

# Building a community-based tourism value chain for the Hmong in Muong Long, Nghe An, grounded in local knowledge<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Community-based tourism (CBT) linked with indigenous knowledge represents a promising direction for ethnic minority and mountainous regions. Muong Long, a highland border commune in Nghe An province, is home to a concentrated community of Hmong people who possess a rich body of indigenous knowledge in agriculture, cuisine, folk songs and dances, traditional crafts, folk games, and rituals. However, CBT activities in the area remain largely spontaneous, small-scale, and have yet to develop into a complete value chain. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the community-based tourism value chain in Muong Long commune on the basis of utilizing and promoting the Hmong people's indigenous knowledge, thereby proposing solutions for developing a sustainable community-based tourism chain.*

**Keywords:** Value chain, Community-based Tourism, Indigenous Knowledge, Hmong People, Muong Long

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, community-based tourism (CBT) has been recognized as a model of sustainable tourism development, particularly suitable for ethnic minority

and upland regions. A key element of this approach lies in leveraging and promoting local knowledge, including customs, traditions, traditional crafts, gastronomy, architecture, and folk art, to offer visitors distinctive, authentic, and culturally rich experiences (UNWTO, 2018; Vietnam Rural Industries Research and Development Institute & Asian Foundation, 2012). Integrating local knowledge into tourism development not only generates economic value but also contributes to cultural preservation, the maintenance of social capital, and the enhancement of community autonomy.

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Muong Long commune (formerly part of Ky Son district, Nghe An province)<sup>1</sup> is home to a concentrated Hmong community, where a rich system of local knowledge has been preserved alongside distinctive natural landscapes. These assets provide Muong Long with necessary conditions for developing CBT rooted in local knowledge. However, tourism activities in the area remain largely spontaneous, small-scale, and poorly coordinated, lacking a fully developed value chain. As a result, the local potential is underutilized, economic and social benefits are unevenly distributed, and there is a risk of commodifying local culture (People's Committee of Ky Son district, 2025).

The value chain approach was introduced by Porter (2008). It explains how businesses create value through a series of interconnected activities, from design, production, marketing, and distribution to product support. At the industry level, a macro value chain encompasses the entire process of value creation, from idea generation, production, distribution, consumption, and recycling. In tourism, the value chain is defined as a network of individuals, organizations, and enterprises that co-create and co-deliver value to tourists while sharing economic benefits through cash flows and value exchanges. A tourism value chain typically involves four main actor groups: (i) Planning and product design entities, such as regulatory bodies and planning organizations; (ii) product and service providers, including tourism destinations, accommodations, food and beverage services, and transportation; (iii)

intermediaries, such as travel agencies and tour operators; (iv) tourists, as the final consumers. This value chain features two key flows: The product-service flow from providers to tourists and the revenue flow in the opposite direction, generating surplus value when income exceeds costs. As such, the tourism value chain provides an essential analytical framework to understand linkages, benefit distribution, and promoting sustainable tourism development (Song et al., 2013).

Applying a value chain approach in research on CBT in Muong Long not only highlights the role of local knowledge in each link of the value chain but also helps identify constraints, bottlenecks, and opportunities to improve development effectiveness. Therefore, conducting studies on constructing a CBT value chain based on the Hmong community's local knowledge in Muong Long holds both theoretical significance (adding to the body of studies on CBT and sustainable development) and practical relevance, contributing to proposals for livelihood development, cultural preservation, and the enhancement of community governance capacity in highland border areas.

## **2. Research methodology**

This article applies GIZ's tourism value chain analytical framework (Partale, 2020) in conjunction with Grenier's perspective on local knowledge (1998). According to GIZ (2020), value chain analysis in tourism is regarded as an effective approach for identifying how value is created, distributed, and accumulated among actors, thereby pinpointing high-value stages, uncovering bottlenecks, and proposing solutions to optimize community benefits while ensuring the sustainable development of destinations. This approach is particularly well-suited

<sup>1</sup> Following the administrative reorganization (effective July 1, 2025), the former Ky Son district in Nghe An province retained five communes that were not subject to reorganization, including Muong Long.

to CBT, in which economic gains need to be closely linked with cultural preservation and strengthened social cohesion.

