

# Perceptions of Key Stakeholders Towards Sustainable Tourism Development: A Case Study in Mekong Delta, Vietnam

Hieu Minh VU<sup>1</sup>, Trung Minh LAM<sup>2</sup>, Sudesh PRABHAKARAN<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

Tourism is one of the key economic drivers not only in Vietnam but also in the world. This study explores the awareness and perceptions of key stakeholders such as local residents, tourism businesses, and tourists on sustainable tourism development in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches have been used with the secondary and primary data to provide insights on the subject. The secondary data is from vast sources, including the governmental department of tourism, statistical departments, annual all-level governmental reports, businesses, and others. The primary data is from the survey by questionnaires with 230 enterprises, 720 local residents, and 670 tourists and from the semi-structured and in-depth interviews conducted with local residents, businesses, tourists, local authorities' officers, and especially with 5 experts who are also stakeholders of Mekong Delta tourism. The results will help the related authorities understand the awareness and perceptions of the key stakeholders and deliver valuable information and a concrete delineated roadmap toward sustainable tourism development of the research settings.

**Keywords:** Destination Management, Stakeholders, Sustainable Tourism, Tourist, Mekong Delta, Vietnam

**JEL Classification Code:** M0, M10, Z30, Z32

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is presently recognized as one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors. The tourism industry not only generates revenues for a country and cultural wealth, but it is also one of the most important economic engines for growth and development (WTTC, 2017; Chamidah et al., 2020). As expected, economic growth is made up of many factors that, when analyzed separately, make the tourism industry more attractive. According to the WTTC (2017), tourism employs 319 million people, and it is expected that this figure will reach 421 million

by 2029. This means that tourism is not only a growing economic engine but also an employment engine in itself, since it is the industry with the best evolution in terms of job creation, just behind the manufacturing sector (Vu et al., 2020). Sustainable development - including tourism development - is the general trend of all economies. Sustainability is often related to a balanced environment. Is the process of development that satisfies the needs of the present. All of this without affecting the ability of future generations to satisfy their needs. Sustainable tourism takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities.

Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus-building. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process and it requires constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary. The Vietnam tourism industry is growing yearly, achieving many very crucial results, and serving as a key economic sector. It can be affirmed that 2019 is a very successful year for Vietnamese tourism, not only shown in the statistics on the number of

<sup>1</sup>First Author and Corresponding Author. Lecturer, Faculty of Business Administration, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam [Postal Address: 45 Nguyen Khac Nhu, Co Giang Ward, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam] Email: hieu.vm@vlu.edu.vn

<sup>2</sup>Ph.D Student, Binary Graduate School, Binary University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: lamminhtrung2010@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Business, Binary University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: sudesh@binary.edu.my

international tourists, domestic tourists, total revenue but also the titles that tourism. In 2019, the Vietnam tourism industry achieved many very important results. The whole industry has welcomed more than 18 million international visitors (an increase of 16.2% compared to 2018), served 85 million domestic tourists, with total revenue of about 720,000 billion VND. With this result, Vietnam is considered one of the 10 countries with the fastest growth in tourism in the world. The year 2019 marked the index of Vietnam's tourism competitiveness that continuously improved in the rankings of the World Economic Forum (WEF). In 3 ranking times (every 2 years), Vietnam's tourism increased by 12 places, from 75/141 position in the economy (2015) to 63/140 in 2019 (Giang, 2020).

The Mekong Delta comprises 13 provinces and cities with an area of about 40,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and a population of nearly 18 million people. The Mekong Delta has a typical ecological landscape that is characterized by plains and islands, a charming river and water, fruit trees of four seasons, combined with a long tradition of culture and history. Mekong Delta region is a leading center of production and export of rice, fruits, and seafood of the whole country; contributing to ensuring food security, bringing significant foreign exchange revenue to serve the country's development. With its own characteristics, the Mekong Delta tourism industry has determined to develop a type of river, eco-tourism, and garden tourism (Phuong, 2019).

