



## **Community-based Tourism Initiative in Rural Malaysia: Is It a Success?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the success criteria for Malaysia Homestay Program (MHP), which is a community-based rural tourism initiative promoted by the government. The goals of this initiative are to empower rural communities through their engagement in rural tourism activities as well as to increase visitor arrivals to rural destinations in Malaysia. The establishment of its success criteria is critical as the criteria can be used to measure the performance of the initiative. Amid the publicized statistics for visitor arrival to the homestay programs under MHP, evidence of their true performance and success as a community-based tourism (CBT) initiative is still scarce. In this study, experts who are familiar with MPH in their lines of work were asked to identify criteria which are regarded by them as crucial for an MPH program to be successful. Their responses were analyzed to establish the success criteria of the programs and to determine if their responses mirror the conditions of CBTs mentioned in the literature. Findings from the responses indicate that the successful criteria of the MPH programs can be grouped into the competitive criteria and the sustainability criteria.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Initiative, Community-based Development, Rural Tourism

**JEL Classifications:** O2, Q3, R1

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Proponents of rural community development tend to advocate alternative economic activities for these communities as solutions to their economic backwardness. These economic activities are considered more beneficial if they are initiated, planned, participated and supported by the communities through a bottom-up developmental approach. Understanding the success criteria of such development will lead to useful planning tools for its management. One economic activity that is becoming popular as an alternative rural development strategy is community-based tourism (CBT).

Tourism development contributes to growth and economic development of many nations. Fayissa et al. (2008), for instance, found that a 10% increase in the spending of international tourists leads to a 0.4% increase in the gross domestic product per capita income in African countries. In addition to its potential to contribute to the nation's economic productivity, tourism also generates other important economic benefits to the hosts. For example, tourism has been found to generate earning opportunities to the hosts,

enabling them to increase their income sources (Samimi et al., 2011). In turn, income created by tourism contributes to poverty alleviation which leads the hosts to a better welfare and quality of life (Manyara and Jones, 2007). Finally, tourism can develop a nation further through modernization as it brings the people to higher standards of livings, improvement in medical services, as well as wider access to other elements related to health, happiness, comfort and security.

The concept of sustainable tourism as an approach in tourism development has taken center stage during the 90s (Swarbrooke, 1998; Butler, 1999). Tourism development that is planned and participated by the host community is a crucial component in the sustainable tourism approach which strives in reducing economic leakages, and maximizing economic linkages while making careful use of local resources, be it environmental, human or cultural resources. These positive impacts are to be achieved through respect for local culture and involvement of local community in all stages of its development (Scheyvens, 2002). Thus, sustainable tourism is considered to be more than an approach; it is also a process, as well as the outcome of tourism development.

For a tourism development to be “sustainable,” its supply and demand need to be managed. The tourist facilities, products and services, must be supplied responsibly in ways that will bring minimal damage to the environment and society. Simultaneously, demands made by tourists must be managed so that they correspond to the principles of sustainable development. Importantly, tourists must be informed, guided and managed so that they too will be able to contribute to responsible development. A sustainable approach in tourism development should aim to satisfy the visitors as well as to develop the people and the place where the community lives in. Striving only to satisfy the tourists will lead to unfairness as a large number of tourists can generate social costs as they impinge upon the lifestyles of the host community as well as deteriorate the community’s ecological and sociocultural resources (Tasci et al., 2006).

One type of tourism development that is said to adhere to the principles of sustainable tourism is CBT, which basically is a tourism development approach that stresses the development of local resources for the benefits of the locals while preserving them. CBT is strongly linked to the community as it is the community who is the main actor of its planning and execution as well as the primary party that benefit from it. This is in accord with Russell (2000) who argues that a tourism project cannot be termed as a CBT unless it has the support and participation of local people, economically benefits the people living at or near the destination and protects local people’s cultural identity and the natural environment. These noticeable similarities with the sustainable development concept lead to an easy conclusion that CBT is a sub-category of sustainable tourism. CBT is often linked to rural tourism as communities in rural areas are usually the ones that have the propensity to work together on community projects such as tourism.

The homestay programs under Malaysia Homestay Program (MHP) fit the CBT description discussed above. The homestay programs offer opportunities for social and economic development to the rural community, while minimizing leakages, establishing backward linkages, educating the tourists as well as conserving resources. However, the ideals do not always match the reality. Amid the publicized visitor arrival statistics for the homestay programs, evidence of its performance is still scarce. Criteria to be used in measuring the performance of a homestay program under MHP, in terms of its sustainability as well as its contribution to sustainable development, must be established. The criteria can also be used to identify conditions in which the homestay programs stand the best possible potential to succeed as a sustainable tourism product. This study was undertaken to determine possible success and sustainable criteria for homestay programs in Malaysia. The purpose of this research was to address two closely related questions:

1. What are the performance criteria used by those who are familiar with the homestay programs in assessing the relative success of an MHP?
2. Do the criteria mirror the ones mentioned in the literature?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. CBT

CBT is said to be a more responsible approach to tourism development as it is more strongly linked to the community. It

is a more responsible approach amidst the mainstream approach which is said to focus too much on profit maximization and having little local control, leading to many disastrous outcomes such as repatriation of profits from developing economies to developed economies through leakages and weak backward linkages. In a CBT initiative, the community plays an important role in its planning and execution and the community is the primary party that benefit from it. CBT presents an opportunity to empower local communities, particularly in developing countries, to develop a more apt ‘grass-roots’ form of sustainable tourism than mass tourism and to contribute to local economic development and poverty reduction. Advocates of CBT claim that CBTs can lead to community empowerment and community development as well as creating an equitable community political and democratic structure (Simpson, 2007). Since the development is controlled by the locals, CBT is able to contribute to cultural and environmental conservation and to the redistribution of economic benefits among the most susceptible groups, such as indigenous communities, women and children. A range of studies about CBT initiatives, especially “commercially grounded” initiatives, have confirmed its potential benefits to communities (Lucchetti and Font, 2013). However, not all CBT initiatives generate these benefits (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009).

