

# Bridging Theory and Transformation: The Role of Community Capitals in Shaping Sustainable Ecotourism Development

**Susana Restrepo Rico**

s.restrepo.rico@outlook.de |  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7300-9884>

**Michael Peterek**

michael.peterek@fra-uas.de |  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1057-5425>

Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, Global Urbanisation Research Team

**Gebhard Warth**

gebhard.warth@uni-tuebingen.de |  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6093-4564>

University of Tübingen, Work Group Physical Geography and GIS

**Chi Nguyen**

chintl@dau.edu.vn |  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2475-5341>

Danang Architecture University, Community Engaged Learning Centre

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## Abstract

This article analyses the evolution of sustainable community-based ecotourism (CBET) in the Cu De River Valley, Central Vietnam, through the analytical lens of the Community Capitals Framework (CCF). Building on earlier theoretical work (Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024) and five years of participatory, longitudinal research (2019–2024), the study examines how transformations in natural, cultural, human, social, financial and built capitals have shaped the transition from resource-dependent livelihoods to a diversified ecotourism economy in the Hoa Bac Commune. The findings show that sustainable development emerged not from isolated interventions but from the cumulative and interacting effects of conservation initiatives, cultural revitalisation, skills development, cooperative governance, decentralised infrastructure and income diversification. The article demonstrates that the CCF provides a robust structure for analysing multi-capital transformation processes, and it argues that its application to tourism contexts benefits from integrating considerations of governance dynamics and environmental thresholds. The conclusions offer insights for designing governance, capacity development and implementation frameworks that strengthen the resilience and long-term sustainability of community-based tourism initiatives in rural settings.

**Keywords:** sustainable tourism; community-based tourism; ecotourism; rural development; community capitals; capacity development

## 1. Introduction

Sustainable tourism has become an increasingly prominent development strategy in rural areas facing economic precarity, resource-based livelihoods and environmental pressures (Swarbrooke, 1999; McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011). Community-based ecotourism (CBET) in particular, is often presented as an approach that blends environmental conservation, cultural revitalisation, decentralised infrastructure and participatory governance into local development processes (Regmi & Walter, 2016; Scheyvens, 1999). Rather than functioning as a conventional tourism model, CBET is rooted in principles of community agency, local benefit distribution and capacity development (Spenceley, 2008). Nonetheless, despite its growing relevance, much of the existing literature still focuses on short-term outcomes or isolated interventions, offering limited insight into how CBET evolves as a multi-dimensional transformation process.

The Cu De River Valley in the Hoa Bac Commune of Da Nang, Central Vietnam, offers a compelling context for examining such transformations. Historically reliant on acacia logging and subsistence agriculture, the region faced significant socio-economic vulnerabilities and environmental degradation. Since 2019, the research project “*emplement! Empowering Urban Regions for Implementation and Resilience Strategies Considering the Urban-Rural Nexus*”, sponsored by the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), and implemented jointly by the German partners with local authorities, the Danang Architecture University (DAU) and the Hoa Bac Community-Based Tourism Cooperative, has supported a gradual transition towards a more diverse and sustainable local economy through community-driven ecotourism initiatives (Restrepo Rico, Peterek & Nguyen, 2025; Peterek, Restrepo Rico, Nguyen & Dopf, 2025; Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024). This evolving trajectory provides an opportunity to understand CBET not as a linear shift but as an iterative process shaped by the interaction of different forms of community capital.

To analyse this process, the article adopts the Community Capitals Framework (CCF), which conceptualises community development as the interplay of natural, cultural, human, social, financial and built capitals (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2018). While the CCF is widely used in community development research, its application to long-term CBET initiatives remains limited. Existing studies frequently focus on individual dimensions, such as conservation outcomes, economic benefits or cultural change, without examining how these capitals co-evolve or reinforce one another. Moreover, longitudinal analyses tracing sustained transformations in governance structures, community capacities and resource management remain scarce.

This article addresses these gaps by examining the empirical evolution of CBET in the Hoa Bac Commune between 2019 and 2024 through an integrated, multi-capital perspective. The study is guided by two research questions:

1. How do the different forms of community capital evolve during the implementation of CBET in the Cu De River Valley?
2. To what extent does the Hoa Bac case contribute conceptually to debates on community-led tourism development, particularly regarding the applicability and further refinement of the CCF in tourism settings?

## 2. Methodology

To answer these questions, the research adopted a longitudinal case study approach, drawing on participatory workshops, semi-structured interviews, surveys, direct observations and joint field activities conducted within the *emplement!* Project between 2019 and 2024. This mixed-methods design

enabled the analysis to trace how CBET evolved in Hoa Bac, capturing both emerging achievements and the persistent trade-offs noted in the literature, including tensions between conservation and livelihoods (Buckley, 2012), cultural preservation and market demands (Cohen, 1988), and tourism growth and limited public infrastructure (Hall, 2008). Overall, the findings illustrate how strengthened local capacities, greater social cohesion, and balanced investments across community capitals can support the development of resilient and sustainable ecotourism models.

