourists to CBT sites, and performs two essential functions: protecting the natural and cultural sustainability of the community and supporting its socio-economic development, in accordance with the established Code of Conduct.

A community-based tourist site is a location with tourism resources that have been invested in and developed for visitor use. Tour guiding in CBT is carried out by community members who possess legally recognized tour guide certificates and are responsible for providing information, coordinating services, guiding visitors, and assisting them throughout their travel programs. Traditional cultural and artistic performances, presented by community members, play a significant role in introducing rituals, customs, and traditional art forms that embody unique cultural characteristics. The Code of Conduct serves as a set of normative guidelines that shape attitudes, behaviors, and civilized interaction among stakeholders in CBT. The management and operation of CBT activities are overseen by a community-based tourism management board composed of

representatives of local authorities, social organizations, and community members, functioning in accordance with legal regulations.

According to the Asia Foundation, CBT typically includes ecotourism, cultural tourism, agricultural tourism, indigenous tourism, and village tourism. Tourists are generally drawn to CBT due to their desire to experience local culture, daily life, and unspoiled natural environments. As such, ethnic cultural identity and local ecological landscapes represent two of the most valuable assets for CBT development. In relation to circular economy theory, Pearce and Turner (1989) emphasized that the fundamental principle of the circular economy is that "everything becomes an input for something else," shifting away from the traditional linear economic model characterized by resource extraction, consumption, and disposal. The circular economy represents a modern economic paradigm that focuses on optimizing resource use, minimizing waste, and circulating products throughout the value chain (Veasco-Munoz et al., 2021).

2.2 Research Methods

This study utilized both secondary data collection and analytical methods to investigate the development of community-based tourism following a circular economy (CE) approach in Vinh Long province. Secondary data were gathered from relevant documents and internal reports provided by the Department of Industry and Trade, the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and the People's Committee of Vinh Long province. Information was also collected and synthesized from policy documents, scientific literature on CE and community-based tourism, as well as reports from tourism management agencies, non-governmental organizations, and academic journals both domestically and internationally.

For data analysis, several methods were employed. The synthesis, interpretation, and inductive method was applied to interpret and analyze research issues, leading to conclusions and assessments. Comparative analysis was used to evaluate and contrast the CE-oriented community-based tourism model in Vinh Long with successful models implemented in other localities, thereby drawing lessons and best practices. Finally, based on the collected data, the study analyzed the advantages, difficulties, and challenges of implementing the CE-based community tourism model in Vinh Long and proposed appropriate groups of solutions to promote its sustainable development.

3. Research results and discussion

3.1 Challenges in Implementing the Circular Economy in Vinh Long Province

The implementation of the circular economy (CE) in Vinh Long province faces multiple challenges related to the awareness and skills of local residents and enterprises, particularly those producing OCOP (One Commune One Product) products. First, awareness remains limited: the number of cooperatives and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) recognizing the benefits of CE is still very low, as reflected in the participation of local enterprises in the OCOP program. This has resulted in slow adoption and low effectiveness of CE practices. Second, there is a lack of professional training: to date, only a limited number of short-term CE training programs have been organized in Vinh Long, mostly focused on agriculture, with little diversity in other sectors. Third, challenges exist for OCOP products: most production units participating in the OCOP program have not yet utilized production by-products to reduce costs and increase product value. Fourth, outdated infrastructure poses a major limitation: waste treatment in the province

still relies on landfilling or incineration, which does not meet modern recycling standards, and no units have yet invested in gasification technologies to increase recycling rates to 30%. Fifth, advanced technology is lacking: Vinh Long currently has no large-scale agricultural by-product processing plants, and only small amounts of rice straw are reused, mainly through small cooperatives. Sixth, the legal framework is still unclear: although the Government issued Decision No. 687/QĐ-TTg on CE, and Vinh Long has recently completed a master plan, a detailed legal framework to support CE implementation at various levels has not yet been established. This limits the execution of projects, particularly in agriculture and waste management. Finally, limited funding constrains progress: according to the Vinh Long People's Committee (2022), over 80% of funding for CE projects depends on the provincial budget and international organizations. Compared with neighboring provinces, Vinh Long receives approximately 30% less ODA for environmental projects, causing delays in implementing resource recycling and reuse programs.

3.2 General Assessment of Community-Based Tourism Exploitation in Vinh Long Province

Community-based tourism in Vinh Long province is an increasingly developing model that attracts both domestic and international visitors, particularly foreign tourists and those interested in experiencing local culture. This type of tourism focuses on providing visitors with opportunities to live and work alongside local residents, participate in agricultural activities, explore cultural and ethnic heritage, and enjoy the flavors of garden-fresh cuisine. Community-based tourism in Vinh Long is a form of tourism that requires preservation, development, and investment to reach its full potential.

