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Sustainable Tourism Recovery amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of the Phuket Sandbox Scheme

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Abstract:

As a tourism-dependent country, Thailand has suffered tremendously amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As a pioneering move to reopen the country, the Island of Phuket has begun to welcome fully vaccinated international visitors under the Phuket Sandbox Scheme since July 2021. This research gained insight into the perceived issues of reviving the tourism industry amid COVID-19 by using the Phuket Sandbox Scheme as a case study. This research undertook a focus group interview of 15 international tourists who have entered Thailand through the Phuket Sandbox Scheme in February 2022. Drawing from thematic analysis, three perceived issues have been identified, including lack of spontaneity, bureaucratic process, and lack of contingency plans. This research contributed to the existing body of knowledge and literature in the subject area of post-crisis tourism recovery and resilience. Also, this research developed a framework that shed light on the essential role played by the central government in coordinating with relevant stakeholders and parties to recover the tourism industry amid the crisis, which goes beyond the context of Phuket.

Keywords: Sandbox Scheme; tourism recovery; COVID-19 pandemic; Thailand; Phuket.

JEL Classification: Z32, Z38.

Introduction

Phuket, as one of the most popular resort islands that heavily relies on the tourism industry, has been chosen as a pilot destination in Thailand for reopening to international tourists as a way to recover the local and national economy. Thailand reopened Phuket on July 1st, 2021 under the Phuket Sandbox Scheme to a list of 67 low-risk countries around the globe, while the rest of the country was still fighting against the 3rd wave since April with an average of over 10,000 new cases each day. The Sandbox Scheme allows tourists who have received full doses of vaccines approved by the Thai government or the World Health Organization for at least two weeks to enter Phuket without quarantine. To further revitalize the tourism industry that was in desperate need, Thailand has simplified the process of international tourists entering the country, such as reducing the number of PCR tests, launching Thailand Pass, and lowering insurance premiums, even though Thailand, along with the rest of the world, still suffers from a high number of cases brought by the highly transmissible Omicron variant. Under the Sandbox Scheme, Phuket has welcomed over 331,000 tourists as of February 2022 since its inception, which has generated a total of 43 billion baht in revenue with average spending of about 55,000 baht per person per trip (Chuenniran 2022). The scheme has paved an innovative way to revive and revitalize the local tourism industry amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This research aims to gain insight into the perceived issues of recovering the tourism industry amid the COVID-19 pandemic by using the Phuket Sandbox Scheme as a case study. Also, this research develops a framework regarding the significant role played by the central government in coordinating with stakeholders and relevant parties so that other countries and/or destinations with similar situations could learn from the Phuket Sandbox Scheme. The findings also offer practical suggestions that could shape the scheme into an exemplary model to revive the tourism industry amid COVID-19.

1. Literature Review

Since the emergence of the deadly and rapidly spreading novel coronavirus in early 2020, the global economy has been wrecked. Many countries had imposed restrictions on mobility, businesses, and social gatherings and a large proportion of the world's population under lockdowns brought about unexampled supply and demand disruption, particularly in the global tourism and hospitality industry (Deb and Nafi 2020; Sigala 2020). On the supply side, travel ban, public-gathering restrictions, and cease businesses operation made a big mess of the supply of goods/services. From the demand side, massive layoffs due to strict stay-at-home regulations, illness, decreased business investments, and low household expenditures resulting from no or less income (Chudik et al. 2020) could bring many developing countries' economies to their knees (Asare and Barfi 2021).

According to the World Bank Global Economic Prospects, the global economy anticipates a 5.2% decrease in the gross domestic product (GDP) despite different governments' unprecedented monetary policy assistances (World Bank 2020). Further, International Monetary Fund envisages that the total loss to global GDP over 2020 and 2021 caused by the pandemic could be around 9 trillion USD dollars (Gopinath 2020). While the pandemic is maturing, its severity, disparate impacts, complicated transmission, and high uncertainty continue to contribute to financial squeeze and the decrease in consumer and business confidence that could lead to diminishing business investment and severe unemployment (Chudik et al. 2020).