Data collection consisted of:

- ▶ **Community workshops** held in Hoa Bac between 2019 and 2024, focusing on tourism planning, capacity development and cultural preservation,
- ▶ **Semi-structured interviews** with cooperative members, local leaders, government officials and farmers,
- ▶ **Surveys** conducted with residents and homestay operators to assess income diversification, skill development and tourism participation,
- ▶ **Direct observations** of ecotourism activities, community meetings and agricultural practices,
- ▶ **Participatory field activities**, including summer schools, mapping exercises and joint technical training sessions.

The authors participated directly in selected workshops, training activities and meetings, which provided in-depth insights into local processes but required reflexivity regarding the dual role of facilitation and observation. The methodological approach, therefore, combines embedded participation with analytical distance to produce a robust and nuanced understanding of CBET evolution in Hoa Bac.

The analysis draws on these diverse data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of how CBET has developed in Hoa Bac. Such mixed methods approach not only allows the identification of achievements and emerging capacities but also illuminates persistent challenges and trade-offs commonly reported in the literature (Buckley, 2012; Cohen, 1988; Hall, 2008).

### 3. Community-Based Tourism as a Catalyst for Sustainable Development

Sustainable tourism has gained increasing recognition as a development strategy that integrates economic, environmental and social objectives, particularly in rural communities where traditional livelihoods are increasingly under pressure. Unlike mass tourism, which often prioritises short-term economic gains, sustainable tourism approaches aim to balance economic development with environmental conservation and cultural preservation (McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011; Swarbrooke, 1999). Community-based tourism (CBT) represents a bottom-up approach to sustainable tourism that promotes community participation, local decision-making and equitable distribution of benefits (Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024; Thomas, Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024). In contrast to mass tourism's top-down, profit-oriented model, sustainable tourism embraces a more holistic and community-sensitive logic that values conservation, cultural integrity and equitable development (Swarbrooke, 1999; Mowforth & Munt, 2016).

CBT has emerged as a response to the risks associated with uncontrolled tourism expansion, which can lead to gentrification, resource depletion and loss of cultural identity. Instead of large-scale, externally controlled tourism investments, CBT encourages small-scale, locally managed initiatives that prioritise long-term sustainability (Prakoso, Pradipto, Roychansyah & Nugraha, 2020). This model ensures that tourism development is aligned with the needs and aspirations of local communities, reinforcing social cohesion and economic resilience.

A key feature of CBT is its reliance on local knowledge, existing community assets and participatory decision-making processes (UNEP & WTO, 2005). It involves diverse stakeholders, including local residents, governments, NGOs and the private sector, in co-designing tourism projects. The process requires extensive capacity development for all stakeholders involved, empowering communities to manage tourism in a way that strengthens their socio-economic conditions while preserving their cultural and natural heritage.

#### **4. Analysis and Evaluation of the Community Capitals in Hoa Bac**

The case of Hoa Bac in the Cu De River Valley in Central Vietnam illustrates the practical application of these theoretical foundations. Since 2019, the transition from a primarily agricultural economy to a diversified ecotourism model has been facilitated by strategic investments in community-based initiatives, conservation programmes, infrastructure development executed by the local government and the development of capacities in community leadership and self-governance that promote local entrepreneurship. This transformation aligns with the broader objectives of CBT by ensuring that tourism serves as a tool for community empowerment rather than as an extractive industry controlled by external interests (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021).

The study presented here builds on previous research on CBT (Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024) to examine the evolution of sustainable tourism in Hoa Bac, assessing its impact on local economic structures, environmental conservation efforts and cultural revitalisation. By using the Community Capitals Framework (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2018), this analysis provides a comprehensive perspective on how different forms of capital, namely natural, cultural, human, social, financial and built, interact to shape the development of sustainable tourism. Through this approach, the research offers insights into both the opportunities and the challenges associated with CBT implementation, contributing to broader discussions on best practices for community-led tourism development.

##### **4.1. Natural Capital: Conservation and Livelihoods in Sustainable Tourism**

Natural capital, including forests, water bodies, biodiversity and soil quality, constitutes both the ecological foundation and the primary tourism asset in community-based ecotourism, and is essential for sustainable tourism in rural areas (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2018). In community-based ecotourism (CBET), these resources serve both as attractions and as assets requiring careful management to prevent degradation (Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024; Spenceley, 2008). Research indicates that ecotourism can promote environmental protection by fostering conservation awareness and providing economic alternatives to unsustainable resource extraction (Buckley, 2012). However, poorly managed tourism can also accelerate resource depletion, leading to ecosystem degradation (Hall, 2008). While conservation measures protect natural assets, they may impose restrictions on traditional livelihood activities, particularly those reliant on forest resources, creating socio-economic trade-offs for local populations (Giampiccoli, Mtapuri & Dłużewska, 2020).