3.2.1 Advantages of Community-Based Tourism in Vinh Long Province

Its geographical location is convenient, being near Ho Chi Minh City, with destinations such as An Binh Islet serving as ideal spots for short trips or weekend tours. Waterway transportation is well-developed, allowing boat and canoe tours that provide unique experiences and easy access to surrounding areas. The province also boasts abundant natural resources. An Binh Islet, for instance, offers lush green landscapes and numerous fruit gardens featuring longan, rambutan, durian, and other tropical fruits, giving visitors an immersive nature experience. The diverse ecosystem supports activities such as rowing, fruit picking, fishing, and a day of farming, enhancing the appeal of homestay tourism.

Vinh Long's cultural characteristics further enrich the tourism experience. Visitors can experience the traditional lifestyle of the Mekong Delta, enjoying rustic local cuisine and participating in agricultural activities like fruit harvesting and fish farming. The province also preserves Don ca tai tu, an intangible cultural heritage of Southern Vietnam, through performances at homestays, adding a distinct artistic and cultural dimension to the tourism experience.

Community-based tourism in Vinh Long contributes to local economic development by helping residents increase income while promoting sustainable development and preserving local culture. The tourism model emphasizes sustainability, ensuring that the exploitation of tourism resources does not harm the environment or cultural heritage, thereby protecting landscapes and local resources. Additionally, pricing is affordable, making Vinh Long's community-based tourism accessible to a wide range of visitors, from domestic tourists to international travelers.

3.2.2 Challenges of Community-Based Tourism in Vinh Long Province

Despite its advantages, community-based tourism in Vinh Long faces several challenges. Firstly, infrastructure remains limited. Accommodation infrastructure is uneven, as some homestays do not meet modern comfort standards, particularly for international visitors or tourists with high expectations for amenities. Transportation infrastructure is also underdeveloped: An Binh Islet is primarily accessible by waterways, while road and bridge networks are limited, making travel difficult during the rainy season or floods. Secondly, service capacity is inconsistent. The quality of services in some homestays is not yet professional, and staff may lack skills to adequately serve international tourists, potentially affecting visitor experiences. Additionally, the shortage of trained tour guides with professional qualifications and foreign language proficiency limits the ability to promote and serve international guests effectively.

Thirdly, the potential for tourism development has not been fully utilized. Promotion remains limited, as An Binh Islet has not been widely advertised, particularly on online platforms and in international markets. Investment in tourism products is also insufficient, with current activities and offerings still relatively simple and lacking diversity, resulting in fewer novel experiences for visitors. Fourthly, the natural environment is vulnerable to negative impacts. Uncontrolled tourism growth could place pressure on the local ecosystem, particularly fruit gardens and water resources. Moreover, inadequate waste management and environmental protection measures could lead to pollution, affecting both the natural environment and the quality of the tourism experience.

3.3 Current Use of Natural Materials and Resource Reuse in Community-Based Tourism in Vinh Long Province

In Vinh Long, local residents show a preference for using natural materials, although these are not yet fully utilized in daily life. Tourists have expressed interest in handicraft experiences made from natural materials, presenting opportunities to develop tourism that is closely linked with cultural preservation and environmental protection. However, the practice of repairing and reusing damaged items remains uncommon; instead, old items are often discarded. Organic waste is rarely repurposed as fertilizer, and agricultural by-products are primarily used as animal feed rather than being fully integrated into a circular economy model. Overall, in order to develop sustainable community-based tourism in Vinh Long, it is necessary to implement programs that support residents in effectively using and reusing available resources, thereby contributing to circular economy practices and environmental conservation.

3.4 Proposed Model for Developing Community-Based Tourism in the Direction of Circular Economy in Households and Cultural Craft Villages

Based on theoretical models of circular economy (CE) development proposed by WWF (2016), Ho Thi Van Anh and Pham Tu Anh (2022), and Tran Van Hoc (2021), the authors propose several models for developing community-based tourism in the direction of CE for households and cultural craft villages.

3.4.1 Simplified Theoretical Model of CE Applied to Household-Operated Homestays

For households operating homestays, CE can be integrated within the framework of responsible tourism. The proposed CE model for homestay households (Figure 2)

includes practical CE activities that focus on optimizing resource use, reducing waste, and recycling materials within the household tourism operations. This model emphasizes the incorporation of circular practices into accommodation services, ensuring that resources are used efficiently and sustainably while simultaneously enhancing the tourist experience and promoting cultural preservation.