The Mekong Delta has many tourism resources, attracting domestic and foreign tourists with river and garden tourism. According to the Mekong Delta Tourism Association, in 2019, the Mekong Delta welcomed 47 million domestic and foreign visitors, an increase of 17.5% over the previous year. The tourism revenue of the whole region reached more than 30,000 billion VND, up 25% compared to the previous year 2018 (Bien, 2020). In 2017, Mekong Delta received over 22.4 million tourists, generating a revenue of US\$ 495 million (VND 11.31 trillion). Last year, Can Tho and Kien Giang were the two most visited places in the region, with tourism income reaching US\$127.6 million (VND 2.9 trillion) and US\$201.4 million (VND 4.58 trillion) respectively. The delta tourism potential lies in areas such as ecotourism, resort, and exploration tourism. According to the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), the tourism industry has the potential to create an additional 300,000 jobs by 2025 in the region, leading to a sustainable and diversified regional economy (Das, 2018).

According to the statistics of the provinces and cities in the Mekong River Delta (Mekong Delta), due to the COVID-19 epidemic, in the first 4 months of 2020, visitors to the Mekong Delta decreased by 41.6%, guests decreased by 50%, and total revenue decreased by 42% year on year (Phuong, 2020). During the complicated outbreak of COVID-19, the Mekong Delta was considered a safe area because there were no cases in the community. However, the tourism industry in the Mekong Delta still faces many difficulties. Kien Giang province has

been a leading tourist destination in the Mekong Delta for many years, but in the first four months of 2020, Kien Giang only welcomed around 1.79 million visitors, down more than 40% over the same period and only reached 19.2% in 2020. Only 536,000 tourists stayed, in which, international visitors were 142,000 arrivals and domestic visitors were 394,000 arrivals, down by 54.7% over the same period last year. Total revenue from tourism decreased to 51.7% over the same period (Phuong, 2019).

Although the Mekong Delta has many potentials for tourism development, however, the region still has major difficulties and limitations that need to be removed for tourism development. Compared to the potential of the Mekong Delta region, the results of tourism attraction and development have not been achieved as expected, not commensurate with the potential, showing the lack of linkages and loose links, promoting promotion. Tourism promotion has not had high results in the Mekong Delta. the biggest difficulty of the Mekong Delta to develop tourism is the limited traffic connection (Mai, 2017).

Furthermore, as a service industry and by the higher requirements of the stakeholders, the service quality must be improved. To overcome these weaknesses and enhance the positive impacts of tourism especially for tourism development in a more sustainable manner, with the aim to make Mekong Delta an ideal destination, scientific and systematic studies for finding solutions and recommendations to promote the development of tourism in Vietnam are required as an urgent task in which understanding and exploring the perceptions of the key stakeholders is essential. However, to date, this kind of study does not exist. For fulfilling this gap, it calls for a scientific study and the results deliver valuable information and a concrete delineated roadmap for all destinations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Concepts of Sustainable Tourism Development (STD)

Sustainable development is the idea that human societies must live and meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The goal of sustainable development is to meet the needs of today, without compromising the needs of tomorrow. This means we cannot continue using current levels of resources as this will not leave enough for future generations. Stabilizing and reducing carbon emissions is key to living within environmental limits (WCED, 1987).

Sustainable tourism is tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities. Sustainable tourism is an industry committed to making a low impact on the environment and local culture while helping to

generate future employment for local people. The positive of sustainable tourism is to ensure that development is a positive experience for local people; tourism companies; and tourists themselves. Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems (Vu et al., 2020).

Choi and Sirakaya (2006) developed indicators to measure community tourism development (CTD) within a sustainable framework. After three rounds of discussion, the panel members reached a consensus on the following set of 125 indicators: political (32), social (28), ecological (25), economic (24), technological (3), and cultural dimensions (13) for CTD. This set of sustainable tourism indicators can serve as a starting point for devising a set of indicators at the local and regional levels.