Hoa Bac Commune, situated in a biodiverse upland area that also functions as a freshwater reservoir for Da Nang City, presents a case where these tensions are manifest. In 2019, the initial assessment revealed severe degradation caused by the widespread cultivation of fast-growing acacia for timber, which contributed to habitat fragmentation, species loss and topsoil erosion (Fig. 1). Similar patterns in Vietnam's uplands have been linked empirically to plantation-driven soil degradation and declining biodiversity (Hoang et al., 2020; Wezel,

Luibrand & Le Quoc Thanh, 2002). This unsustainable land use undermined the region's long-term potential as a nature-based tourism destination. In response, the emplement! Project introduced a set of integrated conservation strategies, including the promotion of biodiversity-friendly agroforestry models and the revalorisation of the forest as an asset in ecotourism activities. Agroforestry has been shown to improve soil conservation and long-term income stability in Vietnam's uplands, providing a viable and sustainable alternative to monoculture plantations (Wezel, Luibrand & Le Quoc Thanh, 2002).



**Fig. 1.** Forest degradation by unsustainable acacia cultivation at the upper reaches of the Cu De river © The authors

By 2022, conservation projects and agroforestry initiatives had gained momentum, enabling some farmers to implement agroforestry pilot projects that aimed at reducing reliance on acacia while contributing to habitat restoration and income generation. By 2024, these efforts were integrated into community-based ecotourism strategies, with sustainable forestry gaining wider acceptance and the Hoa Bac Cooperative launching soil and water conservation initiatives to mitigate erosion and protect water resources



**Fig. 2.** Natural forest and biodiversity as an asset for ecotourism in the Cu De River Valley © The authors

(Fig. 2). A key trade-off exists between transitioning from acacia plantations to agroforestry and maintaining economic stability. While agroforestry supports long-term sustainability, the shift requires significant investment in training and land restructuring, with a delayed return on investment. Tourism offers an alternative income source, but its seasonal fluctuations create economic uncertainty, leaving many residents hesitant to abandon traditional land-use practices (Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024).

Despite the progress, reconciling environmental preservation objectives with economic growth remains a challenge. Increased tourist activity, coupled with slow infrastructure upgrades, has intensified environmental pressures, manifested in soil erosion and habitat disturbance. Tourism development has similarly been shown to increase land-use pressures and ecosystem disturbance in upland Vietnam (Hoang et al., 2020). Sustaining conservation programmes requires long-term community commitment, funding and technical expertise, which are difficult to secure in an agriculture-dependent economy (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2018). Tourism infrastructure, particularly homestays and visitor facilities, demands additional water resources, raising concerns about drinking water provision and wastewater management. These pressures are well documented in ecotourism destinations experiencing rapid growth (Baloch et al., 2023).

While expanded infrastructure improves access, it also risks habitat fragmentation and land-use change. Although low-impact technologies and decentralised infrastructure approaches offer mitigation potential, their high initial costs and technical demands often exceed local knowledge and financial capacities. Stricter environmental regulations may safeguard ecosystems but could also limit the economic viability of emerging tourism enterprises.

Waste and pollution further challenge sustainable tourism. Rising tourist numbers increase solid waste, plastic packaging and food waste, while inadequate waste management threatens both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems (Perkumienė, Atalay, Safaa & Grigienė, 2023). Community-based initiatives, such as composting and waste reduction programmes, have shown promise but require long-term oversight and behavioural change among residents and visitors, as well as the commitment of government actors to provide public infrastructure capable of closing the waste management cycle. Comparable community-based tourism villages elsewhere have shown that decentralised, community-led waste systems can succeed only with sustained participation and institutional support (Damayanti, Tyas & Ningtyas, 2022). The challenge lies in balancing tourism growth with effective waste management to preserve natural attractions while sustaining the local economy.

#### **4.2. Cultural Capital: Revitalising Heritage through Sustainable Tourism**

Cultural capital, including traditions, languages, rituals and local knowledge, is fundamental to shaping a community's identity and its appeal as a tourism destination (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2018). In sustainable tourism, cultural heritage serves both as an attraction and as a mechanism for fostering economic resilience, supporting intergenerational knowledge transfer and enabling local communities to benefit financially from tourism (Ray, 1998). Research shows that tourism-driven cultural revitalisation can strengthen local identities while preserving intangible heritage, ensuring that traditions are maintained and adapted to contemporary needs (George & Reid, 2005; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). However, cultural tourism may also lead to the commodification of traditions, altering authenticity and shifting cultural ownership away from local communities (Cohen, 1988; Shepherd, 2002). To address these risks, cultural sustainability studies emphasise the need for policies that balance economic opportunities with heritage preservation, ensuring that cultural tourism remains community-led (Su & Wall, 2014).

