

INTER-PROVINCIAL REGIONAL LINKAGES IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE MEKONG DELTA: A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

This study analyzes the current situation of regional linkages in inter-provincial tourism development in the Mekong Delta from the perspective of tourism enterprises, who directly design products and operate tours. Findings indicate positive changes such as improved infrastructure and the emergence of distinctive products; however, effectiveness remains limited due to overlapping products, inconsistent service quality, weak coordination mechanisms and insufficient information sharing. The study proposes strengthening product positioning based on local advantages, unifying service standards, establishing a regional coordination mechanism and improving human resources to enhance the sustainability of regional tourism linkages.

Keywords: regional linkage, inter-provincial tourism, tourism enterprises, Mekong Delta.

1. Introduction

The Mekong Delta is a region endowed with significant tourism potential, characterized by a dense river network, fertile orchards, distinctive mangrove ecosystems, and a rich cultural and spiritual life shaped by Kinh, Khmer, and Hoa communities. These conditions provide a solid foundation for the development of ecotourism, community-based tourism, agricultural tourism, and spiritual and cultural tourism. However, transforming these advantages into sustainable competitiveness requires close and effective cooperation among localities in product development and tour organization.

In practice, a single locality finds it difficult to develop a sufficiently diverse and in-depth product portfolio to extend visitors' length of stay, while tourism demand in the Mekong Delta is largely shaped by multi-destination travel experiences. In recent years, tourism linkage initiatives between Ho Chi Minh City and the provinces in the region have been increasingly promoted, yet their implementation remains uneven from the perspective of businesses, the actors directly responsible for designing and operating tours. Against this background, this study examines how tourism enterprises assess the effectiveness of current linkage activities and

identifies key requirements for a more substantive regional cooperation model that aligns with practical operational needs.

2. Theoretical basic and research methods

Tourism is an integrated service industry in which the tourism product is formed through the combination of multiple tangible and intangible elements associated with a destination. Middleton et al. (2009) describe the tourism product as a composite of natural landscapes, cuisine, handicrafts, and the quality of experiences shaped by human interaction and service attitude. Similarly, the Vietnam Tourism Law (2017) emphasizes that tourism products must be developed on the basis of exploiting tourism resources to meet visitors' needs for sightseeing, leisure, and experiential activities. This implies that the quality of a tourism product depends not only on available resources but also on the degree of coordination among stakeholders within the service supply chain.

In the context of an increasingly interconnected economic space, regional linkage has become essential for optimizing resources, minimizing product duplication, and enhancing competitiveness across localities. Nguyen Van Huan (2012) defines regional linkage as a process of cooperation and mutual support aimed at leveraging comparative advantages and promoting socio-economic development. For tourism, the need for linkage is even more critical, as tourism activities typically operate along routes, clusters, or thematic circuits that require strong interprovincial coordination in itinerary design, information sharing, and service standardization. Research by Nguyen Thi Duy Phuong (2016) indicates that regional linkage enables the creation of cohesive travel itineraries, allowing localities to capitalize on their distinctive strengths and develop diverse, attractive tourism chains. Complementing this perspective, Chheang (2013) argues that effective regional linkage can lengthen visitor stays, expand new travel routes, and stimulate higher tourist spending.

Notably, Le Duc Trong (2020) emphasizes that inter-regional coordination in tourism can only be effective when localities share a common development vision, are supported by a clear coordination mechanism, and ensure the

substantive participation of tourism enterprises. According to this perspective, the success of regional linkages is determined by three core factors: the clear functional differentiation of tourism products among localities, the harmonization of service quality standards across destinations, and the establishment of a stable, long-term coordination mechanism rather than reliance on short-term promotional activities. These conclusions are highly consistent with the characteristics of tourism linkage in the Mekong Delta, where tourism products are complementary within a river-based spatial context and the creation of attractive inter-provincial itineraries requires sustained cooperation among multiple localities.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the present study utilizes secondary data from the Departments of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of Can Tho City and the provinces of Dong Thap, Vinh Long, An Giang, and Ca Mau to analyze the current state of coordination in product development and interprovincial tour connectivity. A synthesis and analytical approach is employed to evaluate the level of regional tourism linkage from the perspective of enterprises, which are the primary actors responsible for product development, service coordination, and direct interaction with visitors. This approach enables the identification of existing limitations, the actual degree of cooperation among localities following administrative restructuring, and the key conditions required for the regional tourism linkage model in the Mekong Delta to operate more effectively, maintain stability, and progress toward sustainable development in the coming years.

