



Case Study

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An Overview of Responsible Tourism in Southeast Asia from the Perspectives of Responsible Youth Leaders



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ABSTRACT: Following the setback in the tourism industry in Southeast Asia (SEA) due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, countries are working towards minimizing the losses and damages they sustained. The concept of Responsible Tourism may offer a solution to the post-pandemic tourism industry by engaging and promoting the interests of all stakeholders, such that local communities and the natural environment are not negatively impacted by the implementation of various strategies. Using a qualitative methodology, this study identified three key priorities from engaging discussions with responsible youth leaders in SEA: 1) conserving the environment, which encompasses preserving biodiversity and reducing pollution and waste; 2) empowering women and youth; and 3) encouraging continuous education as a lifelong goal. The significance of the three priorities as solutions in the SEA context and the challenges currently faced in the region are discussed in detail.

KEYWORDS: responsible tourism; responsible youth leaders; Southeast Asia; priorities; local context; issues and challenges

Background

Tourism in Asian countries has been growing at a phenomenal rate, significantly transforming their economy, transportation, and safety. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the hard-hit tourism industry in Southeast Asia (SEA) is now looking for ways out. From promoting domestic tourism to creating travel bubbles to bringing back international travelers, all SEA countries are attempting to overcome novel challenges from the ‘novel’ coronavirus (Vichit-Vadakan, 2021). Interestingly, COVID-19 has transposed the mentality of people around the world towards travel activities. It is reported that 83% of travelers across the globe unanimously believe that sustainable travel is essential (Statista, 2021a), while 61% mentioned that COVID-19 has changed their travel decision; that is, they now want to travel more sustainably (Bratić *et al.*, 2021). The tourism sector thus is reacting actively to this shift by being more concerned about the well-being of the planet.

In this study, we propose the implementation and development of responsible tourism, which is similar yet different to sustainable tourism. Responsible tourism encompasses one's individual response to the challenges of sustainability and personal responsibility for what is consumed in a tourism destination (Goodwin, 2016). Sustainability challenges include congested traffic, demand on public places, and drug or alcohol problems, all of which damage the environment (Pan *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, over-tourism may bring disastrous impacts to a destination's local environment, culture, and heritage (Budeanu *et al.*, 2016), especially when the local community has reached its maximum level of accommodation for tourism.

Unlike sustainable tourism that focuses on the global context, responsible tourism is centered around the local context, in which each country engages in ethical behaviors or actions to address its own issues (Yusrini *et al.*, 2022). Notably, individual countries' issues and priorities may vary in terms of urgency and importance, particularly in relation to temporal and spatial differences. Ethical responsible tourism establishes a healthy and mutually beneficial relationship between tourists and the community that provides hospitality. This relationship is not stagnant but adaptive to ongoing changes, be it human-centric or nature-centric; it evolves each time a variable is introduced in the balanced interests of all tourism stakeholders, and is manifested as economic gains, responsibility towards the community, environmental well-being, and the equal distribution of resources (Tomassini & Baggio, 2021). Moreover, the concept of responsible tourism maximizes the positive impacts of sustainable tourism activities by ensuring the involvement of stakeholders at all three levels: 1) the individual level of consumers and suppliers in both the public and private sectors; 2) the community level, which is the local community as a whole; and 3) the organizational level, which includes governments and NGOs (Goodwin, 2016; Ting *et al.*, 2022).

Responsible tourism is based on long-term planning to generate not only economic benefits but also social and environmental enrichment. As a result, responsible tourism has the ability to advance urban infrastructure, upgrade the inclusivity of local contexts to universal accessibility, promote the regeneration of damaged areas, and preserve assets, culture, and natural heritage. Additionally, responsible tourism encourages mutual understanding and trust, creating a harmonious collaboration among stakeholders through which they learn and understand each other's cultures in a better way and create new community initiatives (Ting *et al.*, 2021). This results in a better place both for people to live in and for people to visit.