In Hoa Bac, the transformation of cultural capital within the community-based ecotourism framework reflects many of these global dynamics. The culture of the Co Tu people, an ethnic minority in Central Vietnam, is central to the region's identity, but integrating it into tourism presents challenges, particularly in ensuring authenticity while meeting visitor expectations (Eck, Zhang & An, 2023; Warcholik, 2023). In 2019, younger generations showed declining interest in storytelling, weaving and dance. Cultural transmission was informal, with traditions mostly practised on special occasions rather than embedded in daily life. Similar declines in cultural practice have been documented in other indigenous and minority communities engaged in tourism (McKercher & Du Cros, 2020; Smith, 2015).

By 2020, discussions emerged around integrating Co Tu cultural traditions into tourism, recognising their value for both preservation and economic empowerment of women and youth. Research indicates that structured preservation activities, such as storytelling, craft production and performances, can enhance cultural resilience and strengthen tourism-based livelihoods (Long & Bui, 2020; George & Reid, 2005). In 2021, initial tourism activities such as weaving demonstrations and traditional dance performances were introduced (Fig. 3). These early efforts encouraged community participation and aligned with studies showing that community-based cultural tourism reinforces identity and provides authentic visitor experiences (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Salazar, 2012).



**Fig. 3.** Traditional dancing performance of the Co Tu ethnic minority © The authors

By 2022, cultural capital had become a central element of community-based tourism in Hoa Bac. Training workshops led by the Danang Architecture University and the Hoa Bac Cooperative were established to teach younger generations weaving and performing arts, ensuring intergenerational knowledge transfer. The Co Tu cultural tour was launched, featuring storytelling, dance and craft workshops. This transition from informal cultural practices to organised, income-generating activities reflects patterns found in other communities where structured cultural programming supports both tourism development and cultural continuity (McKercher & Du Cros, 2020; Cole, 2006). Between 2023 and 2024, cultural tourism continued to expand, with more young Co Tu women participating in weaving and handicraft production.

Cultural exchange programmes strengthened visitor engagement and provided additional income for local artisans. However, maintaining long-term community engagement is challenging, as balancing authenticity with

tourism demands requires continuous effort (Cohen, 1988; Shepherd, 2002). A key trade-off exists between preserving traditions and adapting them for commercial appeal (Hürlemann, 2020). Artisans must therefore navigate the tension between market demands and maintaining cultural integrity (Salazar, 2012). Cultural tourism can simplify or modify traditions, such as shortening performances or adapting handicrafts to suit tourists. Producing traditional Co Tu woven brocade is time-consuming and expensive, limiting its accessibility.

By 2024, cultural tourism had become fully embedded in Hoa Bac's ecotourism strategy. A structured schedule of performances and workshops enabled easier coordination, with younger community members taking leadership roles. Digital marketing expanded the visibility of the Co Tu culture beyond the region. The weaving tradition grew in participation, ensuring skills were preserved across multiple families (Fig. 4). These developments mirror findings from global studies showing that well-managed cultural tourism can incentivise cultural preservation and encourage youth participation in heritage practices (George & Reid, 2005; Smith, 2015).



**Fig. 4.** Weaving traditions of the Co Tu ethnic minority © The authors

Ensuring community ownership of cultural tourism remains a challenge. External stakeholders such as tourism operators and government agencies often influence how cultural heritage is presented, sometimes prioritising economic outcomes over cultural sensitivity (Tian, Stoffelen & Vanclay, 2024). Maintaining community control requires strong internal organisation, consensus-building and sustained leadership. Balancing local autonomy with external support continues to be a central issue.

Through these efforts, the Co Tu community has transformed its cultural capital from a vulnerable, underutilised resource into a defining element of its tourism offer. The structured integration of cultural traditions into community-based tourism supports cultural preservation, strengthens local identity and contributes to sustainable economic development. By aligning cultural tourism with broader principles of sustainability, Hoa Bac demonstrates how heritage can become an active driver of long-term community resilience.

#### **4.3. Human Capital: Skills Development and Knowledge Transfer**

Human capital, defined as the skills, knowledge and experience possessed by individuals (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2018), plays a crucial role in the success of sustainable tourism initiatives. In rural tourism development, investment in

human capital is essential for equipping local communities with the necessary skills to manage tourism services effectively, engage with visitors and ensure long-term economic sustainability (Becker, 1993). Studies highlight that communities with higher levels of education and specialised training are better positioned to benefit from tourism, as they can provide high-quality services, adapt to changing market demands and create innovative tourism products (Sharpley & Telfer, 2014).

Human capital development in Hoa Bac followed an incremental trajectory. In 2019, the community had limited access to training opportunities related to tourism and hospitality. Most residents relied on traditional knowledge for agricultural and forestry practices, with little exposure to structured learning programmes or tourists. Ecotourism was not yet recognised as a viable income option, and the community lacked fundamental skills in hosting visitors, tour guiding or business management. These challenges align with broader research showing that rural communities often face barriers in accessing vocational training, which limits their ability to participate effectively in tourism-related activities (Cole, 2006). A key challenge in the early stages of CBET was the lack of specialised tourism training. Many community members were unfamiliar with hospitality practices, business management or digital marketing. As a result, the successful initiation of CBET relied heavily on external experts, including universities, NGOs and tourism professionals, who provided initial training and technical support. While these partnerships were essential, they also risked creating dependency on external expertise, potentially hindering long-term self-sufficiency.