## 2.2. Destination Management

A tourist destination requires to have a strategic approach to connect all or some separate entities to gain better destination management (Nguyen et al., 2020). Destination management is a coordinated process, where almost all aspects of a destination are managed, including marketing efforts, local resources, accommodation, activities, events, environmental concerns, tourist attractions, and transportation. Destination management defines a process that involves coordinated actions aimed to control the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions of a specific tourism territory. It should be carried out by local authorities and other tourism stakeholders in partnership, following principles of good governance. Tourism destination management has significant importance in controlling many impacts of tourism, thus ensuring its sustainability. Destination management requires the integration of different planning tools, approaches, and concepts that help shape the management and daily operation of tourism-related activities (Conaghan et al., 2015). Destination management must include the strategy formulation, stakeholders' interest representative, destination marketing, and co-ordination of some activities. Further, sustainable destination management is defined as the joint management of a destination in consideration of the concept of sustainable development and can be seen as the key tool for accomplishing sustainable tourism development (Nguyen et al., 2020).

## 2.3. Stakeholders in the Tourism Industry

Freeman (1984) defines a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” as employees, customers,

suppliers, stockholders, banks, environmentalists, government, members of the communities, governments, etc. Stakeholders are groups in connection with formal, official, or contractual relationships and have a direct economic impact or without which the organization cannot survive (Freeman, 1984).

The stakeholders in tourism destinations are local residents, local companies, media, employees, government, competitors, tourists, business associations, activists, and tourism developers (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2003). Stakeholders may include suppliers, internal staff, members, customers (including shareholders, investors, and consumers), regulators, and local and regional communities. Additionally, stakeholders may include purchasers, clients, owners, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Weaver & Lawton, 2002).

For sustainable tourism development to be successful stakeholders must be involved in the process (Byrd et al., 2009). The term “stakeholders in tourism development” includes, national governments; local governments with specific competence in tourism matters; tourism establishments and tourism enterprises, including their associations; institutions engaged in financing tourism projects; tourism employees, tourism professionals, and tourism consultants; trade unions of tourism employees; tourism education and training centers; travelers, including business travelers, and visitors to tourism destinations, sites and attractions; local populations and host communities at tourism destinations through their representatives; other juridical and natural persons having stakes in tourism development including non-governmental organizations specializing in tourism and directly involved in tourism projects and the supply of tourism services (Byrd, 2007).

To ensure that a business, whether in tourism or another industry, is effectively considering stakeholders' needs and requirements, the organization must carry out some form of stakeholder analysis. Stakeholder analysis is a process whereby key stakeholders are identified and grouped according to levels of participation, interest, and influence. The organization must then determine how best to work with and satisfy said stakeholders (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2003).

## 2.4. Relations of Stakeholders, Destination Management, and Sustainable Tourism Development

The support of tourism stakeholders is essential for the development, successful operation, and long-term sustainability of tourism. Tourism stakeholders include many different types of groups depending geographically based in the different parts of the area. However, not all

stakeholders have the same level of interest in sustainable tourism development and may be less active or not active at all. Moreover, some stakeholders are more important than others in determining the success of activities (Byrd, 2007) because the destination future can be affected by the stakeholder variety (Jamieson, 2006).

The competitive environment that global tourism operates in presents exceptional challenges for which tourism destinations are compelled to seek solutions to survive and be sustainable. The composite nature of the industry and the multiple stakeholders that are involved in producing satisfying tourism experiences and products complicate the situation for destinations in achieving and sustaining competitiveness. The success of destination competitiveness relies on the efforts of all the stakeholders that contribute to creating the total tourism experience (Chamidah et al., 2020). This makes their collaboration an essential part of sustainable tourism competitiveness (STC). STC is the ability of a destination to increase tourism yield through the growth of a profitable tourism industry that contributes to the welfare of residents while sustaining natural and cultural assets (Timur and Getz, 2008).

