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# Economic Growth, Social Justice and Cultural Tourism in Minority Communities: Evidence from Vietnam, Bangladesh and Indonesia

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## Abstract

Tourism is widely considered a green industry because it causes relatively little pollution while having the potential to generate high economic returns. It plays an important role as a comprehensive economic sector by creating employment, generating income, and promoting the development of related industries. It also helps preserve culture, protect the environment, enhance spiritual well-being, and strengthen exchanges and friendship among countries. Furthermore, tourism is an effective instrument for promoting a country's image to the international community. Vietnam, Indonesia, and Bangladesh possess many beautiful natural landscapes and long-standing traditional cultures, which

provide favorable conditions for tourism development. However, tourism development in ethnic minority areas currently faces several challenges. These include uneven profit distribution, the commercialization of traditional values, and insufficient attention to the voices of local communities. From a political economy perspective, this research proposes economic and policy-oriented solutions with the aim of supporting stronger and more equitable cultural tourism development in these countries.

**Keywords:** cultural tourism, minority communities, political economy, benefit distribution, inequality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a comprehensive economic sector that has become increasingly important for socio-economic development. The development of tourism contributes to economic restructuring, generates national budget revenue, attracts investment capital, and facilitates on-site exports, thereby positively influencing the development of related economic sectors. Tourism also contributes to poverty reduction, creates employment opportunities, and provides regular income for workers in various regions. From a social perspective, tourism serves people's needs for rest, recreation, learning, and cultural experience. This is a very common need; as the standard of living rises, the demand for tourism also increases. At present, there are many types of tourism worldwide, including cultural tourism. This form of tourism is especially important in developing regions such as Southeast Asia. Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Indonesia share similar advantages in developing cultural tourism. All three countries have numerous ethnic minority communities, and their diverse cultures are well suited to sustainable tourism development, especially in ethnic minority areas. Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with more than 53 ethnic minority groups. For Vietnam, tourism is considered one of the three key economic sectors, receiving significant investment, developing continuously, and making positive contributions to the national economy. Similarly, Bangladesh has more than 45 ethnic minority groups. Indonesia has more than 300 ethnic groups distributed across thousands of islands. In these countries, tourism has been viewed as a way to reduce poverty and develop a green, clean, and sustainable economy. According to the research [1], tourism can help narrow the gap between rich and poor and contribute to improving people's lives.

The governments of all three countries have implemented a series of policies and programs to promote community-based cultural tourism. In Vietnam, there is a national target program for socio-economic development in ethnic minority areas [2]. To institutionalize the provisions of the 2017 Tourism Law and the guiding documents of the Central Government, timely and compliant tourism development plans, programs, and other relevant guiding documents have been issued. These documents serve as a basis for state management, guide organizations and businesses in implementation, and create favorable conditions for tourism development. Most recently, Program No. 02-CTr/TU, dated March 17, 2021, was issued on promoting innovation in growth models, restructuring the economy and international integration, improving productivity, quality, efficiency, and competitiveness, and developing the capital's economy rapidly and sustainably during the 2021–2025 period.

During the period 2017–2021, many tourism products became indispensable sightseeing and entertainment destinations for Vietnamese residents, especially on weekends. Since the implementation of the 2017 Tourism Law, the People's Committee has recognized 19 tourist destinations and tourist areas at the city level. Several tourist destinations have received significant investment in infrastructure and services, attracting a large number of visitors and contributing positively to the performance of the tourism industry. From 2016 to 2019, the number of tourists visiting Vietnam increased rapidly and steadily. Notably, Vietnam has added many high-quality tourism products associated with the capital's tourism brand. The promotion and marketing activities of the capital's tourism industry have also been significantly reformed. These activities include the effective implementation of on-site promotion, cooperation agreements between the city and airlines, and cooperation agreements with 40 nations and cities to build tourism tours and inter-regional routes, thereby connecting Vietnam's tourist destinations with the rest of the country.