By 2020, awareness-building activities introduced ecotourism as an alternative livelihood. Discussions highlighted tourism's potential to generate income while preserving cultural and natural heritage. Some community members began informal knowledge-sharing on hospitality and tourism. This early stage mirrors findings by Scheyvens & van der Watt (2021), who argue that community-based tourism must first cultivate local awareness and interest before formal training can be effective. Structured training began in 2021 through pilot programmes covering basic tourism skills, including guest hosting, storytelling and craft-making. These capacity-building efforts increased interest in tourism, and residents began learning through direct interactions with early visitors. The importance of such hands-on learning aligns with evidence showing that practical engagement is crucial for building tourism capacity in rural communities (Timothy, 2017).

By 2022, human capital development in Hoa Bac had become more structured. Training programmes led by the Community Engaged Learning Centre at Danang Architecture University (CELC-DAU) expanded to include workshops on tour guiding, hospitality services and business management. This period saw growing participation in capacity-building activities that introduced residents to the essentials of sustainable tourism, marketing and homestay operations (Fig. 5). More community members, particularly younger individuals, began to view tourism as a viable economic opportunity and took an active interest in developing new skills. These developments reflect Moscardo's (2009) argument that structured training and educational opportunities play a pivotal role in sustaining long-term community engagement in tourism. However, youth migration remained a challenge, as many younger residents left the commune for employment opportunities in urban areas, reducing the available workforce for tourism development.

In 2023, additional structured training programmes were introduced in tourism services, digital marketing and sustainable agriculture. The "Hoa Bac Ecological Agriculture and Community Tourism Cooperative" was formalised, allowing the community to access financing and government support. The cooperative coordinated training initiatives, equipping members with essential skills for managing ecotourism, including customer service and financial literacy. The cooperative model also reinforced knowledge-sharing,

ensuring that training became an ongoing process rather than a one-time activity. This evolution aligns with Tosun's (2000) argument that long-term institutional support and collaboration with external actors, such as universities, government agencies and NGOs, are essential for successful community tourism initiatives.



**Fig. 5.** Capacity development workshop led by the Community Engaged Learning Center of Danang Architecture University © The authors

By 2024, human capital development was fully integrated into Hoa Bac's CBET framework. Youth engagement increased significantly, with younger community members taking leadership roles in cultural and ecotourism activities. Those who had participated in earlier training sessions began mentoring newer participants, creating a continuous cycle of knowledge transfer that strengthened the sustainability of CBET development. The emplement! research suggests that this type of intergenerational skill-sharing is essential for the long-term success of community-based tourism projects. Through these efforts, Hoa Bac transformed its human capital from a limited and informal knowledge base into a structured and dynamic system that supports tourism and broader economic development. The integration of consistent training programmes, knowledge-sharing networks and cooperative management ensured that residents were not only equipped with relevant skills but were also active contributors to shaping the future of sustainable tourism in their community. This progression aligns with studies demonstrating that investment in human capital through tourism leads to long-term socio-economic benefits, including income diversification and reduced rural-to-urban migration.

#### 4.4. Social Capital: Strengthening Community Cooperation

Social capital, built through relationships, trust and collective action, has played a critical role in the development of community-based ecotourism in Hoa Bac. In 2019, social capital in the community was largely limited to connections between farmers and close family relations. The community lacked self-organisational structures, and neither tourism nor broader participation in rural development processes was present. Most residents operated independently, and coordination between local actors, government representatives and external stakeholders was minimal. This reflects observations by Tosun (2000), who argues that weak social capital often results in fragmented relationships and resistance to collective action, making it difficult for rural communities to manage tourism effectively.

Early discussions on forming a cooperative to oversee tourism activities began, reflecting growing awareness of the benefits of working collectively. Although formal structures had not yet been established, these conversations laid the foundation for future collaboration. Beeton (2006) notes that tourism cooperatives can provide essential frameworks for community engagement, though trust-building is required before formal governance structures can

take root. In 2021, pilot projects, such as cultural tourism events including storytelling and traditional dance performances or the implementation of decentralised infrastructure applications, helped strengthen social ties. These initiatives encouraged collective participation, demonstrating both the cultural and economic value of cooperation. This aligns with Moscardo (2009), who emphasises that early-stage engagement is vital for fostering long-term collaboration in tourism.