Tourism is an economic sector that must be approached especially due to the interlinking of all the stakeholders involved in tourism activities both those based in the tourist destination and the tourists who travel to such places. The participation of stakeholders in the decision-making process is very important for sustainable tourism development. There are a number of stakeholders who may impact directly or indirectly on tourism planning and development. They play a wide variety of roles and may sometimes have competing aims and objectives (Timur & Getz, 2008).

Yuksel et al. (1999) stated the need for stakeholder feedback as central to facilitating tourism development. Also, sustainable management of destinations is beyond the individual performance of a business, company, local authority, and other organizations. Sustainable management looks toward holistic and integrated participation of all individual performance contributing to the greater goal of the destination as a whole.

Tourism planning and development has revolved around sustainability concepts and issues. Addressing concerns on sustainability, environmental conservation, and local community involvement has become increasingly challenging. Success in developing sustainable destinations has been deemed to be a function and result of effective governance. However, tourism governance remains indistinct on the questions of how tourism stakeholders interact and how this interaction can be beneficial in achieving sustainability (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). Given that, the sustainable development implementation in tourism relies

on the involvement and interest of all stakeholders within a tourism system or a destination, the concept of stakeholders which aims to represent a possible presumption for its implementation. For its smooth and perfect implementation, it requires to have a systematic, quality, and effective management of tourism destination normally addressed as destination management or destination management of organizations.

### 3. Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used with the primary and secondary data to analyze multi-perspective of the Mekong Delta area. In terms of the qualitative approach, after searching for the related literature, the document review and analysis have been done. Later, the following approaches are used in a triangulated manner.

- 10 group interviews with local residents; 7 deep interviews with local authorities and officers of the Mekong Delta Tourism Association for exploring the insights of current status-quo, or particular issues or the hidden problems in Mekong Delta. These interviews were conducted in June 2020.
- 2 consultations with 5 experts to understand more deeply the related literature - the weaknesses and rising problems, the future development vision, etc.
- 2-month direct field observation for gaining as much as possible information (formal or informal) about local community involvement, tourism development, and local management, and study more about issues and problems in the location that may complement the shortage of information afterward.

Regarding the quantitative method, the main technique used in this study was a questionnaire survey and this survey was conducted with three groups of stakeholders: local residents, tourism businesses, and tourists (including domestic and international tourists) in the Mekong Delta area. The questionnaire content was adapted from previous studies. In suitability with the sample formula of Sakaran (2000) and Kitchin and Tate (2000), a sample size of 230 enterprises, 720 local residents, and 670 tourists has been selected using a simple random sampling technique. The respondents' anonymity and confidentiality have been assured. To validate the data collection techniques, we checked the comprehensibility and clarity of the questionnaire, for which pilot tests were conducted with 6 enterprises, 20 local residents, and 20 tourists. Data was analyzed and processed with the descriptive statistics in form of frequency table, mean, and charts.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results of Business/ Enterprises' Survey

The study is conducted with 230 businesses operating in the tourism discipline, and their characteristics are as follows: 74 or 32.17% hotels (accommodation providers), 5.65% or 36 travel service agents/ companies, 38.26% or 88 gastronomy/ foodstuff enterprises, 10% or 23 entertainment providers and 3.91% or 9 were others.

Aiming to achieve a generalized but accurate outlook and a good understanding of the business operations/ activities and the industry perspective, 100% of respondents of the business survey are owners and managers. In terms of the number of business operation status, 62.17% of businesses have run for over 4 years and 37.83% of businesses between 2 to 3 years. 86.09% of them are Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs).