Bangladesh has also implemented initiatives to develop community tourism. Indonesia has been developing tourism in a comprehensive manner and has transformed Bali into a world-renowned tourism center. However, there are still many limitations in tourism development. For example, the distribution of tourism profits remains highly unequal for local communities. In Bangladesh's Sajek Valley, wealthy individuals own and operate most of the hotels, while local residents are paid very low wages [3]. In Vietnam, foreign and domestic tourism investment tends to concentrate in developed delta regions [4]. In Indonesia, similar limitations can also be observed where tourism benefits are often unevenly distributed between investors, local authorities, and minority communities.

## 2. THEORETICAL BASIS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

*Political economy approach in tourism research.* [5] pointed out that, in the distribution of tourism profits, inequality often exists between participating groups, especially between investors and local communities. [6] emphasized that tourism is always influenced by economic factors because it generates profit and is closely connected with capital accumulation. In community-based tourism, [7] pointed out that ethnic minority communities often participate in tourism activities but do not usually play a decisive or powerful role in shaping tourism development.

*Integrated analysis framework for exclusion.* Based on a synthesis of the above theories [3, 4], this study proposes an analytical framework for examining exclusion in cultural tourism development. The exclusion analysis framework in cultural tourism development among minority communities is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Exclusion analysis framework in cultural tourism development of minority communities*

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Manifestations</b>	<b>Mechanism</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
<b>Economic exclusion</b>	Unequal access to profitable opportunities from tourism; low income; auxiliary employment	Profits are shifted outward; value chains are controlled by external entities; lack of capital and credit	Economic dependence; reproduction of poverty
<b>Political exclusion</b>	Lack of voice in policymaking; formal consultation without real influence; lack of representation	Top-down decision-making process; power is concentrated in the hands of government authorities and investors	Policies do not reflect the needs of the community; loss of trust
<b>Cultural exclusion</b>	Commercialization of identity; loss of control over heritage; “performed identity”	Culture is turned into a commodity; pressure from tourist expectations	Identity erosion; generational conflict; loss of sacred meaning
<b>Institutional inequality</b>	Seemingly neutral rules and procedures give some groups a systemic advantage	Unequal distribution of investment between regions; biased evaluation standards	Spatial injustice; epistemic injustice; reproduction of inequality

The new point of this analytical framework is the addition of a fourth dimension, namely “institutional inequality”, together with two related concepts. The first concept is *spatial injustice*, which manifests itself in the imbalanced allocation of investment and resources between regions. This imbalance creates a vicious circle: areas that already have advantages receive more investment, while disadvantaged areas continue to fall further behind [8]. The second concept is *epistemic injustice* [9], which manifests itself in the absence of minority voices and minority knowledge in academic discourse and policy formation. This injustice takes two main forms: testimonial injustice, where speech is undervalued because of prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where communities lack the conceptual tools needed to express their own experiences.

The interaction among the four dimensions forms a *vicious circle of inequality*. Institutional inequality leads to economic exclusion; economic exclusion makes the community more vulnerable and leads to political exclusion; political exclusion prevents communities from protecting their culture from commercialization, resulting in cultural exclusion; and cultural decline further reinforces institutional inequality. Identifying this vicious circle is the basis for designing comprehensive policy interventions that simultaneously affect multiple dimensions of inequality.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative meta-synthesis approach. This method systematically integrates and interprets findings from multiple independent qualitative studies in order to generate new insights at a higher level of generalization [10]. This approach is consistent with the goal of building a theoretical framework for institutional inequality based on a rich body of evidence drawn from a variety of contexts.

The study follows the five-step process proposed [11]: (1) identifying research questions and selection criteria; (2) searching and screening documents; (3) conducting quality assessment; (4) extracting and analyzing data; and (5) synthesizing and interpreting the results. The search was conducted in the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases using a combination of keywords related to cultural tourism, minority communities, inequality, and the names of the three countries during the period 2015–2026. The search initially identified 312 papers; after screening, 42 studies met the inclusion criteria.

To ensure quality, the article uses the CASP criteria for qualitative research. Each study was independently reviewed by two researchers, and only studies that scored  $\geq 7$  out of 10 were retained. In the end, 38 *studies* were included in the analysis, consisting of studies on Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. Specifically, the final sample included 15 studies from Vietnam, 10 studies from Bangladesh, and 13 studies from Indonesia. These included 17 in-depth interview studies, 13 case studies, and 8 ethnographic studies.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo 14 software. Measures to ensure the validity and reliability of the meta-analysis were adopted according to the guidelines [10]. These measures included member checking with original authors, triangulation with independent policy reports, and the maintenance of a complete analysis log.