A major shift occurred in 2023 with the formal establishment of the Hoa Bac Cooperative. This provided a structured platform for tourism governance, facilitating collective decision-making and enabling more equitable distribution of income. The cooperative model strengthened collaboration between residents, government officials and external partners, creating clearer accountability in tourism management. Similar cooperative models in Southeast Asia have been effective in strengthening social capital by enabling communities to pool resources, access external funding and engage with government agencies (Cole, 2006). Over time, the cooperative expanded its capacity, forming specialised working groups, i.e., cultural performances, forestry management, hospitality and transportation (Fig. 6). This division of responsibilities allowed residents to contribute based on their expertise, fostering a sense of ownership in tourism development. Partnerships with academic institutions and NGOs further supported training and capacity-building, reinforcing the cooperative's role as the central coordinating body for CBET. As Simpson (2008) highlights, partnerships with external stakeholders enhance social capital by facilitating knowledge-sharing and strengthening organisational structures.



**Fig. 6.** Leading representatives of the Hoa Bac Ecological Agriculture and Community Tourism Cooperative © The authors

Studies suggest that social capital strategies emphasising leadership, transparent governance and inclusive decision-making are essential for sustaining tourism initiatives over the long term (Pretty & Ward, 2001). By 2024, social capital in Hoa Bac had matured considerably. Cooperative members were actively involved in tourism planning and decision-making. Collaboration with academic partners and networking with other rural communities supported knowledge exchange and increased tourism visibility. The community exhibited a higher level of self-organisation, with local members taking greater ownership of tourism initiatives to ensure their long-term sustainability.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain. Ensuring inclusive participation in CBET continues to be difficult, as some households benefit more directly from tourism while others rely on traditional livelihoods. This uneven distribution of benefits can lead to social tensions, particularly if tourism growth is perceived as favouring only a subset of the community. Collective decision-making can also be challenging, as differing views on tourism development, revenue-sharing, and cultural representation sometimes slow down decision-making processes.

External stakeholders supporting CBET may inadvertently influence how tourism activities are structured, creating tensions between community values and external expectations. Ensuring that tourism remains community-driven is therefore essential for maintaining social cohesion and safeguarding local ownership. While entrepreneurial tourism initiatives encourage innovation, they can also weaken cooperative structures if individual businesses prioritise short-term gains (Mohamad & Hamzah, 2013). Balancing cooperation with individual entrepreneurship is thus crucial for long-term social, economic and environmental development. Strengthening democratic decision-making within the cooperative may help reduce internal tensions, particularly as local governance structures evolve away from traditional top-down approaches.

Overall, Hoa Bac's transformation from a fragmented community into a well-organised, cooperative-driven CBET model underscores the importance of social capital in sustainable tourism. Strengthening collaboration, promoting inclusivity and balancing external support with local autonomy will be essential to maintaining a resilient tourism economy. Investment in social capital through community-based tourism has enhanced resilience, improved economic stability and contributed to long-term sustainability, echoing broader findings on the benefits of community-led tourism development.

#### 4.5. Financial Capital: Economic Resilience and Diversification

Financial capital is a fundamental pillar in the development and sustainability of community-based tourism. Investments in infrastructure promote incremental construction, business development and the emergence of community-based initiatives that contribute to wider community development (Most & Farhana, 2023). Financial security enables communities to improve services, attract visitors and reinvest in local development, making it a crucial determinant of CBT success (Santilli, 2008). Access to credit, financial stability and revenue generation from tourism activities play decisive roles in ensuring long-term economic resilience for rural communities (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2018). The financial evolution of Hoa Bac reflects these broader trends, as it transitioned from informal, underfunded initiatives to a more structured and economically viable tourism sector.

In 2019, tourism-related businesses in Hoa Bac were extremely limited. Most residents relied on agriculture, forestry and small-scale trade, with minimal investment in tourism infrastructure. Financial mechanisms to support new businesses were virtually non-existent, reflecting the common challenge in rural CBT contexts, where access to financing is constrained by limited banking services and restricted credit facilities (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). Early discussions in 2020 introduced tourism as an alternative income source, prompting some community members to explore homestay ventures. However, financial investment remained minimal, and businesses struggled to formalise operations. Research shows that financial barriers often prevent tourism expansion, limiting the ability of local entrepreneurs to scale their businesses (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). By 2021, a small number of homestays and cafés had opened, though they operated independently, often without registration or financial backing. Financial constraints in rural CBT settings often lead to a limited service quality and reduced economic benefits for local residents (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). The community continued to face difficulties securing investment, as structured financial mechanisms were still lacking. As a result, most accommodations remained small-scale, serving only a limited number of guests.

Cooperative financial models have proven effective in supporting CBT, as they allow communities to share investment risks, access joint funding opportunities and distribute tourism revenues more equitably (Zielinski, Kim, Botero & Yanes, 2020). The establishment of the Hoa Bac Ecological Agriculture and Community Tourism Cooperative marked a turning point. It introduced financial

pooling mechanisms, enabling members to share investment risks and leverage collective resources to develop tourism businesses. The cooperative model also facilitated access to external funding and government support, allowing more accommodations and cafés to register legally, upgrade facilities and enter formal markets.