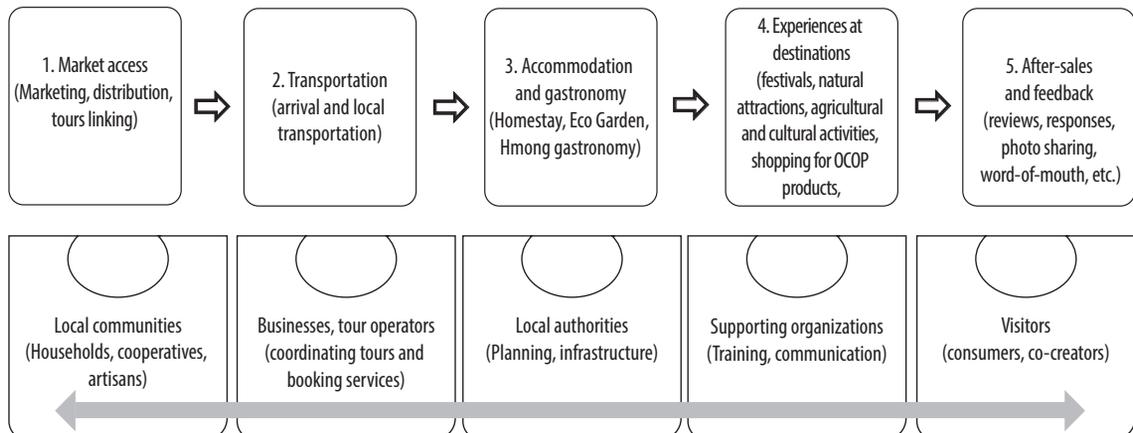
In the CBT value chain, the tourist journey comprises four fundamental stages: Market access, transportation, accommodation and dining, and on-site experiences. Each stage not only generates economic value but also reflects the degree of community participation, benefit-sharing, and co-creation, spanning from market promotion and connectivity, enhancing accessibility, and providing essential services to crafting local cultural experiences (Vietnam Rural Industries Research and Development Institute & Asian Foundation, 2012). The stakeholders such as local authorities, supporting organizations, households, cooperatives, tour operators, and tourists, play distinct yet closely interconnected roles, shaping the operational structure and ensuring equitable benefit distribution across the entire value chain (Song et al., 2013).

A distinctive feature of the CBT value chain is the decisive role of local knowledge, viewed as the system of understanding, skills, and practices accumulated over generations and closely linked to the community’s natural and cultural environment (Grenier, 1998). From agricultural production, handicrafts,

and traditional architecture to festivals, beliefs, and folk art, local knowledge functions both as an input and as a critical determinant of community identity and competitive advantage (Gupta et al., 2016). Integrating local knowledge across the entire value chain, from product design and service delivery to brand positioning and feedback reception, not only delivers distinctive and authentic experiences for tourists but also reinforces cultural and social sustainability (UNWTO, 2018).

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, and analyzed secondary sources such as strategic policy documents, reports on tourism development planning, and product development guidelines. In addition, a sociological survey was conducted in Muong Long in April 2025 to collect primary data for analyzing the CBT value chain, comprising 100 questionnaires for tourists and 230 for local residents. The data were subsequently processed and analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistics, content analysis, and the value chain analytical framework, providing a robust foundation for the discussion and the formulation of evidence-based recommendations.

**Figure 1. Tourism value chain analytical framework in Muong Long**



### 3. Research findings

#### 3.1. Tourism resources in Muong Long

The findings reveal that Muong Long Commune possesses a remarkably diverse range of tourism resources, including both natural and cultural assets.

##### *In terms of natural resources*

Natural resources are considered a critical pillar that defines the distinctive appeal of CBT in highland areas characterized by unique topography, climate, and ecosystems. According to local reports, Muong Long boasts abundant and varied natural endowments that play a pivotal role in the development of tourism products (see more Party Committee of Muong Long commune, 2018).

Its distinctive topography and geographical setting create a temperate microclimate within the tropical zone. Situated at an average elevation of around 1,050 meters, the commune features steep mountains, enclosed by limestone ranges and isolated valleys, earning it the description of a rare “highland basin” in western Nghe An. Such features make it an ideal location for cloud-hunting, trekking (which combines adventure tourism with nature exploration), camping, and exploring the rugged mountain landscapes.