Most of the businesses are developed by the local residents and originate from the family sector, thus, the survey result shows 100% of businesses employ local residents in which 84.35% of businesses employ regularly/ full-time and 15.65% employ sometimes/rarely. This shows the tourism industry in the Mekong Delta contributes enormously to society's development in the form of employment generation. The characteristics of the Mekong Delta's people here are hospitable, honest, and very rustic; they live peacefully and love life, are friendly, gentle, and emotional. Therefore, 100% of surveyed businesses are involved in public and local activities like charity programs, environmental conservations, etc. As such, in case the local authorities launch any social-cultural program, businesses will follow and support. This result is similar to the result of the interviews with other stakeholders. In contrast, most businesses state that they rarely receive the support of relevant authorities in their operations and activities. Also, the finding affirms 93.33% of the businesses are willing to participate in governmental campaigns to make Mekong Delta sustainable although their awareness and understanding of sustainable development and sustainable tourism development are very limited. Concerning this, the result shows 82% of local residents including tourism businesses do not know or have no awareness of sustainable development and sustainable tourism development or they think sustainable development and sustainable tourism development are only related to environmental issues.

In terms of practicing environmental protection measures, 100% of businesses own environmental protection policies and practices such as water usage and saving, waste management, power saving, etc. However, the practice among businesses is not the same. For instance, in travel services and food businesses, the policy implementation is very limited due to various reasons such as managers

and/or employees' attitude, etc. However, this is contrary to the disciplines of hotels especially in four or five-star hotels. Most of the related environmental protection policies are strictly implemented.

### 4.2. Results of Local Residents' Survey

The purposive sampling technique is applied to select the local residents because people living for a short time in the study area are not able to provide a holistic overview of the locality in relation to the tourism discipline. Thus, 720 local residents having a minimum of 4-year residency in the Mekong delta have been chosen. As known, when compared to other regions in Vietnam, the Mekong Delta had the lowest immigration rate and a population growth rate of 0.01% in the period 2009–2019 (Quang & Hai, 2020). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Mekong Delta tourism had increased rapidly and strongly, but 40% of the respondents do not agree and 60% agree that their main incomes are from the tourism.

However, in terms of the awareness and understanding of sustainable development and sustainable tourism development, 82% of local residents do not know or have no awareness of sustainable development and sustainable tourism development or they think sustainable development and sustainable tourism development are only related to environmental issues. The result shows 82% of respondents are *not at all familiar* or *slightly familiar* or *somewhat familiar* with the term "sustainable development; 82% of respondents are *not at all familiar* or *slightly familiar* or *somewhat familiar* with the term "sustainable tourism", 82% of respondents are *not at all familiar* or *slightly familiar* or *somewhat familiar* with the term "sustainable tourism development". As required, normally, for planning the tourism strategies, related authorities receive recommendations/suggestions of the residents on local tourism development plans or projects as a basic requirement for sustainable tourism development. The survey result shows that 91.53% of respondents did not agree that local authorities ask for their suggestions/recommendation in developing sustainable tourism (45.28% said *never*, 32.5% said *rarely*, and 13.75% said *sometimes* when asked if they have been allowed to give recommendations/suggestions to relevant authorities on local tourism development plans or projects). However, 8.47% of the respondents agreed that local authorities do ask them for suggestions/recommendations concerning local tourism development plans or projects as a basic requirement for sustainable tourism development.

Additionally, in terms of the local authorities' support to residents regarding tourism development activities, 81.11% of the respondents stated that they do *not get any supports* (particularly 30.28% said *never*,

28.19% said *rarely*, and 22.64% said *sometimes*). In contrast, the remaining respondents (*often* and *always*) stated that they get support from residents and related government authorities to participate in tourism activities. Consequently, 70.42% of the respondents were *dissatisfied*, 17.08% *agreed*, and 12.5% were *completely satisfied* with the implementation of policies or tourism projects like land acquisition policy, compensation, site-clearance, and support to employment change, etc. However, 34.72% of respondents were completely dissatisfied or and 65.28% suggested measures to develop sustainable tourism. In general, regarding tourism activities meeting the residents’ expectations, the result shows 53.06 % of respondents are completely dissatisfied, 17% of them are satisfied, 15.22% are partially satisfied and 14.72% are completely satisfied.

### 4.3. Results of Tourists’ Survey

As known, the year 2020 is called the year of the Covid 19 pandemic. International tourists are not traveling to Vietnam and most tourists traveling to Mekong Delta are domestic. Thus, the respondents for the survey are mostly domestic. The sample for the survey is 670 tourists of which 600 were domestic tourists and 70 were international tourists. The majority of the domestic tourists are from northern Vietnam, 72.08% are from the northern parts of Vietnam and 27.91% are from the southern part.