Significance of Responsible Tourism to Southeast Asia

SEA is a region consisting of 11 countries (i.e., Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) that are impressively diverse in religion, culture, and history. SEA is unique for being the home of not only various indigenous communities but also numerous flora and fauna that cannot be found elsewhere in the world. With such a rich diversity in culture and biosphere as well as affordable travel costs, SEA attracts over a hundred million international visitors each year; tourist numbers are expected to reach 155.4 million in the year 2022 (Fox, 2019). Accordingly, the tourism industry contributed USD 393.1 billion to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of SEA countries in 2019 alone (Statista, 2021b). It is therefore evident that SEA has an increasingly high reliance on revenue generated from the tourism industry.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the industry has taken a major hit. As of mid-March 2022, governments in many SEA countries have begun implementing measures to support and revitalize their tourism industries, both domestic and local. Their efforts suggest the mass incoming traffic of possible tourism in the near future as activities resume to pre-pandemic levels. In light of this, the concept of responsible tourism is essential to be implemented in SEA countries, as it aims to benefit the local community, create employment opportunities, preserve local culture, protect the environment, sustain economic growth, and ultimately, improve quality of life for the people as well as the other organisms inhabiting an area. Hence, a sense of responsibility and duty is crucial within each and every stakeholder to develop and recover tourism in SEA (Ting *et al.*, 2021). Such responsibility can be categorized as formal and informal; the former is enforced by legal judgment on behalf of the individual or group and the latter is assessed by moral judgment that shapes a social construct (Dodds, 2010). Therefore, collective responsibility is an extension of individual responsibility; it involves combined responsible group actions to fulfil a collective purpose, which in this case is to develop responsible tourism.

Methods

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the priorities that should be focused on to develop responsible tourism in SEA. A group of youths (n=25) from SEA countries, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand, came together to discuss responsible tourism under the Responsible Youth Leader (RYL) Program, which was a 12-week program from November 2021 to February 2022. Teams of five members were formed to deliberate on and present various topics under responsible tourism and sustainable development. From these discussions, three priorities were identified as the most urgent in the local context of SEA. Relevant literature was also reviewed to support the proposed priorities.

The main characteristics of the case study method are continuity, validity, and completeness of the data as the method deals with the social life unit and society as a whole. This case study encompassed all the life aspects of the examined social units, including past, present, and future terms, that bring positive societal changes across SEA countries. In doing so, the study sought to suggest corrections in human behaviour and well-being to produce responsible action. The present case study was thereby categorized as intrinsic, retrospective, descriptive, explanatory, and interpretive, wherein data was interpreted by developing and supporting conceptual categories.

The results of this case study were drawn based on the participants' experiences in SEA countries, whereby the diverse and in-depth information they provided led to specific and pertinent findings. The study thus provides matured knowledge that could be useful to individual and public life. Another significant strength of this case study is its rich amount of qualitative information that provides insight for further research. In future studies, detailed cross-country analysis could be done to compare and contrast the development of responsible tourism across various SEA countries, as individual countries may have unique priorities and stakeholders due to the difference in local communities.

Discussion

Based on this case study, we identified three priorities for the SEA region that need immediate and urgent attention. The first is to conserve the environment, which encompasses preserving biodiversity and reducing pollution and waste. Second, it is imperative to empower women and youths. Third, it is a priority to encourage continuous education as a lifelong goal. Both human-centric and environment-centric aspects of responsible tourism are covered by the aforementioned priorities. However, it should also be taken into consideration that each region or tourist destination may have its own localized priorities; what may work in one destination may not work in another.

Environmental conservation - preserving biodiversity

SEA is one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots. Unfortunately, Life on Land (SDG14) and Life Below Water (SDG15) remain major challenges in this region. As depicted in Figure 1, most SEA countries are showing critical decreases and stagnant trends in their SDG reports (Sachs *et al.*, 2021). They appear to be struggling in the preservation of species (United Nations, 2020), especially those in the IUCN Red List such as Bornean orangutans, Malayan sun bears, Siamese crocodiles, and Sunda pangolins (Our Better World, 2020). It is estimated that around one million animal and plant species are now threatened by extinction, while around half of all the world’s species could go extinct by 2100 (McKie, 2017; United Nations, 2019). Hence, protecting biodiversity is a dire matter; we must wisely manage available natural resources and sustain natural ecological systems upon which national economies stand and local communities rely on for their livelihood.