There is no need to mention that travel and tourism is one of the worst-hit industries by the pandemic. Bianchi (2020) argued the COVID-19 pandemic has tremendously affected global tourism destinations at an unprecedented level as compared to previous disruptions, such as natural disasters or financial crises. According to World Travel & Tourism Council (2021), the travel and tourism industry as a third-largest export sector after fuel and chemical categories supported 10.6% of all jobs (334 million jobs) and accounted for 10.4% of global GDP (9,170 BN USD \$) in 2019. By the onset of the novel disease pandemic, the tourism and travel industry experienced an unrivaled fall in international tourist arrivals leading to a decreased share of GDP to 5.5% in 2020 and a drop off of 18.5% in employment, suggesting that many hotels, airlines, and travel-related businesses have been forced to closing down and started to lose revenue. Meantime, industry practitioners in the travel and tourism sector also suffered from the negative consequences of the pandemic by losing their wages or their jobs. The travel and tourism sector suffered further as data revealed a total of 87% decline in international tourist arrivals in January 2021 compared to the same month in 2020 due to countries' tightening travel restrictions in response to the crisis, the low-speed vaccination, and unequal global vaccine distribution (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2021).

Thailand, known as "The Land of Smiles", also heavily relies on the tourism and hospitality industry to drive the economy (Chancharat 2011), as the industry not only generates hundreds and millions of job opportunities but also contributes to a considerable amount of foreign exchange earnings (Wattanakuljarus and Coxhead 2008). Thailand ranked one of the most visited countries around the world before all leisure travel activities were forced to stop by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thailand attracted more than 39 million tourists in 2019, which was equivalent to THB 301 trillion in tourism revenues (Department of Tourism, 2020), making it the fortress of the Thai economy that created almost one-fifth of tourism-related jobs in the employment market (Sun, Fang and Du 2021). As one of the key driving factors of the national economy in Thailand, the tourism industry suffered tremendously when the borders were closed and international tourists have dropped by over 80% ever since (Ministry of Tourism and Sport 2020). A heavy price was paid as the lockdown measures and the border closure not only contained the virus but also eliminated domestic and international tourism-related activities. Almost 1.5 million tourism and hospitality employment opportunities were lost to the pandemic (Reuters 2021).

Given the significance of the travel and hospitality industry to countries with tourism-dependent economies, it is vital to design sustainable recovery strategies to deal with the crisis. For example, in 2002–2004, the SARS epidemic was one of the most severe epidemics in recent human history with a mortality rate of about 10%, infected 10,000 people from 29 countries and territories, and killed 774 persons worldwide (Smith 2006). Similarly, the SARS epidemic had a profound negative impact on tourism worldwide (World Travel and Tourism Council 2003). Hong Kong was affected the most by the SARS epidemic since the nation's economy heavily relies on the travel and tourism industry. The epidemic resulted in an 80% decline in Hong Kong's international tourist arrivals, hotel occupancy rate reduced almost 10–20%, and unemployment increased up to 8.6% (Pine and McKercher 2004). Besides the government investment (HK\$1 million) on restoring the destination image and returning international travelers, tourism-related businesses made a lot of special offers available such as flight tickets with 70 % below regular rates or hotel discounts up to 50 % on rooms to cope with the crisis by mid-2003 (Pine and McKercher 2004). To manage the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Thai government started by launching two stimulus packages, namely "We Travel Together" and the "Tour Tiew Thai", to boost domestic tourists (Fronde 2021). Under these schemes, Thais enjoyed a 40% discount on aircraft seats and hotel rooms. Since October 2020, Thailand has introduced "the Special Tourist Visa (STV)". Under that scheme, tourists can apply to enter Thailand for 90 days, then can be extended twice if they agree to undergo a 14-day quarantine upon arrival (Lau, Tan and Lee 2021).