The age group of the tourists is between 18–45 years, where, 17.91% are in the age group of 18–25, 31.94% are in the age group of 26–35 years, 22.99% are in the age group of 36–45, 13.13% are in the age group of 45–55, and 14.03% are over 55 years. Hence, the related stakeholders should have programs or strategies to exploit and meet the needs and requirements of each group of tourists.

Besides, in terms of the source of destination information, the result shows many tourists (21.94%) know Mekong Delta from their friends/colleagues/relatives, the Internet (17.91%), from travel agencies (22.99%), tourism fair (7.91%), television (10.15%), leaflet/ brochures (8.96%), magazines advertisement (3.13%) and other sources (7.01%). However, the result shows that 17.91% of the tourists traveling to Mekong Delta for the 1<sup>st</sup> time, 32.09% for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time, 41.94% for the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> time, and 8.06% for the 6<sup>th</sup> or more time.

**Table 1:** The Number of Tourists as the Sample for the Study

	<i>n</i>	Ratio (%)
International	70	10.45
Domestic	600	89.55
Total	670	100

Vy (2019) stated that The East Coast region of the Mekong Delta includes Tien Giang, Ben Tre, Vinh Long, and Tra Vinh provinces. Although the region has a lot of tourism potentials, tourists and revenue from tourism activities are not commensurate with the tourism potential of each locality. Understanding the factors that the ability to attract tourists is an important issue for the exploitation and promotion of tourism strengths. The results of linear regression analysis showed that the factors affecting the tourist attractability of the East Coast of the Mekong Delta, from high to low levels of influence, are: natural factors, socio-culture factors, and support characteristics.

Thus, in term of exploring the causes of tourists paying visits to the Mekong Delta, the finding show tourist come to Mekong Delta for many purposes. 87% of tourists have combined purposes to travel to Mekong Delta. However, historical (32.09%), entertainment/shopping (26.87%), and socio-cultural (26.12%) are the most attractive factors. Besides, people (17.91%) and natural factors (14.93%) are also attractive factors for tourists to visit the Mekong Delta.

Regarding the stay length of tourists, the results depict the 2 different modes of stay length because tourists travel to a single province or multi-provinces in their trips.

- In case tourists traveling to a single province, 47.91% stay for 1 day, 41.04% for 2 or 3 days length, 9.10% stay for 4 days, 1.94% stay over 5 days. The 1-day trips are often to the province of Tien Giang, or Ben Tre, or Long An because the provinces are near to the tourist hub of Ho Chi Minh City. The 2 days and above trips are for far-off provinces such as Kien Giang, Phu Quoc islands, Can Tho, An Giang, etc.
- In case tourists traveling to multi provinces, the result shows that 100% of tourists do not prefer one day travel to Mekong Delta. As per their viewpoints, transportation takes a long time to the destination and several problems/issues must be taken care of. Hence, 32.09% stay for 2–3 days, 55.97% stay for 3–4 days, and 11.94% stay over 5 days.

However, the finding also shows a significant difference between international and domestic tourists exists. For international tourists, 100% of them wanted to explore the culture and lifestyles of the local residents. Thus, they often stay longer than domestic tourists. Besides, the result show differences in tourism spending as follows:

- For domestic tourists, the daily average spending including souvenir purchases is not high - it is around USD 50 to USD 70. For far-off provinces and longer stay, the average spending is about USD 160 to 200. For Phu Quoc island (this is a unique tour - a hub of marine activity, housing large patches of coastal ecosystems) the daily average spending is USD 100 to 130 (for

package tours organized by travel service providers). Also, in the interview result, the findings show that in the case of a single province tour, domestic tourists often travel in a group or with friends or use a tourism service provider.