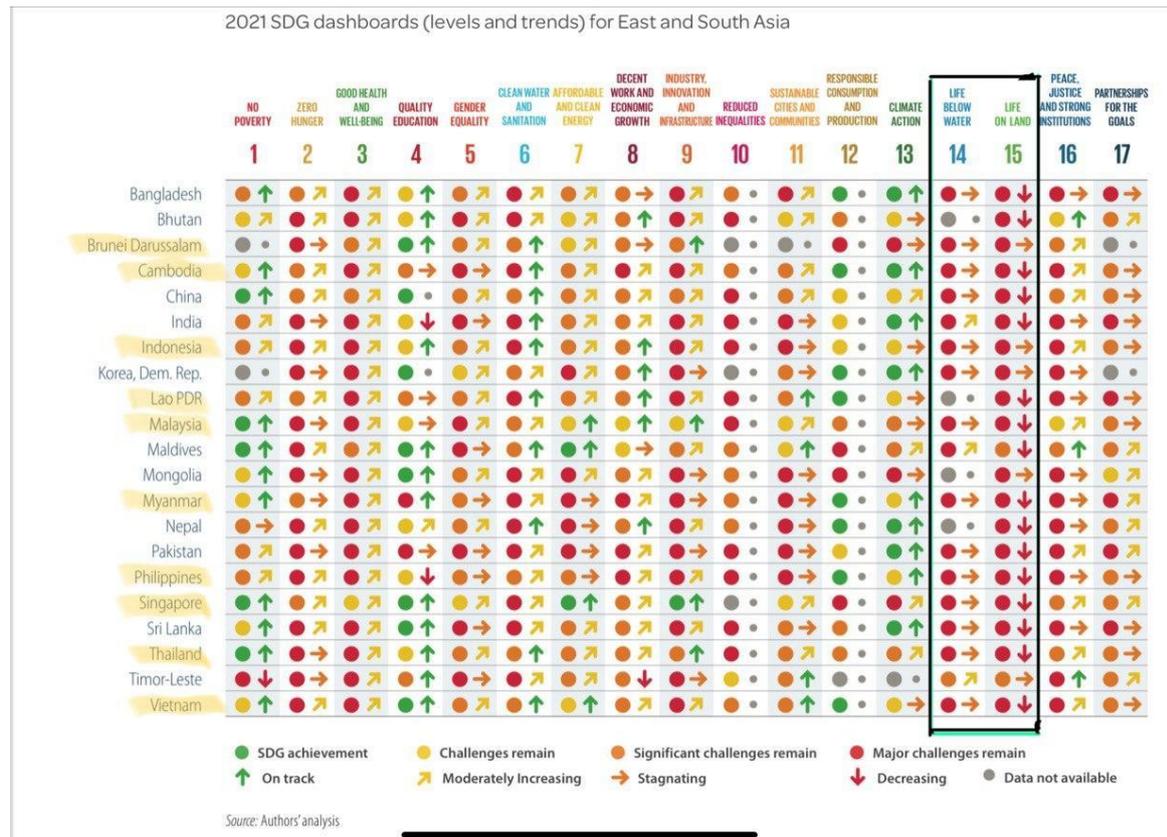


Figure 1: 2021 SDG Dashboard for East and South Asia
(Sachs *et al.*, 2021)

However, recent economic expansion has largely been pursued at the expense of the environment. With a predicted increase in the populations of SEA countries, China, and India by another 462 million (UN, 2010), the destruction of natural resources is foreseeable. Moreover, in many parts of SEA, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, deforestation due to palm oil plantation is common. Other causes of deforestation include timber demand and the expansion of subsistence farming. An alarming 5.39 million hectares of deforestation was observed in Indonesia's Sumatra and Kalimantan between 2000 and 2008; such figures have been on the rise in recent years. Further, not only forests are threatened by modern advancement in SEA; its water bodies, including major rivers and their tributaries, are affected by the discharge of untreated waste and pollutants from households, agricultural fields, industries, and townships.