### 4. RESEARCH RESULTS

*Overview of the analyzed studies.* We conducted a meta-analysis of 38 high-quality qualitative studies on cultural tourism in Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The results revealed the current state of inequality in the distribution of benefits. The studies, published between 2015 and 2026, included 17 in-depth interview studies, 13 case studies, and 8 ethnographic studies. The majority of the studies, namely 32 out of 38, had fieldwork periods ranging from 6 months to 2 years, providing rich and reliable data. The results are presented through four main themes corresponding to the theoretical framework: economic exclusion, political exclusion, cultural exclusion, and institutional inequality.

*Economic exclusion: disproportionate benefit structure.* We found that the phenomenon of profits largely going to actors outside minority communities is common in all three countries. For example, in the Sajek Valley, Bangladesh, up to 85% of accommodations are owned by people from the city. Local people from the Tripura and Lusai communities work for low wages [3]. One resident shared: “Resorts are springing up everywhere, but they are not ours... They are from the Dhaka owners.” In Bali, Indonesia, only 25–30% of tourism revenue actually contributes to the local area, while the majority is dominated by large corporations [12]. In Sapa, Vietnam, homestays owned by ethnic minorities account for only 30% of the accommodation market. Sadly, high-value services have virtually no involvement from local people [13].

*Barriers to access to capital and credit* are an important cause of this inequality. In Vietnam, ethnic minorities face difficulties because of a lack of collateral, since collective land often does not have a red book, and only 12% of households have access to official loans [14]. In Bangladesh, minority communities do not have formal land ownership and must borrow heavily from lenders in the delta at interest rates of 10–15% per month [15].

*Lack of business capacity and market connectivity* is also a major barrier. In Indonesia, communities without online marketing skills depend heavily on intermediaries, who account for 40–50% of product value [16]. In Vietnam, many tourism cooperatives dissolve after projects end because of a lack of management skills [17].

The impact of COVID-19 has deepened inequality. In Sapa, 40% of ethnic minority homestays were permanently closed after the pandemic, compared with 15% of hotels owned by Kinh people [18].

*Political exclusion: lack of formal representation and participation.* All 38 studies noted the lack of meaningful minority voices in decision-making. Participation, if present, is usually only formal.

*Formal participation* is common in all three countries. In Lao Cai, Vietnam, people are invited to meetings, but only to hear decisions that have already been passed; there is no opportunity to discuss or criticize these decisions. A Hmong village chief said: “We were invited to a meeting, but when we arrived, all the decisions were passed... I do not know who to tell if I have an opinion” [19]. In Bali, Indonesia, strategic decisions are often shaped by the central government and large corporations, with local governments and communities involved only at the implementation stage [20].

*Violence and discrimination* in Bangladesh further exacerbate political exclusion. More than 2,900 incidents of violence against minorities were recorded between 2024 and 2025, making it impossible for them to have a voice in defending their rights [21]. A Chakma village elder shared: “They say tourism development will benefit us, but we are not consulted about anything... If we protest, they call us the enemies of development” [22].

*The lack of political representation* in tourism management agencies is a common reality. In Vietnam, the proportion of ethnic minorities in resort management boards is only 5–8%, while they account for 30–70% of the local population [23]. In Indonesia and Bangladesh, the situation is similar or even worse.

*Institutional inequality: spatial injustice and intellectual injustice.* This is the most important finding of the study, showing that the benefits from tourism seem to be concentrated in the hands of a select few. In Vietnam, 78% of international investment is concentrated in the Mekong Delta, while only 22% goes to the northern mountainous region, which is home to 85% of ethnic minorities [4]. In Indonesia, 85% of tourism investment is concentrated in Bali and Java, overlooking the enormous potential of the eastern islands [24]. Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill Tracts receive only 12% of the country’s total tourism investment [25].

These inequalities in listening to and using community insights are reflected in the lack of community voices in research and policy. In Vietnam, research shows that only 18% of international articles on community tourism mention ethnic minority areas, and these studies rarely include contributions from ethnic minority authors [4]. In Indonesia, tourism revenue often flows into the pockets of wealthy city owners [26]. In Bangladesh, government policy reports often ignore issues of conflict and inequality [27].