Besides, the commune enjoys a mild climate, with cool summers (18-20°C) and winters that can drop to -5°C, accompanied by frequent mist and high humidity, which together provides ideal conditions for the development of health tourism, and cold-season tourism. These favorable conditions have led to frequent comparisons between Muong Long and well-known destinations such as Da Lat and Sa Pa.

Furthermore, the forest ecosystem, covering more than 14,100 hectares and featuring valuable timber species along

with rich vegetation, is not only ideal for nature exploration but also offers great potential for developing health tourism associated with local medicinal herbs.

Prominent natural attractions such as Muong Long Heaven Gate, Rong Waterfall, Bat Cave, Mount Phap, and the seasonal blossoming of plum and peach blossoms enhance the commune’s distinctive charm, making it an appealing destination for nature-based discovery, leisure, and photography.

##### *In terms of cultural resources*

In addition to the natural assets, the cultural resources of the Hmong community forms a vital pillar for CBT development in the commune. As a predominantly Hmong settlement, Muong Long has preserved its cultural identity in a remarkably intact form, reflected through local lifestyles, customs, local knowledge, and traditional craft practice (Party Committee of Muong Long commune, 2018).

The local community maintains a variety of traditional handicrafts closely linked to both livelihoods and ritual practices, including brocade weaving and embroidery, *khen* (traditional musical instrument) making, agri-tool forging, and *do* paper production (translator’s note: *Do* paper, a distinctive form of Vietnamese traditional craftsmanship, is made from the bark of the *do* tree, which grows abundantly in the northern highlands). Traditional earthen houses with low roofs embody both adaptation to the natural conditions and spiritual beliefs. Traditional costumes, particularly women’s clothing, with its intricate hand embroidery, silver accessories, and vibrant colors, carries not only aesthetic value but also potential for integration into performance-based and experiential tourism products.

Although simple, the local gastronomy embodies profound local knowledge. Together with various forms of folk performance, such as *khu xia* singing, *khen* dancing, *pao* throwing (a traditional Hmong game), and long narrative songs performed during weddings and funerals, these cultural expressions enrich the community's distinctive cultural depth. A belief system of animism, along with ritual practices and traditional festivals such as *nem con* (ball-tossing), *bo chan* (bull-fighting), and *ma kho* (a ritual to send the spirits of the deceased back to the ancestral world), carries significant spiritual value and also holds potential to be developed into event-based tourism products if appropriately organized.

Furthermore, Hmong folktales about the origins of names and customary laws, rooted in a moral philosophy that values fairness, honor, and integrity, further define the community's unique cultural identity. These elements not only enrich visitors' experiences but also form a solid foundation for building a CBT value chain that harmonizes cultural preservation with the promotion of living heritage.

### **3.2. Current status of the CBT value chain in Muong Long**

*First, regarding market access*

Market access represents the initial yet decisive stage of the CBT value chain, as it establishes the connection between local tourism products and target customer segments. According to GIZ (2020), market access involves not only communication and marketing but also branding strategies, product positioning, distribution channels, and post-purchase relationship management. In a mountainous destination like Muong Long, where infrastructure and business conditions remain limited,

this capability is particularly crucial for attracting tourists and building a sustainable tourism brand.

Our field survey indicates that visitors to Muong Long are predominantly group travelers accounting for 56.8%, while family and individual tourists each represent 21.6%. This distribution reveals a heavy dependence on collective organizations (such as agencies, schools, and associations) rather than independent travelers, underscoring the need to adjust marketing strategies and tourism product accordingly. In terms of access channels, 82.0% of visitors became aware of Muong Long through friends, relatives, or colleagues, highlighting the pivotal role of word-of-mouth in promoting CBT. The Internet and social media reach 52.0% of visitors, reflecting the potential for digital engagement, though current efforts remain largely informal and lack professional coordination. Traditional channels, such as travel agencies (27.0%), television (20.0%), and print media exhibit relatively low reach, indicating that the destination has yet to implement a marketing campaign that is both integrated and synchronized.

The survey results also highlight other restriction that is the community's limited capacity for market linkages. Only 13.0% of local households reported having connections with other tourism services, while 87.0% operate independently. Such fragmentation constrains the commune's ability to integrate into provincial tourism routs.

Overall, market access in Muong Long remains underdeveloped, relying predominantly on word-of-mouth promotion and failing to capitalize on modern communication channels. Given the commune's official designation as a

recognized tourism destination and its attainment of a three-star OCOP rating, restructuring the marketing strategy toward digital transformation, professionalization, and strengthened community linkages should be considered a key solution to enhancing competitiveness and sustainable development.