3. Research results

3.1. Positive developments in inter-provincial tourism linkages in the Mekong Delta

From the perspective of tourism enterprises, following the administrative restructuring of provinces in the Mekong Delta, three major groups of positive changes in interprovincial tourism cooperation can be observed.

First, regional transport infrastructure has improved significantly, particularly the road networks connecting Can Tho, Vinh Long, Dong Thap, An Giang, and Ca Mau. The expansion and operation of new expressways, interprovincial

bridges, and linking corridors have considerably reduced travel time. This improvement has enabled tourism businesses to design more flexible tour programs, ranging from day trips to two-day-one-night itineraries or extended multi-destination tours. Previously, many routes were constrained by lengthy travel distances and limited connectivity, reducing the available time for sightseeing. At present, enterprises can allocate itineraries more efficiently, increase the number of stopovers, and still maintain the overall quality of the visitor experience.

Second, the distinctive tourism products of each region have become more clearly defined after the administrative reorganization, helping to reduce duplication and enabling businesses to develop complementary inter-regional tour programs. Specifically, the Vinh Long region, comprising the former provinces of Ben Tre, Vinh Long, and Tra Vinh, is characterized by garden ecotourism, community-based tourism, and Khmer cultural heritage. The Dong Thap region, formed from Tien Giang and Dong Thap, has strengthened agricultural tourism, flower tourism, and lotus-based experiential activities. The An Giang region, which includes An Giang and Kien Giang, possesses a diverse range of natural resources, from mountains and forests to coastal and island ecosystems. The Can Tho region, made up of Can Tho, Soc Trang, and Hau Giang, functions as the central urban hub of the Mekong Delta, with strengths in floating-market tourism, cuisine, and event-based tourism. The Ca Mau region, consisting of Bac Lieu and Ca Mau, leverages its mangrove forests, ecological landscapes, and southernmost national landmarks. As these product clusters become more clearly defined, tourism businesses are better able to design thematic itineraries, enhance the differentiation among destinations, and avoid repetitive experiences for visitors.

Third, tourism enterprises have become significantly more proactive in initiating and strengthening interregional cooperation. Instead of relying solely on promotional initiatives from government agencies, many businesses now independently contact and establish cooperation agreements with partners in neighboring regions. They jointly organize product surveys, share

promotional costs, develop integrated tour packages, and coordinate visitor flows according to seasonal demand. Some enterprises in Can Tho, Vinh Long, and Dong Thap have formed flexible collaboration groups that maintain regular communication through digital platforms, allowing them to support each other in allocating customers, particularly during peak seasons.

In parallel, businesses have increased direct engagement with local communities at tourism sites. Many enterprises have assisted community members in standardizing visitor reception procedures, improving food and beverage services, enhancing environmental sanitation, and developing cultural narratives to enrich visitor experiences. These efforts not only elevate product quality but also foster trust among enterprises, communities, and local authorities, thereby facilitating smoother coordination in interprovincial tour operations.

Additionally, enterprises actively participate in regional promotional activities such as tourism fairs, cultural festivals, and marketing events held in major tourism centers. These activities provide opportunities to expand partnership networks, understand market trends, and stay updated on product changes across newly consolidated regions. Many enterprises note that without such regional promotional initiatives, it would be difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of available tourism resources in neighboring provinces, making it challenging to design well-structured and innovative interregional tours.

Overall, these positive developments indicate that the foundation for regional tourism linkages in the Mekong Delta has become more clearly established. Although major breakthroughs have yet to occur, the changes provide favorable conditions for enhancing collaborative efficiency in the coming years.