Although deforestation is a major environmental issue, Indonesia's remaining forests support extensive flora and fauna biodiversity, providing vital ecosystem services to local communities. In fact, many tourist destinations in SEA attract visitors due to their unique flora and fauna. Undeniably, tourism plays a role in local biodiversity, such that it could have direct or indirect negative impacts. To illustrate, fulfilling the demand of observing wildlife up close, for instance in a zoo, consumes environmental resources like animals and plants. Though this is not always the case, capturing animals from their natural habitat and holding them in captivity is not necessarily for conservation purposes. For example, circuses train animals to perform tricks for the audience, which goes against animal rights in some countries. A detailed set of rules and regulations for the involvement of wild animals in commercial gain activities must thus be established. Unless managed at all levels, from individuals to organizations, it would be difficult to provide specific consideration to each resource. Consequently, our natural environment (e.g., rainforests, beaches, coral reefs, or heritage sites) and the wildlife inhabiting it will continue to suffer at various degrees. Responsible tourism is more crucial than ever if we hope to continue growing in the tourism sector without compromising the heritage of biodiversity.

We propose all stakeholders to develop projects as well as collaborations with biodiversity conservationists to raise public awareness with the aim of ensuring that the value of natural resources and wildlife is neither overlooked nor diminished. Plantation projects and rehabilitation areas could be set up to maintain a safe ground for wildlife to survive before releasing them back to their natural habitat. Trained staff should be employed to smoothly run such projects under the supervision of experts in the field. Finally, a win-win scenario for both tourists and endangered wildlife can be achieved by creating conservational geographic parks which tourists may visit to observe wildlife in their natural habitat; in turn, the parks would generate income for species preservation.

Environmental conservation - pollution and waste management

Almost all human activities consume resources and produce waste; as a result, these activities have the potential to pollute and heavily strain the natural environment. With 1.8 billion tourist arrivals projected across the globe by 2030, tourism is one of the major contributors to pollution and waste production (Grandcourt, 2020). Waste and pollution have long-term impacts on not only the geographical environment but also the wildlife, visitors, and communities that live in the area. In some cases, local communities are forced to relocate to other places due to the inhospitable environment resulting from pollution. This is not as easy for wildlife, which may experience drastic decreases in species population or even worse,

species extinction. In addition, water and soil pollution increases the chance of potential infectious diseases, which could develop into endemics or even pandemics without close monitoring and control.

As SEA continues to achieve economic development, the region sees a concurrent rise in energy demand and a decrease in environmental performance in general (Table 1). Meanwhile, in Vietnam and Thailand, intensive farming has contributed to severe declines in agricultural soil quality. It is estimated that about two-thirds of SEA nations (excluding Singapore) face severe land degradation due to human activities in 40% of the land. Another pressing issue is air pollution, with an estimated 65% of urban brown haze formation attributed to aerosols and partially combusted carbon, along with forest fires in tropical peat land. These issues are not only detrimental to the global climate and agriculture but also to human health. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that over one million deaths in China, India, and SEA are directly attributable to air pollution each year (WHO, 2009). In 1997, a major incidence of regional transboundary haze pollution (THP) from forest fires in Indonesia affected multiple countries, including Malaysia and Singapore, leading to a total economic loss of USD4.5 billion and air-pollution-related health costs of USD1.4 billion (EEPSEA/WWF, 2003). In response to THP, a regional haze agreement was formulated under the auspice of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2002.

Table 1. Environmental Performance Index of ASEAN member countries (Hsu & Zomer, 2016).