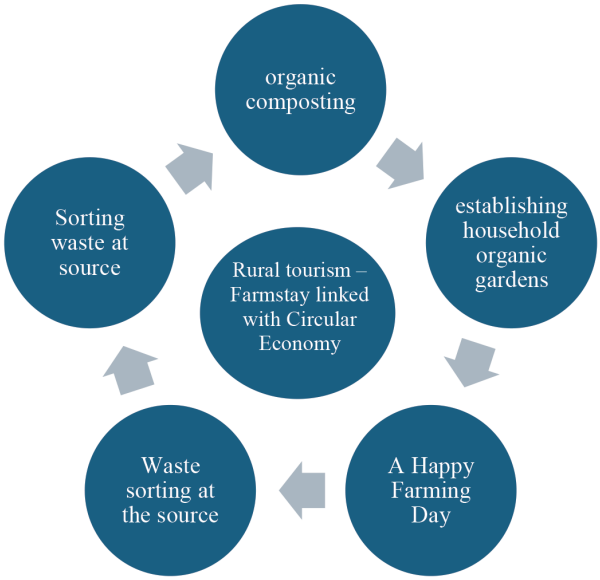

Figure 1: Circular Economy Application Model for Households Operating Supplementary Services

Households operating homestays can implement circular economy (CE) practices through several practical measures. First, they can increase the use of local materials for tourism-related items. For example, woven bamboo and rattan can be used to create trays, fruit baskets, plates, and food serving trays, often lined with banana or dong leaves to maintain hygiene while preserving a natural aesthetic. Second, single-use plastic items can be replaced with more durable alternatives: plastic water bottles can be substituted with glass bottles, and large stainless-steel water containers can be placed in convenient locations for guests to serve themselves. Third, waste should be sorted at the source in accordance with the 2020 Environmental Protection Law. Households can separate waste into (i) organic waste, such as food scraps and agricultural by-products; (ii) recyclable waste, including plastic, aluminum, and glass; and (iii) non-biodegradable or bulky waste. These practices aim to optimize resource use, reduce environmental impact, and integrate CE principles into everyday operations while enhancing the visitor experience.

Households can further apply circular economy practices by cleaning, reusing, recycling, or selling valuable waste materials, such as plastic bottles, plastic containers, beer cans, and soda cans. Additionally, organic waste from food scraps and agricultural by-products can be converted into compost. Households can build composting pits or bins to produce organic fertilizer, which can then be used for home gardens or ornamental plants within the homestay. These practices not only reduce environmental impact but also create economic opportunities and contribute to the sustainable management of resources, aligning with the principles of circular economy while enhancing the ecological and aesthetic value of the homestay experience.

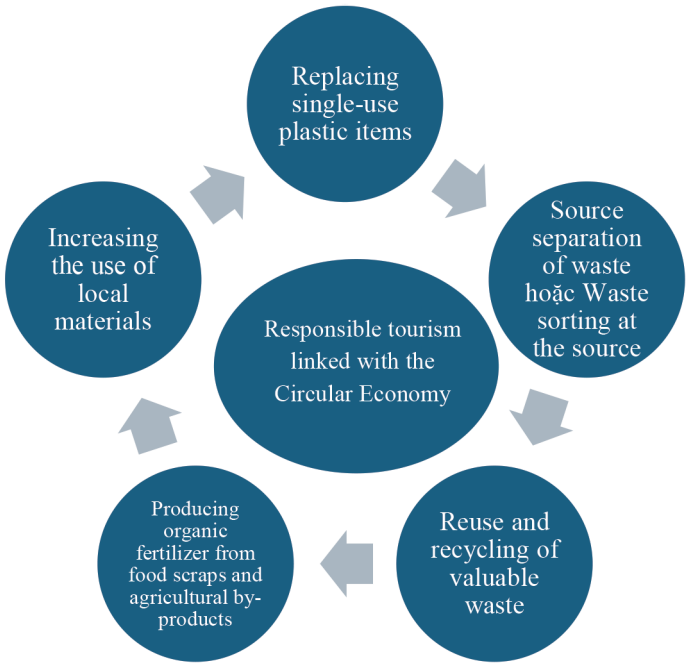

Figure 2: Simplified Theoretical Model of Circular Economy Applied to Household-Operated Homestays

3.4.2 Theoretical Model of Circular Economy Applied to Households Providing Supplementary Services

For households providing supplementary tourism services, such as food and beverage services or agricultural experience activities, circular economy (CE) practices can be integrated within the framework of rural tourism, specifically the farmstay model. The CE practices in these households (Figure 1) include several key activities. Firstly, waste should be sorted at the source, separating organic waste (food scraps and agricultural by-products), recyclable materials (plastic, aluminum, glass), and non-biodegradable or bulky waste. Secondly, organic waste and agricultural by-products can be processed into compost for household gardens or ornamental plants. Thirdly, households can establish organic vegetable or fruit gardens that serve both consumption and tourism purposes.