Since the devastating effects of the COVID-19 far exceed any other pandemic or epidemics that the travel industry has experienced (Bianchi 2020; Uğur and Akbiyik 2020), stakeholders, such as tourism practitioners and policymakers can invest their lessons learned from previous crises and pandemics and devise innovative and pioneering recovery strategies. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 virus with endless mutation and different types of variants emerging worldwide has long-lasting impacts on international tourism demand. Therefore, some countries with a tourism-dependent economy started to grow and promote domestic tourism as a timely and critical tourism

recovery strategy; although, it was somewhat challenging to promote domestic tourism as a recovery strategy in a country with low disposable income (Woyo 2021). Therefore, for tourism-dependent countries that need international tourists to revive the local economy, greater involvement, participation, coordination, and collaboration are needed among all stakeholders, including government at all levels, business owners, local community, industry practitioners, etc., to maximize the effects of the recovery strategies (Deb and Nafi 2020). In particular, the central government plays an essential role in coordinating stakeholders and relevant parties to revive the tourism industry after the crisis (Assaf and Scuderi 2020). The study conducted in Taiwan indicated how the government support either in the form of government-sponsored loans with no interest or the government open communication by holding a daily press conference to update the public with the latest news, bringing the entire nation together, and building a strong working network among local governments to help the tourism-related businesses to deal with the devastating impact of the COVID-19 crisis (Yeh 2021).

However, travel restriction policies could not be implemented permanently due to increasing business and political pressure for lifting the travel ban in the majority of the countries for the opening of economies in the shortest possible time (Hall, Scott and Gössling 2020). Starting vaccination against COVID-19 amplified that pressure. Many countries gradually lift cross-borders restrictions and tourism slowly restarted. For instance, three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Australia and New Zealand, or China and South Korea started to launch temporary opening borders and allowing travel between their neighboring countries that have successfully curbed the infection. It is known as 'travel bubbles' or 'travel corridors' and still many countries are joining this initiative program (Locker 2020). Overall, the success of the travel bubble highly depends on strict implementation of COVID-19 testing before boarding on the flights and two-week quarantine upon arrival followed by a PCR test in the destination airport to ensure the traveler is virus-free (Dickens et al. 2020; Sharun et al. 2020). However, quarantine has been identified as one of the biggest barriers to tourism recovery as tourists do not want to spend time in quarantine when they start traveling again (International Air Transport Association 2020; Rutynskyi and Kushniruk 2020). Also, the adoption of tracking technology to trace anyone who had close contact with confirmed COVID-19 cases has been effective but controversial since people fear their freedom and privacy could be undermined by the government, and the collected data could be breached or hacked (Wnuk, Olesksy and Maison 2020).

Moving beyond the above discussion, some countries have also come up with a series of solutions that strengthens their innovation programs to increase their international arrival demand. For example, Thailand is pinning high hopes for the Phuket Sandbox Scheme as an innovative model to reduce the COVID-19 crisis impact on the island's economy and speed up the post-crisis recovery in the travel and tourism industry. By using the Sandbox Scheme as a case study, this research explores the perceived issues revolving around the innovative model for tourism recovery.

2. Methodology

Located in the Andaman Sea, Phuket was one of the most popular destinations in Thailand and received more than 13 million visitors in 2019 (Sangkaew and Zhu 2020). However, the tourism-dependent island had suffered tremendous economic losses due to the tightened border policies caused by the ongoing pandemic. It is of great necessity for Phuket to reopen to international tourists to recover the local tourism industry, boost the employment market, and revive the local economy. Thus, the Phuket Sandbox Scheme has been used as a case study to derive insights into the perceived issues regarding the innovative model for tourism recovery.

The reasons why Phuket was reopened as a pilot destination were four-fold. Firstly, Phuket has a tourism-dependent economy. According to Mr. Wangboonkongchan, the spokesman for the Center of Economic Situation Administration, "tourism was a major source of income for Phuket, normally about 450 billion baht per year. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic revenue had dropped to only 108.4 billion baht in 2020 and 5.2 billion baht in 2021. Businesses had been shuttered and people were unemployed." (Bangprapa and Chuenniran 2021b). Secondly, Phuket—The Pearl of the Andaman Sea—is the second most favored tourism destination among international tourists, offering not only seaside relaxation but also exquisite local cuisines as an awarded City of Gastronomy within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (Sangkaew and Zhu 2022). Thirdly, geographically speaking, the island of Phuket is linked to the mainland with a bridge, making it easier to control its land borders with the neighboring province. Lastly, the government of Thailand prioritized vaccine supplies to Phuket, and over 75% of the residents on the island have been vaccinated, whereas the nationwide vaccination rate remains low (Ford and Vimonsuknopparat 2021).