3.2. Limitations observed from the perspective of tourism enterprises

Alongside the positive developments, tourism enterprises continue to encounter several structural limitations that directly affect the quality and long-term sustainability of interprovincial tourism linkages in the Mekong Delta.

The most commonly cited constraint is the high degree of product duplication among provinces.

Although each locality seeks to highlight certain unique features, in practice many tour activities remain similar: boat trips on rivers, visits to fruit orchards, traditional music performances, local handicraft demonstrations, and rustic culinary experiences. When multiple provinces develop products following the same pattern, combining them into a multi-day itinerary results in repetitive experiences. Enterprises report that tourists often perceive little differentiation between destinations, which undermines efforts to increase length of stay and encourage higher spending.

A second limitation concerns the inconsistency in service quality across provinces and among service providers. Disparities appear in accommodation standards, staff competencies, environmental hygiene, food safety practices, and the ability to coordinate experiential activities. Within the same itinerary, one destination may deliver professional, well-coordinated services, while another operates informally with limited capacity. A single weak link can diminish overall visitor satisfaction, negatively affecting both the perception of the entire tour and the reputation of the tour operator.

Third, the absence of a clearly defined regional coordination mechanism places the burden of interprovincial collaboration largely on enterprises themselves. There is currently no centralized coordinating body or shared information system capable of connecting stakeholders, offering guidance, or assisting enterprises in resolving issues that arise across provincial boundaries. Many operators note that they must independently gather information, build their own partner networks, and negotiate disputes involving pricing, service quality, or benefit sharing. This increases unnecessary transaction costs and reduces incentives to expand regional cooperation.

A fourth limitation lies in the inadequate sharing of market information. Data on visitor flows, consumer trends, and customer feedback are typically collected separately by individual provinces, with limited circulation across the region. Without access to a comprehensive regional market overview, enterprises often rely on fragmented or self-compiled information. The lack of timely and integrated data makes decision-

making - such as expanding routes, adjusting service frequency, or investing in new products - more uncertain and potentially risky.

Finally, the effectiveness of regional cooperation is still influenced by interpersonal relationships. Several enterprises acknowledge that the smoothness of collaboration often depends on personal ties between organizational leaders or between businesses and local officials, rather than on formalized and transparent mechanisms. When responsible personnel change or when provincial priorities shift, previously established agreements may be disrupted. Such instability makes it difficult to maintain progress over time and limits the sustainability of regional linkages.

4. Proposed solutions

First, regional tourism product role-mapping should be developed based on a systematic assessment of resources, cultural spaces and the development orientations of each administrative unit after the restructuring, with the goal of minimizing duplication and strengthening complementarities among localities. In this structure, the Vinh Long region can focus on garden ecotourism, community-based tourism and Khmer cultural values. The Dong Thap region is positioned to develop agricultural tourism as well as flower and lotus-based experiential products linked to seasonal characteristics. The An Giang region can capitalize on its diverse natural assets ranging from mountains and forests to coastal and island environments, thereby forming integrated routes that combine ecological tourism, spiritual tourism and marine tourism. The Can Tho region plays the role of the central hub for tourist reception and distribution, supported by its strengths in river-city tourism, floating markets, gastronomy and event tourism. The Ca Mau region has advantages in mangrove ecosystems and coastal resources, making it suitable for ecological tourism, nature discovery and experiential activities connected with the marine and forest landscapes. When the functional roles of each locality within the regional tourism value chain are clearly defined, enterprises can design coherent interprovincial itineraries more easily, diversify visitor experiences and reduce the likelihood of repetitive tour activities.