EPI	2016 - EPI	Global rank	10-year change (%)
Brunei Darussalam	67.89	98	67.89
Cambodia	51.24	146	17.52
Indonesia	65.85	107	10.45
Lao People's Democratic Republic	50.29	148	8.52
Malaysia	74.30	63	13.05
Myanmar	49.80	153	-
Philippines	73.70	66	16.30
Singapore	87.04	14	-0.43
Thailand	69.54	91	17.68
Viet Nam	58.50	131	20.67

The Covid-19 pandemic period witnessed significant reductions in waste and carbon emissions due to less human activity throughout various degrees of lockdown. Nonetheless, medical waste is on the rise. In March 2020 alone, there were 27% and 30% increases in medical waste compared to the previous month in Malaysia and Indonesia, respectively. It should be highlighted that the use of masks, gloves, and other protective equipment following specific guidelines is mandatory when in contact with various types of waste. This further adds to the escalating amount of medical waste. Recycling medical waste is challenging, as workers have to be extra cautious with contaminated waste. In some cases, recycling plants have been temporarily halted, such as the Bantar Gebang landfill in Indonesia (S. Sasaki, personal communication, 2020). Household waste is also on the rise with people spending more time indoors and working from home. Plastic waste, especially, is worsening due to the increased demand for food delivery. Therefore, reusability is extremely important in this case.

In the Philippines, local recycling industries utilize reusable polypropylene to produce protective suits for non-healthcare workers exposed to risk, such as policemen, firefighters, and waste-pickers (Fernandez, 2020). Efforts have also been made to ensure proper sanitization; for example, the Temasek Foundation in Singapore provided alcohol-free hand sanitizer to almost 1.5 million households through a bring-your-own-bottle scheme (Fernandez, 2020).

To address the issue of pollution and waste management, we call for SEA countries to draw support from modern technology to implement large-scale methods of managing and monitoring waste. The adoption of technology to utilize and recycle items is an innovative approach to turn waste into reusable products; at the same time, it reduces the stress on the environment to decompose waste, especially since certain materials like plastic take hundreds of years to do so. Given that access to food and shelter is still among the top priorities in many parts of the world including SEA, another benefit of recycling is the utilization of landfill for other purposes, such as agriculture and housing.

To complement technology adoption in recycling waste, the sense of responsibility and duty should be reinforced in all stakeholders by implementing strict rules and regulations for different types of waste deposits. This can range from individual littering to factories' dumping of industrial waste into nearby water or soil bodies in uncontrolled amounts or without prior waste treatment. Penalties should not be limited to fines but extend to more severe forms such as prohibiting entry, discontinuing operations, and cancelling work permits. Systematic training and expert advice are further required to educate stakeholders in appropriate ways. For consumers and suppliers, periodic workshops and talks on waste management could be introduced, along with strategically placed, eye-catching notice boards that warn them not to litter. The community, including hotel management (Musavengane, 2019), should be taught the proper way to manage waste, such as avoiding green waste, kitchen waste, and other biodegradable waste from going to landfills. Organic matter in this waste is packed with nutrients that belong back in the natural cycle, not in landfills. For instance, green waste can be processed into fertilizers while non-biodegradable materials like plastic, paper, and metal can be reduced, recycled, and reused. Hence, hotels' team-in-charge must take the responsibility to manage this initiative.

Empowering women and youth

Empowerment is a process of positive change that improves women's contingency stance and bargaining power within a patriarchal structure. It identifies different causal pathways of change, namely material, cognitive, perceptual, and relational. In short, empowerment is a process of awareness- and capacity-building leading to higher participation, greater decision-making power and control, and transformative action. Empowerment can be both individual and collective; sometimes, it involves groups of people who begin to develop their awareness and ability to organize to take action and bring about change (Rahman, 2013). Considering that a destination's local community is one of its main stakeholders, the empowerment of the community must be realized through the active participation of its women and young people, who are essential to sustainable and responsible development. Often, a settlement (e.g., a village) may be inhabited mostly by youths, women, children, and the elderly, as the men of the village could be in other places seeking better job opportunities to support their family. In such cases, the empowerment of women and youths is even more necessary as they constitute a larger percentage of the local population.