To be eligible for entering Phuket under the Sandbox Scheme as fully vaccinated tourists from July 1st, 2021, they must adhere to the following rules too: 1) apply for a Certificate of Entry (COE) besides their visa (if they are not from a visa-exempt country or territory); 2) pre-book their hotels from the list approved by Thailand Safety

and Health Administration, referred to as 'SHA Plus Hotels'; 3) take a PCR-test and get a negative result no more than 72 hours prior to the departure; 4) purchase COVID-19 insurance with a minimum of 100,000 USD coverage; 4) be ready to take up to four compulsory PCR-tests during their stay in Phuket depending on the length of their holidays with a total pre-paid cost of 8,000 Baht per person (Bangprapa and Chuenniran 2021a). Since then, the Sandbox Scheme has extended from Phuket to other popular destinations such as Krabi and Pattaya, etc., and the entry rules associated with the scheme have been updated from time to time based on the pandemic situation, both domestically and internationally, including shortened stayed at Sandbox destinations, newly introduced Thailand Pass to replace COE, reduced number of PCR tests, and lowered insurance coverage to accommodate the rapidly changing needs among the targeted tourists (TAT Newsroom, 2022).

Against the backdrop of the case study, this research adopted a qualitative descriptive method as it offers a straightforward way for scholars to provide answers to the research question (Sandelowski 2000). This research recruited a total of 15 international tourists who entered Thailand under the Sandbox Scheme to undertake a focus group interview in February 2022. The interview of the focus group was digitally recorded for transcription and further analysis. Research has pointed out that focus groups allow the researcher to gather spontaneous responses and quickly identify the full scope of perspectives among the participants that revolve around the research question (Powell and Single 1996). An inductive thematic analysis was undertaken to comply with the qualitative descriptive method and allow the empirical materials to present themselves (Boyatzis 1998). Firstly, the recorded focus group interview was transcribed into written texts for analysis. Secondly, the transcribed texts were read and re-read to gain familiarity. Later, these transcriptions were coded based on the objective of this research (Braun and Clark, 2006; Zhu, Duncan and Tucker 2019). Then, the codes that shared similarities were developed into themes to summarize the narratives of the participants. Three themes were developed in terms of the perceived issues within the Phuket Sandbox Scheme. The identified themes, including lack of spontaneity, bureaucratic process, and lack of contingency plans, were involved in the entire process of planning and enjoying a vacation to Phuket under the Sandbox Scheme.

3. Findings and Discussion

Lack of Spontaneity

Before the pandemic, tourists from many countries could get a visa-on-arrival or even do not need a visa to enter Thailand and they could easily be spontaneous, flexible, and hassle-free regarding their vacation itineraries. Many participants mentioned the considerable amount of paperwork involved to have a holiday in Phuket under the Sandbox Scheme. For example, one participant stated: "It takes a ton of paperwork and preparation. It takes a long time to take approval from the Thailand Pass application. It is really stressful." Another participant commented on the difficulties of reserving the required accommodation: "There does not seem to be any websites that reserve test and go hotels in Phuket (unlike Bangkok) and it is too much work to contact hotels directly to get the test and go rate. Plus, it is impossible to reserve some nights as test and go and then others at the regular rate. This system does not work"