By 2023, financial capital in Hoa Bac had expanded significantly. The number of homestays, cafés and tourism-related businesses increased, reflecting rising community participation in the tourism economy (Fig. 7; Fig. 8). External investment plays a critical role in strengthening financial capital for CBT, as shown in global case studies where government and NGO support improved infrastructure, training programmes and marketing capacities (Giampiccoli, Mtapuri & Dłużewska, 2020). In Hoa Bac, government support for sustainable tourism initiatives provided financial backing for local enterprises, while several accommodations obtained official land-use certificates and business licences, ensuring legal recognition and access to financial services. This shift signalled the community's transition from informal economic activities to structured and legally recognised tourism enterprises.



**Fig. 7.** New homestay in Nam Yen village ©  
The authors



**Fig. 8.** Farmstay café in Nam Yen village ©  
The authors

By 2024, financial capital in Hoa Bac had become more structured and sustainable. The cooperative facilitated joint investments, while partnerships with external organisations and the private sector created new financial opportunities. Diversifying income sources, such as expanding tourism services, selling handicrafts and developing agritourism, enhances financial resilience and reduces reliance on a single revenue stream (Spenceley, 2008). Digital marketing and e-commerce, promoted in Hoa Bac by the Danang Architecture University, have emerged as important additional tools for strengthening

financial capital in CBET, enabling small tourism businesses to reach wider audiences and improve revenue generation. Such strategies helped local businesses to attract more visitors, to increase their revenue and contribute to long-term financial viability.

Strengthening financial capital through cooperative structures, government support, and income diversification has stabilised local businesses, attracted investment and fostered long-term economic resilience. The experience of Hoa Bac aligns with broader research demonstrating that financial capital is essential for CBT sustainability, highlighting the value of cooperative financial models and diversified income strategies in achieving financial stability.

#### **4.6. Built Capital: Decentralised Sustainable Infrastructure Development for Tourism**

Built capital, which includes roads and transport systems, homestay and farmstay accommodations, sanitation facilities and public infrastructure, is essential for community-based tourism because it directly influences accessibility, visitor experience and long-term sustainability (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2018). Investments in well-planned infrastructure enhance both environmental conservation and economic benefits, enabling rural tourism destinations to develop sustainably (Sharpley & Telfer, 2014). The transformation of built capital in Hoa Bac illustrates how targeted infrastructure development can support ecotourism while balancing modernisation with environmental preservation.

Hoa Bac's built capital development played a central role in its transition from an underdeveloped tourism area to a more structured ecotourism destination. In 2019, the Cu De River Valley had minimal tourism infrastructure. Roads were unpaved, making travel difficult, particularly during the rainy season. Homestays and visitor accommodations were limited, and sanitation and waste management systems were largely underdeveloped. As noted by Beeton (2006), inadequate infrastructure restricts communities' ability to participate effectively in sustainable tourism, and this was evident in Hoa Bac's early stages. Tourism was not yet a significant economic activity, and the local economy remained dependent on subsistence agriculture and resource extraction.

Decentralised infrastructure solutions, such as small-scale water treatment systems and off-grid sanitation facilities, are widely recognised as essential for sustainable rural tourism development (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). By 2022, significant investments in road infrastructure improved accessibility within Hoa Bac, stimulating incremental self-construction and encouraging early adopters to expand accommodation services. The number of homestays increased from three in 2019 to more than fifteen, reflecting rising interest in community-based tourism. Infrastructure improvements, including sanitation upgrades and new road construction, received government support, ensuring continued investment. The focus on decentralised infrastructure, such as independent wastewater and waste management systems, demonstrated a commitment to sustainable tourism development. Decentralised wastewater treatment initiatives were launched to address sanitation concerns (Fig. 9). Sustainable infrastructure, including low-impact accommodations and composting toilets, is considered vital for balancing tourism growth with environmental protection (Weaver, 2008). New cafés and restaurants also began catering to visitors, indicating a shift towards a tourism-oriented local economy.

By 2024, Hoa Bac had made substantial progress in expanding built capital. Existing community centres were repurposed to support tourism activities, and homestays were upgraded to enhance visitor comfort. Pilot projects in waste management and sanitation, including a decentralised wastewater treatment plant, laid the groundwork for scalable, environmentally sensitive solutions. Sustainable mobility options, such as electric vehicles and bicycle rentals, were introduced to promote eco-friendly transport for visitors (Fig. 10). Capacity-building initiatives were implemented to train community members in tourism

**Fig. 9.** Pilot project of a decentralised wastewater plant with constructed wetland in Gian Bi village © The authors



**Fig. 10.** Eco-friendly tourists' transport with electric vehicle © The authors



management, facility maintenance and hospitality, ensuring that infrastructure improvements translated into long-term economic benefits. Government support and public–private partnerships played a key role in financing infrastructure projects, aligning local tourism development with broader sustainability goals.