The trend of responsible travel is most popular among youth and Millennial travellers, who are increasingly aware of the consequences of human actions on the local community and the environment. This is likely due to the free flow of information that has allowed youths to be exposed to global conditions from the comforts of their own homes (Scheyvens & der Watt, 2021). In fact, social media is a main platform for youths to share their travel experiences as a responsible tourist, which results in the trending and proliferation of the idea to other youths or groups of people who enjoy traveling. It has also been reported that youths still prefer to travel even if they are on a low budget (Lim *et al.*, 2015). As such, these young people may appreciate organic interactions with the local community by staying in low-budget accommodations where they can enjoy a longer stay and more social opportunities locally. Notably, with the establishment of more environmentally conscious companies such as the Tread Right Foundation, youths are able to combine their hobby of responsible tourism with work (Jackson, 2018; Kassim & Wicken, 2018).

Empowering women is a vital and much-needed change today. Empowered women have the ability to make decisions by themselves, which is necessary for the health and social development of their families, communities, and countries. This cannot be attained without encouraging their independence, self-confidence, and self-respect. Thus, women should be given the opportunity to reach their full potential and be entitled to the same rights to participate and contribute to all aspects of society. This begins with an equal ground in education and the workforce, and expands to an equal voice in politics and other societal matters, including in developing responsible tourism. Advocating women empowerment through tourism bridges the gender gap by solving the problem of women being concentrated in the lowest paid positions in the industry. It also contributes greatly to building strong economies and achieving sustainability. Encouraging stories of SEA women include Borneo women exploiting basket weaving into a fashion hit (Hong, 2017) and three sisters from Ranau, Sabah who support their family through weaving craftsmanship in Malaysia (Bernama, 2021). With many more stories of successful women in SEA, it is strongly believed that great potential remains untapped among women as responsible leaders in the tourism sector.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) act as key drivers of economic growth, constituting 88.8% to 99.9% of all establishments and generating 51.7% to 97.2% of total employment (Hambalah, 2019). In this regard, the SEA region recognizes the critical role of women in SME entrepreneurship. Through a more structured and targeted Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) program in the region, enhancement in MSME competitiveness and resilience may be achieved. Various crucial factors are to be focused on, including the promotion of productivity, use of technology, and adoption of innovation. The next stage is to enhance market access and internationalization through support schemes, integration into global supply chains, and e-commerce growth facilitation. In order to achieve this, all ASEAN Member States need to be actively involved as stakeholders. In particular, focusing on youth and women as priorities can establish a more integrated and holistic environment for entrepreneurship. This cannot be achieved without proper training and experience; hence, online learning platforms (e.g., ASEAN Online Academy) and enhanced social capital development for MSMEs are extremely crucial (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015)

While the SEA region has seen rapid economic growth since 2000, it grew by five percent in the past 10 years alone, performing better than the East Asian and Pacific region (World Bank, 2017). As per the Framework on Equitable Economic Development in ASEAN

countries, to sustain such economic growth, financial access should be granted to marginalized groups such as less educated individuals, low-income individuals, women, youth, and rural communities. With full access to financial services, both women and youth will be empowered to achieve their full potential in economic contributions (Tjahjadi, 2018). In fact, SEA countries have taken actions to achieve this. For instance, in Indonesia, financial education programs by the Ministry of Finance, Bank of Indonesia, and the Financial Services Authority aim to teach students, children, and youth about the importance of savings. In Malaysia, young people lack savings due to poor financial knowledge and the inability to plan for financial problems. By filling this knowledge gap, more youth and women can join in developing responsible tourism, such as by establishing their own MSMEs. Some countries in SEA have already built a facilitating environment for entrepreneurship. Singapore is successfully promoting women-owned enterprises through favorable policies, programs, national laws, and customs (Gentle, 2017). Likewise, Myanmar has a women-focused entrepreneur association and a tech start-up sector that seeks to encourage young female entrepreneurs (Totten, Lwin & van Roosmalen, 2019). However, the challenges and barriers faced by youth and women in SEA should also be highlighted, including security issues, poor social support, familial constraints, and limited access to financing, technology, and relevant skills training. Raising public awareness is an important step in this situation to enable local women to transcend stereotypical gender roles. It is also important to equip them with necessary knowledge and skillsets as well as mentorship with prominent women in tourism whom they can emulate as leaders in the industry. Research collaborations and publications with development partners are other ways to increase awareness among the public.