*Second, in terms of transportation*

Transportation represents a vital intermediary stage in the tourism value chain, shaping destination accessibility and directly influencing tourists' choices and satisfaction. In Muong Long, this factor is even more critical, as the commune's rugged mountainous terrain and limited infrastructure make the feasibility of CBT development largely contingent upon transport connectivity.

Muong Long is located approximately 270 kilometers from the center of Nghe An and about 47 kilometers from Muong Xen (the former district center of Ky Son). The commune is primarily accessible by road, with travel taking around six hours from Vinh City and over one hour from Muong Xen. Survey findings reveal that 49.0% of visitors are from Ky Son district, 33.3% from other parts of Nghe An province, 15.7% from other provinces, and only 2.0% are international tourists. This structure clearly reflects the commune's limited accessibility, as its tourist market remains largely local travelers and relies heavily on self-organized trips.

In terms of transportation modes, institutional or private cars are the most common (57.0%), followed by tour company vehicles (23.0%) and motorbikes (20.0%). Other transport services, such as taxis, motorbike taxis, or motorbike rentals, are almost negligible. This situation indicates that a supportive local

transport ecosystem has yet to develop, thereby constraining access for individual, independent and international travelers.

Consequently, transportation currently represents a major "bottleneck" in Muong Long's CBT value chain. Although local infrastructure has seen some improvements, tourism transport services remain fragmented, lack friendliness, and are not fully aligned with visitors' experiential expectations. In light of the destination's official recognition, reorganizing the transport network, including shuttle vehicles, eco-friendly transport services, and partnerships with transport providers, is an urgent priority to enhance the competitiveness of CBT in Muong Long.

*Third, in terms of accommodation and gastronomy*

Accommodation and gastronomic services represent two pivotal links in the CBT value chain. They not only satisfy visitors' basic needs but also offer immersive experiences closely connected to local life, culture, and knowledge. In Muong Long commune, where the Hmong community has maintained a wealth of traditional values, these services play a crucial role in conveying cultural identity and promoting the local economy.

Regarding accommodation, the lodging sector remains at an early stage of development but has already demonstrated promising growth. By 2025, Muong Long features five homestays operated by local households, alongside the large-scale community eco-resort, Muong Long Eco Garden, which offers 17 bungalows and a communal stilt house equipped with modern amenities. Additional models, such as Muong Long Village and family-run homestays (Lau Y Denh, Vu Tong Po, Senh Ly), integrate traditional architecture

with the surrounding landscape, delivering an immersive “live like the Hmong” experience - a crucial factor of CBT. While still modest in scale, the accommodation network has spurred community engagement and is progressively forming a culturally grounded service ecosystem.

Regarding gastronomy, most culinary offerings are provided at homestays, utilizing locally sourced ingredients and traditional cooking techniques. Signature dishes include grilled black chicken, local pork, *bo giang* (strips of local beef are threaded onto bamboo skewers and suspended over a gentle wood fire. The meat is slowly smoked until the exterior turns a rich brown while the interior remains lightly pink), stream fish, smoked meat, forest bamboo shoots, boiled *cai meo* (leafy vegetable from the mustard family, commonly grown in the mountainous regions of Vietnam), and local spices such as *mac khen* (wild pepper with a mild, numbing spiciness), *thao qua* (cardamom with a strong, warm fragrance), and *hat doi* (a forest spice with a pungent, peppery flavor). These foods embody local knowledge in cultivation, preservation, and culinary use, while also reflecting adaptation to the highland ecological environment. Notably, meals are typically served in traditional kitchens featuring wood stoves, wooden trays, and handcrafted bowls, immersing visitors in an authentic “Hmong dining experience.” Such settings provide a solid basis for developing culinary tourism products, including cooking classes, experiences of harvesting agroforestry products, and food preparation with local residents.

Overall, accommodation and culinary services in Muong Long are gradually forming a community-based service ecosystem with a clear cultural identity,

though they remain modest in scale and not fully professionalized. Strengthening their competitiveness in the tourism value chain requires ongoing improvements in service quality, enhanced management capacity among local households, the development of distinctive cultural and culinary experiences, and the creation of homestay brands that are deeply rooted in local knowledge and traditions.