*Cultural exclusion: commercialization and erosion of identity.* Minority communities must protect their identities from commercialization. The commercialization of rituals is becoming increasingly common. In Bali, Indonesia, sacred dances are shortened, simplified, and performed daily, thereby losing their spiritual significance. They become tools for making money. A cultural researcher in Bali shared with us: “Cultural festivals become entertainment programs. The younger generation only knows how to perform and make money from them, without understanding the profound meaning of these traditional values” [28]. In Son La, Vietnam, the Xoe and Sap dances are frequently performed for tourists. A Thai village elder said: “Young people dance but do not understand the meaning. They dance for money, not for spirituality” [29]. In Ha Giang, Vietnam, many homestays are built with modern architecture. This creates staged and artificial cultural experiences, misleading tourists about local culture [30].

However, communities also have ways to protect their traditional values. In Indonesia, the Tengger community has built a “cultural buffer zone”. There, they clearly distinguish which rituals are accessible to tourists and which are reserved only for the local community [31].

*The vicious circle of inequality.* The four forms of exclusion do not exist independently; rather, they are intertwined and reinforce each other, forming a vicious circle. Institutional inequality, especially unbalanced investment allocation,

leads to economic exclusion through lack of capital and lack of opportunity. Economic exclusion makes the community vulnerable and without a voice, leading to political exclusion. Political exclusion makes it impossible for communities to protect their culture from commercialization, resulting in cultural exclusion. Cultural erosion undermines community cohesion, making it even more difficult for communities to struggle for a fair allocation of investment, thereby reinforcing institutional inequality. This vicious cycle explains why inequality in cultural tourism is persistent and difficult to change. It also shows that single interventions are unlikely to be effective if they do not affect multiple dimensions simultaneously.

*Exceptions and lessons learned from successful cases.* Some exceptions provide valuable lessons. *Pemuteran Cooperative, Bali, Indonesia* is a community-owned and community-managed model, with 150 members providing a variety of services. Here, 100% of the profits are retained by the community and distributed at the discretion of the general meeting of cooperative members [32]. *Lac Village, Hoa Binh, Vietnam* is a homestay model that has existed for more than 20 years thanks to community cohesion, effective cooperatives, and government support without deep intervention [33]. *The ILO-supported Khasiapunji programme in Bangladesh* has empowered communities to participate from design to operation [34]. General lessons include the following: (1) ownership and control of resources should belong to the community; (2) management capacity should be well developed; (3) there should be a truly representative organization; (4) there should be a mechanism for cultural protection; and (5) support should be appropriate but should not create dependency.

Results from 38 studies show that minority communities in the three countries face four intertwined forms of exclusion. Economic exclusion is manifested in the outward transfer of profits and barriers to access to capital. Political exclusion manifests itself in formal participation, violence, and lack of representation. Institutional inequality manifests itself in spatial injustice in investment allocation and intellectual injustice in policymaking. Cultural exclusion manifests itself in the commercialization of rituals and the erosion of identity. These four forms create a self-reinforcing vicious circle. However, successful cases show that, when empowered with three core elements, namely resource control, decision-making power, and benefit sharing, minority communities can build sustainable and equitable tourism models.

## 5. DISCUSSION

*Contradiction between economic growth and social justice.* The findings reveal a fundamental contradiction: tourism growth does not automatically lead to social justice. On the contrary, in many cases, faster growth deepens inequality when equitable distribution institutions and substantive empowerment mechanisms are absent.

The case of Sajek Valley, Bangladesh, is the clearest example. As shown in the research results, the number of tourists increased by 300% during the period 2018–2024, leading to an explosion of more than 200 accommodation establishments. However, 85% of these establishments are owned by people from the delta, while only 15–20% of tourist spending goes to local communities. This phenomenon of “shifting profits outwards” not only reproduces poverty but also exacerbates inter-ethnic tensions.