Responsible youths are capable of leveraging new innovations to lead their community and solve issues like environmental problems. They can contribute to responsible tourism through simple innovative initiatives, such as selling locally sourced, environmentally friendly products made by local entrepreneurs to incoming tourists as local attractions (Hanafiah *et al.*, 2016; Widjojo & Yudianto, 2015). To provide such a platform for interested women and youths, government and NGOs can collaborate on projects that provide the necessary training to help these parties establish businesses. The authorities can then continue to support them via rules and regulations, allowing women and youth to explore their potential in the industry of responsible tourism. For example, the Responsible Youth Leader Program (RYLP) 2021-2022 was conducted by the Sarawak Research Society and the Southeast Asia Research Academy (SEARA) in East Asia from December 2021 to March 2022. The program received strong support from the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Sarawak, Responsible Tourism Management (REBORN), and Emerald Publishing. Overall, it has been established that volunteers, especially young leaders, aspire to travel responsibly by working to solve issues involving the environment, social justice, and poverty (Han *et al.*, 2019; One Young World, 2020). It is therefore likely that the youth will be responsible leaders in tackling contemporary issues in the tourism sector.

Education and continuous learning

Continuous learning is the practice of constantly gaining new skills and information. This can take numerous forms, ranging from formal coursework to informal social learning. It necessitates initiative and the willingness to take on new problems. Continuous learning can take place within a company or at a personal level, such as in lifelong learning. People must acquire new skills or information in order to perceive things from a different perspective and act accordingly. The same is true for responsible tourism; there are several disparities in the

local context, and in order to tackle those issues, one must examine the situation from multiple perspectives, including social, cultural, and environmental.

To achieve the aim of education and continuous learning in tourism, it is imperative to build a supportive atmosphere that encourages stakeholders to engage in such learning. This requires dedication, resources, and coaching. Although expecting all stakeholders to engage in continual learning at the same level is impractical, youths are uniquely positioned to receive such knowledge through both formal and informal education. On the other hand, social education may be the primary source of continual learning for some stakeholders, such as senior individuals in the society.

Continuous learning starts with leaders; as a result, it is critical to establish role models in society for others to emulate. When the public recognizes that the leaders among them are actively involved in and supportive of learning and development activities, an environment that supports continuous learning would be cultivated. Moreover, time and resources are the most important aspects in creating a learning environment; thus, all parties must have access to them. Unfortunately, time constraints make it difficult for stakeholders to take time away from their everyday work activities to pursue learning. As such, apart from learning by attending team workshops, trainings, and events, stakeholders should also be provided access to self-paced courses and professional resources via subscriptions or memberships in online learning platforms (e.g., Coursera and EdX). Alternatively, they can participate in mentorship or coaching opportunities that allow them to investigate and collaborate on certain societal issues.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has been one of the major initiatives in the SEA region lately, ranking fourth in the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization's (SEAMEO's) Seven Priority Areas (2015–2035). Given that TVET promotes lifelong learning and regional mobility, ASEAN's Work Plan on Education 2016–2020 aims to strengthen regional harmonization by establishing regional quality assurance and recognition of TVET, as well as by reducing the gap between the supply and demand of skilled labor. Such plans are needed to ensure that social exclusion is minimized, as lifelong learning occurs partly through deliberate non-formal, informal, and formal educational systems, but even more through intentional or unintentional aspects of day-to-day living.