- For foreign tourists, the daily average spending is also not high - it is around USD 70 to USD 80. For far-off provinces and longer stay, the average spending is about USD 250 to 350. For Phu Quoc island, the daily average spending is USD 150 to 200 (for package tours organized by travel service providers).

In terms of environmental protection, 100% of tourists are willing to keep clean and strictly follow all environmental protection measures/rules/regulations and 87% of them are willing to pay a fee to protect the environment. The findings also show 26.87% of tourists do not want to return and 15.07% of them have not decided whether they will return and 58.06% of tourists said that they would return. This suggests that the correlation between tourist satisfaction and their loyalties is relatively low. With regard to tourist satisfaction, 62.09% of domestic tourists said that they were *satisfied*. Specifically, 88.57% of international tourists *feel satisfied* and *completely satisfied* with Mekong Delta. Therefore, related stakeholders must maintain and increase the satisfaction of tourists.

However, the survey is done with local residents, tourists, and businesses to know if they are aware that political and technological factors are the cornerstones in stages of sustainable development. The finding shows experts and related authorities affirm that political factors are the most crucial factors in the process of sustainable tourism. As known, technology plays a big role in all disciplines of our society. Technology factor is considered as the competitive advantage of all organizations and sectors especially for the process of sustainable tourism development. Therefore, in the future, technological factors should impact greatly sustainable tourism development not only in Mekong Delta but in Vietnam and other countries as well (see Table 2).

#### 4.4. Results of Interviews with Local Authorities’ Officers and Field Observations

The result finds that the Mekong Delta faces many vital risks and challenges, climate change, and environmental issues which make the sea level rise and affect the region. Therefore, the Government of Vietnam has made great efforts to implement environmental protection programs to protect the area and adapt/ follow up the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and Trans-Pacific Economic Partnership (TPP) agreements on tourism and tourism development. Besides, the lack of/ shortage of high-quality human resources is a critical problem in the Mekong Delta. Most human resources have not been well trained and have not met the requirements of professional and sustainable tourism development.

According to the statistics of the Tourism Association of the Mekong Delta in 2018, more than 85% of workers in the tourism industry have not received any training. Among the trained workers, less than 1% owns certificates, about 1% has a vocational degree, more than 2% has an intermediate degree, and nearly 3% completed college, university, and have a postgraduate degree (Phuong, 2018). Also, there is the migration from provinces and cities in the Mekong Delta to Ho Chi Minh City which caused a shortage of labor in the Southwestern provinces and a series of consequences.

The above data shows that high-quality human resources are still very low, not meeting the requirements of tourism development in the Mekong Delta in the current context. Besides, the infrastructure for the tourism industry of the Mekong Delta has not yet developed, not yet met the demand for travel by road and waterway although, in comparison with the past 10 years, the road and bridge systems in the whole Mekong Delta area have been built and are quite developed. In terms of the tourism products in the Mekong Delta region, the tourism products are unique; however, in each province/ region, the products of each locality are quite similar and undeveloped due to many different factors such as the shortages of product marketing and promotion, handcrafted production, and little support from the related authorities.

**Table 2:** The Awareness of New STD’s Factors of Tourists, Businesses, and Local Residents

Stakeholders	Factor	Ratio				
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Tourists	Technological	17.31	22.39	18.06	21.94	20.30
	Political	20.30	21.94	20.60	17.76	19.40
Local residents	Technological	10.14	13.75	46.53	16.39	13.19
	Political	10.14	13.75	46.53	16.39	13.19
Businesses	Technological	14.78	6.96	49.13	12.61	16.52
	Political	8.70	26.52	43.04	11.74	10.00

#### 4.5. Discussion

Mekong Delta tourism has made great advancement, promoted its image to the world, contributed revenue to the tourism industry of Vietnam. However, the tourists and local residents are not much involved and tourism activities have not benefited the local residents. From the survey results, most tourists responded that they did not intend to return to Mekong Delta. This can pose a big problem for the tourism sector in its future development. Also, tourism products are monotonous, repetitive, and undeveloped due to many different factors such as the shortages of product marketing and promotion, handcrafted production, and little support from the related authorities.