Second, it is necessary to establish and implement a unified set of minimum service standards for the entire Mekong Delta region to address inconsistencies in service quality between provinces and among different types of providers. These standards should cover fundamental requirements related to hygiene, safety, accommodation quality, service procedures, staff professionalism, and communication practices with visitors. Based on existing national tourism competency frameworks, the region can adjust the standards to suit various models such as homestays, farmstays, resorts, or community-based tourism sites, while still ensuring a consistent minimum quality threshold. Implementing these standards together with periodic inspections, classification activities, and support programs for businesses will create incentives for service improvement. Once service quality becomes more uniform across destinations, tour operators can coordinate interprovincial itineraries with greater confidence and reduce the risk of service disruptions affecting the overall visitor experience.

Third, the establishment of a dedicated Mekong Delta Tourism Coordination Board is essential to support practical and effective interprovincial cooperation. This board would not replace the regulatory functions of provincial tourism departments or local tourism associations, but act as an intermediary that harmonizes interests and minimizes fragmented implementation. Its responsibilities may include coordinating regional itineraries, organizing product assessments, publishing a shared regional events calendar, collecting and disseminating market data, and assisting in resolving operational issues between enterprises in different provinces. Transparent reporting and publicly accessible information would further enhance accountability and build trust among tourism stakeholders.

Fourth, strengthening regional human resource development is crucial, as personnel directly influence visitor experience and ensure seamless coordination within the service chain. Provinces can jointly organize interprovincial training programs covering service skills, tour guiding techniques, safety management, intercultural communication, and problem-solving. Enterprises should be involved in curriculum design to ensure training content aligns with market needs. Cross-internships, short-term staff rotations, and on-site training at community-based destinations can provide employees with exposure to diverse models across the region. Additionally, establishing annual forums that connect training institutions and businesses will enhance dialogue and ensure that educational programs reflect real industry demands. These efforts will contribute to greater consistency in service quality along regional itineraries and strengthen the human resource foundation needed to support sustainable regional tourism cooperation in the Mekong Delta.

5. Conclusion

Regional cooperation in tourism development across the Mekong Delta is a critical condition for enhancing destination competitiveness and extending visitor stays. Although recent improvements in infrastructure and enterprise-level collaboration are encouraging, the overall effectiveness of regional linkages remains limited due to duplicated products, inconsistent service quality and the absence of a unified coordinating mechanism. Tourism enterprises expect a more substantive and operational model of cooperation, grounded in clear product positioning, standardized service quality and transparent information sharing. If these solutions are implemented in a coherent and systematic manner, the Mekong Delta can establish a more sustainable and competitive interprovincial tourism ecosystem ■

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LIÊN KẾT LIÊN GIỮA CÁC TỈNH TRONG PHÁT TRIỂN DU LỊCH TẠI VÙNG ĐỒNG BẰNG SÔNG CỬU LONG TỪ GÓC NHÌN CỦA CÁC DOANH NGHIỆP DU LỊCH

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TÓM TẮT:

Nghiên cứu này nhằm đánh giá thực trạng liên kết giữa các tỉnh trong phát triển du lịch tại vùng Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long từ góc nhìn của các doanh nghiệp du lịch - những chủ thể giữ vai trò trung tâm trong thiết kế sản phẩm và tổ chức khai thác tour. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy đã có những chuyển biến tích cực, như cơ sở hạ tầng được cải thiện và sự hình thành của các sản phẩm du lịch mang tính đặc thù; tuy nhiên, hiệu quả hợp tác vùng nhìn chung vẫn còn hạn chế. Các rào cản chính bao gồm sự trùng lặp sản phẩm, chất lượng dịch vụ chưa đồng đều, cơ chế điều phối còn yếu và tình trạng chia sẻ thông tin giữa các địa phương chưa hiệu quả. Trên cơ sở đó, nghiên cứu đề xuất tăng cường định vị sản phẩm dựa trên lợi thế so sánh của từng địa phương, thống nhất tiêu chuẩn dịch vụ, xây dựng cơ chế điều phối vùng hiệu quả và nâng cao chất lượng nguồn nhân lực nhằm thúc đẩy phát triển du lịch vùng theo hướng bền vững và liên kết chặt chẽ hơn.

Từ khóa: liên kết khu vực, du lịch liên tỉnh, doanh nghiệp du lịch, Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long.