Additionally, these households can provide agricultural experience services either in their own gardens or within production areas operated by individual households or groups of households, under programs such as "A Happy Farming Day," which allows tourists to participate in daily farming activities. Another activity involves guided culinary experiences using locally harvested ingredients, including specialty spices and produce from the household or other local suppliers, organized through initiatives such as the "Tày Cuisines Contest," where tourists learn to prepare traditional dishes. These practices not only promote sustainable resource use and circular economy principles but also enhance tourists' engagement with local culture and agricultural traditions, contributing to both environmental protection and socio-economic development.

4. Conclusion and Proposed Solutions

4.1 Conclusion

Circular economy in Vinh Long Province is not only an inevitable economic development trend but also a strategic solution aimed at achieving sustainable development goals. While community-based tourism is recognized as a sustainable approach that

contributes to improving local livelihoods and protecting the natural environment, numerous studies indicate that this tourism model has not fully realized its expected outcomes in many areas. Concerns remain as to whether local residents receive benefits proportional to their contributions, or whether most of the advantages are captured by other groups, and whether this tourism model can be sustained in the long term. From a planning perspective, for community-based tourism to be effective and sustainable, local residents need to be actively involved from the planning stage. This participation is essential in identifying tourism sites, determining the level of organization, and guiding tourism development. Only when these decisions are made by the community themselves can they genuinely own, manage, and operate tourism activities on their own land, ensuring both sustainability and equitable benefit-sharing.

4.2 Proposed Solutions for Developing Community-Based Tourism in the Direction of Circular Economy in Vinh Long Province

4.2.1 Legal Framework

To promote community-based tourism aligned with circular economy (CE) principles in Vinh Long, it is necessary to supplement or establish new regulations within village or community guidelines. These documents should provide specific instructions on applying CE practices in tourism activities, giving residents and businesses a clear legal basis for implementation. In addition, detailed manuals or handbooks should be developed on applying CE in various tourism services, including household accommodation (homestays), agricultural experiences (farmstays), culinary services, and transportation. These guidelines can be adapted from existing green tourism criteria to suit the practical conditions of Vinh Long Province.

4.2.2 Human Resources

Human resources play a crucial role in implementing CE practices at community tourism sites. At least one member from the community tourism management board and several members from tourism business households should participate in training programs. The training content should focus on basic skills for applying CE in tourism services, including waste reduction, resource reuse, and the use of eco-friendly materials.

4.2.3 Science, Technology, and Innovation

Organizing exchange programs and competitions can encourage residents and businesses to propose CE initiatives in tourism. This approach raises awareness and helps identify models suitable for local conditions. Digital technology should be applied to create digital maps of community-based tourism destinations following CE principles, integrated into platforms such as Google Maps or virtual reality maps. Furthermore, QR code systems should be developed to introduce CE practices, exemplary models, and practical instructions at tourism sites, allowing tourists to easily access relevant information.

4.2.4 Infrastructure and Equipment for CE

It is essential to establish waste sorting and collection systems at the source, including the recycling of solid waste such as plastics, paper, metals, and glass, to minimize negative environmental impacts. Vinh Long Province should invest in transfer and storage facilities for waste that cannot be immediately processed within the community. Households and businesses leading in organic waste management should be supported with equipment to convert organic waste into compost or bio-cleaning products. Additionally, demonstration and experiential zones for CE practices should be developed for tourists and local residents

to raise awareness and encourage wider adoption of CE practices.

4.2.5 Education and Awareness Raising

Workshops and exhibitions on CE should be regularly organized to enhance community and business awareness. Clear guidelines and definitions should be established for key terms and practices: (i) waste reduction - setting targets and encouraging low-waste products; (ii) clean production - promoting the adoption of clean technologies to save resources and energy; (iii) reuse - encouraging the repeated use of products and packaging; (iv) recycling - regulations on collection, sorting, treatment, and recycling of waste; and (v) technical training - organizing courses on recycling and the use of by-products for farmers and businesses. Community models should also be developed to allow residents to participate actively in environmental protection and sustainable development initiatives.

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