#### *Fourth, in terms of on-site experiences*

On-site experiences represent the central stage in the CBT value chain, where visitors directly engage with the destination’s natural and cultural resources and interact with the local community. According to GIZ (2020), this stage generates most of the emotional value, shaping visitors’ impressions, satisfaction, and their intention to revisit.

In Muong Long, on-site experiences are designed based on local knowledge, reflecting the deep connection between the Hmong community and their living environment. Notable offerings include agricultural and festival experiences. Notable examples include the plum harvest festival, held at the end of May during the peak harvest of *man hau* (a typical kind of plum), which combines harvesting activities, food tasting, local markets, and traditional games. In addition, the buffalo fighting festival (*Hoi bo chan*), held during Vietnam’s National Day on September 2, is a distinctive cultural and spiritual event that not only showcases community strength but also offers a space for folk arts performances, such as *khen* dancing, *pao* throwing (a traditional Hmong game), and courtship singing.

Nature-based and ecological experiences are also among Muong Long’s key strengths, featuring attractions such as

Rong Waterfall, Muong Long Heaven Gate, the TH herbal garden, plum orchards, and hills blanketed with reeds. These pristine landscapes are ideal for outdoor activities such as picnicking, trekking, stream bathing, and exploring tropical forest ecosystems. However, the sites currently lack essential visitor services, such as signage, tour guiding, and support facilities that shortens visitors' stay duration and results in relatively low spending levels.

In particular, experiences rooted in local culture and knowledge provide a distinctive advantage for tourism in Muong Long. Activities such as learning the *khen* performance, participating in traditional folk games, engaging in local crafts like weaving, blacksmithing, and *do* paper making, or attending folk performances (*cu xia* singing, *lu tau*) not only offer recreational enjoyment but also allow visitors to actively participate in the creation of cultural value. This practice underscores the strategic importance of local knowledge in developing unique and sustainable CBT products (Vietnam Rural Industries Research and Development Institute & Asian Foundation, 2012).

In summary, experiences at Muong Long CBT sites rests on a solid foundation of natural and cultural resources, yet it remains constrained by a lack of systematic organization and professional management. Central solutions to enhancing the value and sustainability of the tourism chain include the improvement of supporting infrastructure, the development of integrated experience routes, and the enhancement of the community's capacity for cultural storytelling.

### 3.3. SWOT analysis

*Regarding strengths*, Muong Long boasts distinctive natural and cultural resources,

including a valley terrain exceeding 1,000 meters, a temperate climate that remains cool year-round, and prominent landscapes such as Heaven Gate, Rong waterfall, and medicinal forests, forming a solid foundation for the development of ecotourism and leisure tourism. Hmong culture has been relatively well preserved, encompassing festivals (plum picking, buffalo fighting), folk performances, traditional crafts and gastronomy, which provide a competitive advantage for developing tourism products with a strong cultural identity. Several CBT models (Eco Garden, Muong Long Village, and household homestays) have initiated a combination of traditional architecture and modern amenities. Community awareness has also improved, reflected in a growing trend in local startups and the provision of complementary services.

*Concerning weaknesses*, management and coordination capacities across the tourism chain remain limited, with inadequate mechanisms for collaboration among local authorities, the community, and businesses. Market outreach is underdeveloped: 87% of households are not connected to service networks, the majority of visitors are local (from within the district), and international arrivals account for only 2%. Communication and brand identity lack professionalism, while infrastructure continues to exhibit notable deficiencies (including transportation, sanitation, internet connectivity, and food safety). In addition, community participation in tourism activities is low, services are mostly ad hoc, lack standardization, and often fail to meet the expectations of visitors from other provinces or international markets.

*In terms of opportunities*, there is a growing demand for ecotourism and cultural tourism, with visitors increasingly

prioritizing authentic local experiences and immersion in cultural life. National and local policies, such as Resolution No. 82/NQ-CP (2023) and the 2021-2030 National Target Program, provide favorable conditions for CBT development in ethnic minority areas. Muong Long was officially recognized as a provincial-level CBT site (in July 2025), opening up opportunities to attract investment. Furthermore, the OCOP program and the widespread adoption of digital technologies supports product diversification and enhances promotional effectiveness.