## 5. Conclusion: Community Capitals Analysis as the Basis for Integrated Community Development

This study examined the evolution of sustainable tourism development in Hoa Bac between 2019 and 2024 through the lens of the Community Capitals Framework (CCF). By explicitly analysing changes across natural, cultural, human, social, financial and built capitals, the study addressed the research questions posed in the Introduction: namely, how different forms of community capital evolve during the implementation of community-based ecotourism (CBET), and to what extent the Hoa Bac case contributes conceptually to current debates on community-led tourism development. The analysis responds to the identified gap in the literature, which has largely focused on descriptive accounts of community-based tourism, rather than longitudinal, capital-based analyses of transformation processes in rural tourism settings. By tracing developments over five years, this research provides empirical evidence on how multi-capital transformations unfold in practice.

The findings demonstrate that CBET in Hoa Bac has not been the result of isolated interventions, but of interdependent and mutually reinforcing capital investments. Consistent with existing critiques of tourism models that prioritise economic growth alone (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010), the Hoa Bac case shows that sustainable tourism requires simultaneous attention to environmental conservation, cultural vitality, social cohesion and institutional development.

The study highlights that those investments in one form of capital, i.e., road infrastructure, are effective only when aligned with complementary efforts, such as conservation programmes, waste management solutions and capacity-building initiatives. This integrated approach not only strengthens the resilience of the tourism system but also supports long-term sustainability across all forms of capital.

The analysis also underscores the centrality of community governance structures in ensuring that CBET remains inclusive and equitable. The establishment of the Hoa Bac Cooperative enabled transparent decision-making, income distribution and conflict resolution, demonstrating how cooperative governance strengthens social capital and empowers local communities to negotiate with external actors. At the same time, the findings reveal persistent challenges, including uneven benefit distribution and the tension between collective governance and individual entrepreneurship. These issues highlight the importance of designing CBET governance models that strengthen leadership, enhance financial transparency and embed democratic decision-making processes.

Economic sustainability in Hoa Bac has been reinforced through income diversification, especially through the expansion of agritourism, handicrafts and cultural activities, echoing research on the vulnerability of rural tourism economies that depend on limited activities (Giampiccoli, Mtapuri & Dłużewska, 2020). Digital marketing and e-commerce have further strengthened financial capital by enabling local businesses to reach new markets. These developments suggest that future CBET strategies should integrate financial literacy, digital skills training and microfinance initiatives, all of which can help rural enterprises scale their activities and build economic resilience.

Environmental conservation has emerged as a foundational pillar in Hoa Bac's CBET development. The case illustrates that expanding tourism must be accompanied by adaptive environmental governance, decentralised water and sanitation systems, and community-led conservation initiatives. Similarly to findings in other rural tourism settings (Long et al., 2022), clearly defined carrying capacities, local monitoring systems and community-managed conservation programmes are essential to prevent resource depletion. Strengthening collaboration with government agencies, universities, and NGOs can further enhance technical and financial support for conservation.

Human capital development has been central to the long-term success of CBET in Hoa Bac. Training programmes focusing on hospitality, business management, and tourism operations have enabled residents to improve service quality and increase competitiveness, aligning with other research underscoring the importance of skills development in rural tourism (Zielinski, Kim, Botero & Yanes, 2020). Intergenerational knowledge transfer has ensured that traditional cultural practices are preserved while tourism offerings adapt to changing visitor expectations. Integrating formal education pathways, such as partnerships with schools and universities, can further strengthen human capital and reduce outmigration.

Decentralised infrastructure development has supported the steady growth of CBET in Hoa Bac. However, the case illustrates that infrastructure must be designed and implemented in alignment with sustainable tourism principles to avoid negative environmental and social impacts. Small-scale, eco-friendly infrastructure approaches, including off-grid sanitation systems and low-impact accommodations, offer a viable pathway for rural communities seeking to balance tourism expansion with environmental stewardship (Fig. 11). Public-private partnerships may play an important role in financing infrastructure while ensuring that local communities maintain ownership over tourism assets.

The findings from Hoa Bac contribute new insights to the theoretical literature on the Community Capitals Framework. Specifically, the study suggests that CBET contexts require a more explicit consideration of the interactions between capitals under conditions of tourism growth, seasonality, external stakeholder

influence and environmental pressures. The longitudinal evidence indicates that the “spiralling-up” effect described in the CCF literature may be incomplete for tourism settings unless political-institutional arrangements and environmental carrying capacities are integrated more explicitly into the framework. Thus, the Hoa Bac case points to the need for refining the CCF by emphasising governance dynamics and environmental thresholds as core components of capital interaction in tourism-dependent communities.



**Fig. 11.** Climate and context-adapted homestay construction in Gian Bi village © The authors

Overall, the lessons learned from Hoa Bac offer a holistic approach to designing and implementing CBET in rural areas. By integrating investments across different capitals, rural communities can develop tourism strategies that foster economic resilience, social inclusion and environmental stewardship. A well-structured CBET model ensures that tourism functions as a tool for sustainable rural development rather than an extractive industry controlled by external actors. Through participatory governance, diversified income streams, capacity-building programmes and conservation efforts, communities can build self-sustaining tourism economies that contribute to long-term local prosperity.

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