Also, the results of this study showed a low average length of stay and lack of interest to return by tourists. Besides, most businesses are run by SMEs, or are family-run businesses, or run by local residents, therefore, the adaption and standard requirement of international integration (an increasing need of the industry) may not be met. Also, there is a lack of capital for investment and expansion, besides, limited organizational and managerial qualification. With respect to human resources, there is a lack of/ shortage of high-quality human resources, which is a critical problem in the Mekong Delta. Most human resources have not been well trained and have not met the requirements of professional and sustainable tourism development. From the observation and the interview results with the local residents, businesses, local authorities, and tourists, it is confirmed that the “foreign language issue” is the biggest challenge and foremost obstacle with most of the staff who are working in the tourism sector.

As known, one of the most crucial issues to achieve sustainable tourism development, especially in the process of tourism planning is the need to have collaboration/cooperation among stakeholders, but 70.42% of residents have responded they have not been asked for recommendations/suggestions/opinions/comments on local tourism development plans or projects. Also, the result shows 82% of local residents including tourism businesses do not know or have no awareness of sustainable development and sustainable tourism development or they think sustainable development and sustainable tourism development are only related to environmental issues.

Besides, there are very few achievements related to tourism promotion and marketing activities. As such, local authorities jointly with the Mekong Delta Tourism Association should have tourism promotion and marketing programs such as domestic and foreign fairs; publication of tourist magazines, website creation, etc. This is consistent with studies of Hall (1996), McIntosh et al. (1995), Pridham (1996), Veal (2002), Choi and Sirakaya (2006), and Scheyvens (2011).

The process of sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders and strong political leadership and in most cases, the key

function of all destination management is implemented by local authorities. In recent years, the national government has issued legislation such as Decision 593/QĐ-TTg and Resolution 120/NQ-CP that promote regional coordination in the Mekong Delta but progress has been slow. Regional and sub-regional coordination institutions have been established in the Mekong Delta by the central government and also by provincial leaders but often they overlapped in functions and are limited to activities such as information sharing and improving product quality and value chains. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability.

Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them. In addition, one of the interesting results from this study is about the difference in the viewpoints between residents and the tourism businesses on the issues of development of sustainable tourism. As expected, local residences are not willing to adopt the new measures of sustainable development when they have not perceived their benefits in the current situation. While most businesses confirmed to comply with the new program. Hence, the benefits of local residences should be direct and clear to persuade them contributing more to developing sustainable tourism. As known, education is the key to creating a sustainable planet by which nations maintain economic competitiveness and global prosperity.

Therefore, by educating the local residents and other stakeholders, Mekong Delta’s sustainable tourism development should be promoted. Moreover, all activities in relation to sustainable tourism development cannot operate properly and legally without the decisions and approvals of the Vietnam Administration. Under the condition of Vietnam, the political factor is the most crucial factor in the process of sustainable tourism. Sustainability in tourism is based upon 3 dimensions economic, socio-cultural and environmental. Sustainability in tourism is meeting the needs of today’s tourist and at the same time maintaining and protecting nature and tourist destinations, and increasing the prospects of sustainability in future. Sustainability is extremely important because the growth of tourism industry is dependent on management of economic, ecological and aesthetic constraints and social compatibility, and at the same time maintaining biodiversity, retaining cultural integrity and developing a system that supports it.

#### 5. Conclusion

Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and



consensus-building. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process and it requires constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary. The study findings show the strengths and obstacles in the process of developing sustainable tourism. The study of sustainable tourism development in the Mekong Delta is of great importance for the development of its tourism in the coming years. The first limitation of the study is the tourist survey has not been conducted in the high (peak) season and this limits the number of tourists. Second, the tourist questionnaire was distributed in English. Respondents who do not understand English were not able to complete the survey in a manner that best reflects their views. Future studies should survey in multiple languages such as Chinese, French, Spanish, and Czech.

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