*Regarding challenges*, the absence of collaborative mechanisms and a coordinating body has led to the fragmented development of CBT. Community capacities in service delivery and specific skill sets are still limited, notably in foreign language proficiency, managerial competencies, and food safety practices. Muong Long still lacks a distinctive tourism product to establish a strong brand identity. Both technical and digital infrastructures are underdeveloped, while competition among CBT sites in the region is intensifying, creating considerable pressure to achieve differentiation.

In summary, the SWOT analysis suggests that Muong Long possesses significant potential; however, sustainable development of CBT will require addressing current limitations, capitalizing on available opportunities, and developing a competitive value chain.

#### **4. Solutions and recommendations**

To develop the CBT value chain in Muong Long, the following solutions should be considered:

*First*, it is essential to strengthen the community's internal capacity based on local knowledge, as the sustainability

of CBT depends on residents being the true stakeholders of the value chain. This requires structured training programs in tourism management, tour guiding, and intercultural communication skills, while also encouraging each community member to serve as a community tour guide. Moreover, establishing a standardized service framework that incorporates Hmong cultural elements will help improve service quality and ensure consistency in visitors' experiences.

*Second*, tourism products should be developed based on local culture and practical, participatory experiences. The rich local knowledge of the Hmong, including flax weaving, corn wine brewing, culinary preparation, *khen* performance, and *cu xia* singing or *lu tau*, should be translated into well-defined thematic tours that encourage active visitor participation. Each activity should be designed using a co-creation approach, in which local residents serve as master artisans while visitors assume the role of "apprentices". This approach not only generates distinctive emotional value for visitors but also contributes to the preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage.

*Third*, it is necessary to develop distinctive CBT villages, structured into integrated tourism clusters encompassing accommodation, gastronomy, cultural performances, experiential production activities, local markets, and OCOP product outlets. Each village becomes a destination, each household functions as a key actor within the service value chain, and OCOP products serve as cultural narratives to share with visitors. This approach transforms the village into a "living museum" of Hmong life, offering visitors immersive experiences that foster strong emotional engagement.

*Fourth*, strengthening linkages within the tourism value chain among the community, businesses, and local authorities is crucial. A co-governance model for tourism should be established, in which businesses facilitate market connections, authorities provide institutional frameworks and support mechanisms, and the community directly offers services and manages resource conservation. Furthermore, transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms should be maintained, while businesses should be encouraged to develop multi-day tours rather than short tours.

*Fifth*, digital transformation plays a pivotal role in CBT promotion and operation. It is vital to develop digital communication channels, including fan pages, village tourism digital maps, and multilingual content presenting products and experiences. Additionally, the community should be supported in accessing domestic online booking platforms (Mytour, Vntrip) and international platforms (Booking, Airbnb) in order to expand the market, reduce reliance on traditional channels, and enhance professionalism.

Based on field survey analyses, the following recommendations are proposed: *Local authorities* need to plan CBT development aligned with value chains and distinctive products, prioritize essential infrastructure (transportation, electricity, water, sanitation, internet), and establish “model CBT villages” to be replicated more widely.

*Tour operators* should form a community - business - government alliance to develop distinctive experiential products, foster transparent benefit-sharing, and actively participate in training, promotion, and market expansion. They should prioritize thematic tours grounded in local

knowledge, including gastronomy, *khen* performances, flax weaving, and festivals. *The community and cooperatives* should establish a service standard framework that reflects local identity, organize core groups, and encourage residents to serve as tour guides. In addition, they should promote digital transformation through fan pages, online booking platforms, and networks linking homestays with OCOP products.

*Supporting organizations* should concentrate on enhancing value chain management capacity, designing products that integrate cultural preservation, promoting responsible tourism, while engaging in research, policy consultation, and the implementation of models tailored to the specific conditions of mountainous and ethnic minority areas.

## 5. Conclusion

This study focuses on analyzing the tourism resources of Muong Long, identifying the roles of key stakeholders, examining how local knowledge is incorporated at each stage, and evaluating the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of community-based tourism in the commune. Building on these findings, the paper offers several recommendations to harness local knowledge in developing Muong Long’s community-based tourism value chain, thereby contributing to livelihood enhancement and cultural preservation in ethnic minority areas of Vietnam. The research findings are expected to make a meaningful contribution to the development of a community-based tourism value chain grounded in the local knowledge of Hmong people in Muong Long over the coming period □

(continue to page 60)