Despite efforts to foster tourism development by facilitating the local community with financial and technical training, the gap remains between the tourism potential of rural areas and their lack of service management expertise. With 64% of the SEA region comprising rural populations, capacity-building is seen as a crucial step towards the development of a trained labor force. This is because these communities often lack the knowledge and methods to transform their livelihood from an agriculture-based economy to a service-based one. Innovation and tourism service development in rural areas are strongly associated with human capability development; in other words, service development determines the extent of tourism that the community, whose assets are natural scenery and preserved cultural elements, can sustainably facilitate and supply labor to.

There is a dire need to catch up with the fast-changing labor market and industrial landscape brought about by technological changes. As SEA recovers from the COVID-19 crisis, leaders of regional organizations representing governments, employers, and workers have committed to supporting lifelong learning and skills development to help the region rebuild. Upgrading

skills through lifelong learning is pivotal for competitiveness, increased investment, and economic sustainability. Strategies should be designed to motivate and incentivize workers to upskill and reskill themselves. These strategies should also outline the roles of employers in facilitating such skill development. Finally, skills should be adjusted in accordance with the green economy to enable more inclusive and sustainable growth.

After gaining the necessary training and knowledge, self-inspiration may be the most powerful force in reminding responsible young travellers and industry employees of their obligations when they travel to a new location. They will be less likely to exert a negative influence on the destination's local communities and environment as they would realize the true value of heritage, both that of nature and the local culture. With this strong sense of accountability, responsible tourism can be implemented to develop the destination for the benefit of the local people as well as the wildlife inhabiting the area.

Conclusion

In conclusion, responsible tourism is a concept that focuses on the local context and aims to involve all relevant stakeholders in both private and public sectors to generate a positive impact on the local community and environment. This impact is not limited to economic growth but also long-term development, such as conserving local flora and fauna as well as creating more job opportunities by empowering and educating women, youths, and other relevant parties in the society. The study has posited three priorities for responsible tourism development along with potential ways to implement them in the context of SEA. Ultimately, we consider environmental conservation, women and youth empowerment, and education and continuous learning as interlinked elements that reflect urgent actions to be taken by stakeholders.

The implementation of responsible tourism emphasizes sustainability, accessibility, digitalization, and cultural heritage and creativity (Gajdošík, 2018), all of which offer tourists satisfying and great experiences. In this regard, virtual reality technology is closely related with the concept of the metaverse, which allows people to enjoyably explore tourism attractions from the comfort of their own home (Ordóñez *et al.*, 2020). For example, the Qiandao Lake in China offers a virtual reality hot air balloon ride, while in SEA, Singapore conducts the Mandai Wildlife Reserve virtual walk via Zoom video call and streams it "live" onto a physical stage for presentation (Visit Singapore, 2021). Following suit, Tourism Malaysia launched the Malaysia Smart Tourism 4.0 initiative on 5 April 2018 and has embraced smart tourism as one of its strategies under the Malaysia Tourism Policy 2020-2030. The country seeks to upgrade its tourism industry to the next level by taking advantage of opportunities in the current digital era. Therefore, embracing technology is essential even though physical and social connections remain the priority for humankind.

Considering the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, continuous learning via creative tools and digitalization is essential for responsible youth leaders to engage in inclusive actions and impacts. With the pandemic still posing a threat to the tourism industry, adopting responsible tourism can introduce resilience to this crisis among local communities. The current crisis is indeed the ideal juncture to rethink and reinvent old processes, particularly by adopting modern technology and balancing it against responsible tourism actions to build a more resilient and sustainable future in SEA. Overall, this study aims to inspire more SEA

youth leaders to take action to develop and implement responsible tourism. It is noteworthy, nevertheless, that the concept of responsible tourism is not only applicable to SEA but also to the local context of any country and region dependent on the tourism industry worldwide. We thus call for stakeholders to collaborate at the international level for potentially more significant global impacts.

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