The case of Bali, Indonesia, is a prime example of the downside of rapid tourism growth. According to our research, in the first eight months of 2025 alone, Bali welcomed more than 4.6 million international tourists. This number is dozens of times greater than the local population. However, local people do not benefit proportionately from this income; the majority of the economic benefits go to large corporations. According to [12], only about 25–30% of tourism revenue is actually allocated to the local area, and the people of Bali receive very little of the overall benefits. Similarly, in Vietnam, tourism growth is also exposing inequalities within local communities. In Sapa, some wealthy families from the city own homestays and earn high incomes. Conversely, the majority of local people are involved only in supplementary work with precarious and unstable incomes [13].

*The intertwining of forms of exclusion and the vicious cycle of inequality.* The addition and verification of the two concepts of “spatial inequality” and “intellectual inequality” within the political economy analysis framework of tourism is an important theoretical contribution. [8] concept of “spatial inequality” refers to the unequal distribution of investment and resources between regions. Evidence from the research results shows that this phenomenon is prevalent in all three countries. In Vietnam, 78% of international investment resources are concentrated in the Mekong Delta, with only 22% going to the northern mountainous region, which is home to 85% of ethnic minorities [4]. Spatial inequality causes disadvantaged regions to fall further behind because of the lack of investment. To overcome this situation, a policy of actively investing in disadvantaged areas is needed [9].

Inequality also occurs when communities lack the power to speak out against the injustices they face. Evaluation criteria such as the number of tourists or tourism revenue do not accurately reflect the values that the community cherishes. Therefore, the study concludes that priority should be given to activities that involve community participation. Simultaneously, bottom-up criteria for evaluating success must be developed, and the consultation process must be redesigned to ensure that the community’s voice is truly heard by the state and relevant authorities.

*From formal participation to substantive empowerment.* The participation of local minority communities means that they must have a genuine voice. If they are “consulted” but their opinions are not answered, or if they are given responsibility but

are not empowered to make decisions, or if they participate but do not receive commensurate benefits, then that consultation is merely a formality. Genuine empowerment requires three elements to be ensured simultaneously. First, the community must have the right to own or manage tourism resources. In Pemuteran, the cooperative is community-owned, and 100% of the profits remain local [32]. Second, the community must have the right to participate in the decision-making process at all stages, from planning to implementation and monitoring. In Lac village, the people-elected cooperative has a decisive voice on pricing, labor allocation, and cultural preservation [33]. Third, the community must receive the majority of the benefits and have the right to decide how those benefits are distributed.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

*Conclusion.* Through a meta-analysis of 38 high-quality qualitative studies on the relationship between economic growth and social equity in three countries, namely Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, in the development of cultural tourism, the study draws four main conclusions.

First, tourism growth inherently contains inequality. Surveys from tourism models in Sajek Valley, Bangladesh; Bali, Indonesia; and Sapa, Vietnam, show that benefits are concentrated among individuals and groups outside the community. Second, minority communities face four serious problems: lack of capital, auxiliary employment, lack of representation in government, commercialization of rituals, and inequality in the distribution of tourism profits. Third, structural inequality is reflected in two complementary concepts: spatial inequality, represented by the disproportionate allocation of investment, such as 78% going to the Mekong Delta, 85% going to Bali–Java, and the Chittagong Hills receiving only 12% of tourism investment; and knowledge inequality, reflected in the lack of community voice in research and policy, as well as externally imposed indicators of success. Fourth, empowerment is fundamentally a key solution, requiring three elements to be ensured simultaneously: control over resources, participation in decision-making at all stages, and the right to equitable benefits.

*Policy recommendations.* Firstly, a legal framework is needed to protect the rights of minority communities. The government should establish a community development fund from tourism taxes and entrust its management to the communities. These communities could use the fund to develop infrastructure or education for ethnic minorities. Alternatively, a clear mechanism for revenue sharing from major tourist areas could be implemented. Simultaneously, preferential credit packages should be created for businesses belonging to minority communities. The state needs to develop tourism training programs tailored to local cultures. Training content should focus on practical skills such as management, negotiation, marketing, and cultural identity preservation. Priority should be given to organizing training within the communities themselves to ensure easy access and practical application. Next, support should be provided for the establishment of tourism cooperatives owned by the communities themselves. Furthermore, mechanisms for protecting intangible cultural heritage need to be developed. Specifically, it is necessary to categorize which cultural elements can or should not be commercialized, and to establish codes of conduct for tourists.

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