The uncertainty and difficulty revolving around the new scheme cast a shadow over the tourism recovery model to attract international tourists back to Phuket. In the beginning, even visitors, who are from visa-exempt countries, need to apply for a COE before departure. Currently, although Thailand has simplified the pre-departure process, international tourists still need to apply for a Thailand Pass, which involves plenty of paperwork. Moreover, some participants mentioned that information about entering into the country was frequently changing with wide-spreading rumors and hearsay and it was not easy for them to obtain information through common communication channels from the embassies in their departure countries. Although Sandbox destinations are quarantine-free, these existing procedures could cause a lack of spontaneity when visitors plan their vacations, leading to lowered intention during the decision-making process and reduced satisfaction with the destination image. The finding echoes with previous literature that identified the feeling of spontaneity was closely associated with the satisfaction of the travel experience (Neal, Sirgy, and Uysal 2004). Thus, the central government of Thailand needs to better coordinate with its worldwide embassies to better smooth the preparation process and provide effective communication channels to promptly and timely address relevant issues arising from the pre-departure process.

Bureaucratic Process

The pre-departure preparation to Thailand is already stressful enough; however, the bureaucratic process that participants have witnessed and encountered in the destination has also decreased their satisfaction. One participant specifically discussed the situation of alcohol sales in restaurants and entertainment venues:

"Alcohol sales at restaurants in approved provinces have been allowed until 11 pm since January 24. Alcohol Flip-flopping from 11 pm to 1 am and back to 11 pm has shown that Phuket officialdom had no clue/feeling about

international tourism they wanted so desperately. Officialdom also blocked the chance that local entertainment outlets had to make some money they needed so much. Now people stayed home and drank at home, so bars and restaurants in Phuket lost their chances to make some money during nights. Actually, thinking about it, officials who forbade people to have a count down at midnight without a drink to toast with others around were mentally complete of the road. They suffered a kind of mental COVID-19 that made them unfit to be in their position. The new order also confirmed that service places such as entertainment venues, pubs, bars, and karaoke were to remain closed until further notice. It is nonsense.”

Research has discussed that the restaurant industry in Phuket has suffered tremendous losses from pandemic-related restrictions, such as border closures, stay-at-home orders, curfews, and no alcohol sales, to name but a few (Yasami, Phetvaroon and Zhu 2021). So it is of great importance to expedite the economic recovery and improve tourists' satisfaction by eliminating any bureaucratic acts so that Phuket, as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy, can further develop its unique gastronomic resources by working closely with local government, associations, and stakeholders (Zhu and Yasami 2021), which aims to revive the local tourism industry and economy in the short and long run. To achieve this objective, the central government needs to coordinate with local governments to make sure that the policies formulated are in line with actual situations and needs, and bureaucratic acts are minimized when local officials implement these policies. Also, local officials need to work closely with industry practitioners to promptly address their needs.

Lack of Contingency Plans

Although research has argued the importance of having contingency plans during the recovery stage (e.g., Garrido-Moreno, García-Morales and Martín-Rojas 2021; Quang et al. 2020), some participants pointed out that there is no contingency plan in place to deal with possible scenarios that arise from the Phuket Sandbox Program. For example, one participant talked about what would happen should one get a positive PCR result:

“If one tested positive during the first PCR test but tested negative on day 5, they still need to stay in quarantine. It is such a stupid rule, and it does not make sense. It is like a prison sentence. Even when you have no symptoms, they will quarantine you. If you have booked an apartment or any kind of activities, you should cancel all and it means you will lose a lot of money.”

Another participant vented his frustration by sharing his son's experience that he tested positive but was left unattended in his hotel room without medical care for 5 days. Both of them could not understand why the process took so long. These narratives have shown that even after implementing the Sandbox Scheme for over 6 months, the authorities still lack contingency plans to quickly respond to these situations where tourists tested positive. The mandatory quarantine will severely disrupt the initial holidaymaking plans of these international tourists, which will in turn decrease their overall satisfaction and undermine the destination image. Without contingency plans, the perceived risks and consequences of testing positive affected the subjective intention of traveling to Phuket under the Sandbox Scheme (Matiza and Slabbert 2021). Thus, the government at all levels need to formulate clear and effective contingency plans to make sure that policies are transparent to all international visitors and alternative options are available to those who are infected and affected, which will facilitate the decision-making process of international tourists who wish to enter Thailand under the Sandbox Scheme.

Conclusion

By using the Phuket Sandbox Scheme as a case study, this research identified three main issues, namely, lack of spontaneity, bureaucratic process, and lack of contingency plans, perceived by Sandbox international tourists in terms of the innovative initiative to reopen one of the most popular destinations—Phuket—in Thailand. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge and literature in the subject area of post-crisis tourism recovery and resilience. The findings reaffirm that the perceived issues and risks are closely associated with the subjective intention to travel amid the crisis. Also, the findings re-emphasize the fragility of the travel and tourism industry in confronting the crisis and the harnesses of organizing recovery efforts in a planned way. More importantly, the current research develops a framework (Figure 1) that sheds light on the essential role played by the central government in coordinating with relevant stakeholders and parties to recover the tourism industry amid the crisis, which goes beyond the context of Phuket.

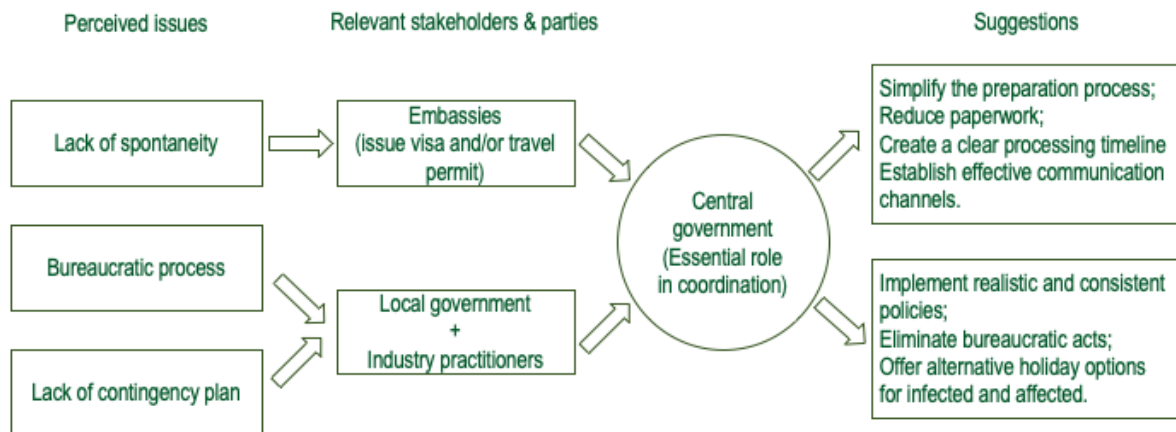


Figure 1 - The Framework of the Coordinating Role Played by the Central Government in Tourism Recovery

In accordance with Figure 1, the findings have offered practical suggestions about how the tourism recovery initiatives could be optimized with the central government playing a greater role in coordination. Firstly, the central government could coordinate with their embassies around the world, particularly in the target market, to simplify the process and paperwork as well as offer a clear processing timeline of issuing visas, travel permits, and/or other COVID-19 related documents, and establish multiple communication channels to increase the flexibility and reduce the uncertainty amid the crisis. Secondly, the central government should make sure that policies formulated and implemented at the local level are realistic and consistent. Governments at all levels should strive to minimize or even eliminate any bureaucratic acts in the process and be willing to consult local industry practitioners and accommodate their specific needs in order to revive local enterprises and boost the local economy. Lastly, the central government, local governments, and industry practitioners could work together to develop contingency plans that offer alternative holiday options and experiences, such as a remote yet scenic place with scheduled activities for those infected and affected international tourists, instead of directly transferring them to local quarantine facilities.

Besides the theoretical and practical implications, this research also suffers from the following limitations. Firstly, the empirical data only covered a small number of international tourists who entered Thailand under the Phuket Sandbox Scheme, so future studies could collect more quantitative data via questionnaires to analyze the tourists' experiences and satisfaction under the Sandbox. Secondly, the destinations and entry rules of the Sandbox Scheme keep expanding and updating as the situation of the pandemic evolves, so future studies could adopt a longitudinal method to compare the issues and experiences encountered by these Sandbox tourists.

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