Competitiveness and sustainability form the basis for a CBT successful performance. Competitiveness is indicated by the CBT’s ability to attract and retain customers through appropriate marketing and providing quality services and experiences. Sustainability, on the other hand, is the ability for the CBT to ensure that its resources are conserved through demand management, resource management and equitable development. Hence, CBTs must generate individual and collective benefits for community members (Simpson, 2007), which must exceed costs to all involved and counterbalance to tourism impacts produced (Novelli and Gebhardt, 2007). The benefits generated must accrue both to individuals and the whole community, and exceed costs to those involved. Benefits may be financial and/or non-financial, e.g. to include for example social, cultural, environmental and educational opportunities.

However, due to its supposedly “more responsible” nature, several parties mistakenly use the term “CBT” like others use the term “ecotourism” in their marketing ploys to attract consumers who are then made to believe that they are supporting a good cause – which is to travel responsibly. Tangible evidence of the benefits produced by CBTs are still debatable (Goodwin 2008). Previous research has found that many CBT enterprises do not succeed or do not produce intended benefits, or do not sustain. For example, Goodwin and Santilli (2009) surveyed 116 CBT initiatives identified by experts as successful: Of 28 responses secured, 15 qualified as CBT enterprises, and only six were economically sustainable. Earlier, research undertaken by Dixey (2008) in Zambia brought similar findings when only three of 25 CBT enterprises surveyed “generate enough net income per year for tangible development and social welfare in the wider community,” all of which had a private sector backing. If the initiative fails, investments and efforts made by the community will make an already vulnerable community worse off (Mitchell and Muckosy, 2008).

**2.2. MHP**

There are different models of CBTs: They can be in the forms of commercial partnerships, joint ventures, or small-scale community-run operations (Armstrong, 2012). The rural community-based homestays registered under the MHP can be categorized under the third model of CBTs. A rural community-based homestay under this program can only be formed once the community, which can be a village or several villages within an area, establish themselves as a group of certified homestay operators that are able to manage and host visitors efficiently. Certifications as homestay operators are awarded to members of that community who apply and fulfill the requirements established by the Ministry of Tourism. The ministry requires a homestay under the MHP to be participated by the whole community. Each member should have the opportunity to benefit from the initiative. The members of the community can be involved in the initiative as homestay operators who are certified to host visitors in their homes, as cooks and helpers who prepare food during the many fiestas arranged for the groups of visitors, as tour leaders, or as those who are involved in putting together activities which are designed for the visitors. As alternative tourism products, the homestays represent the government’s approach to improve and develop the standard of living of the rural community through their participation in the programs. This approach is in support of one of the objectives of tourism development set by the Ministry which is to empower rural communities through the rural tourism activities. At the same time, each homestay in MHP is also classified as a community project to instill unity among its members. Through the homestays, it is believed that rural communities can share tourism benefits while offering tourists an enhanced experience and an opportunity to experience local culture and way of life.

Just as there are uncertainties about the actual benefits brought by CBTs due to the low number of studies about their real contribution (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009), the MHP homestays’ actual performance that can qualify them as tools for sustainable development are still vague due to lack of research. Armstrong (2012) suggests that the principal conditions for CBT success include engagement with the private sector; a strong and cohesive host community; genuine community participation, ownership and control; planning for commercial viability; sound market research and demand-driven product development; attractive, quality products based on community assets; transparent financial management; appropriate stakeholder support and effective monitoring and evaluation. The study attempted to explore how the homestay programs under the MHP match the conditions for CBT success mentioned in the literature.

**3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

At the beginning of the study, the researchers gathered criteria identified and regarded by experts, namely researchers, conservationists and industrialists who are familiar with MHP in their lines of work, as crucial for a community-based rural homestay program under MHP to be successful. Their feedbacks and responses were analyzed to determine if their responses mirror the conditions of the CBT mentioned in the literature. By March, 2014, there are 170 registered rural homestay programs

throughout Malaysia that are registered under the MHP with 3,486 homestay operators within these programs. The study employed a qualitative method, involving Email open-ended interviews as it aimed to explore perceptions and ideas from those who have high familiarization with these community-based rural homestays. Forty-four participants were contacted and invited to respond to two interview questions using snowball sampling method, with the qualifying criteria that they understand the nature and operation of the homestays. There was an attempt to choose a sample which represented a good range of groups with different interests in the programs. New respondents were added to the point of diminishing returns, when no new information emerges, thus adhering to the criterion of saturation which Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain to be critical qualitative research sampling. The profile of interviewees who participated in the Email interviews is presented in Table 1. Simultaneously, a review of past writing and research in this area was undertaken to gather information related to performance criteria of other similar CBT programs as to develop a benchmark for the responses in the present study.

Through the Email interviews, the respondents were asked to name community based homestays promoted by the government in the rural areas of Malaysia that they feel are successful and to explain the critical factors that may lead to the success of those homestays. Data gathered through the email responses from respondents were analyzed using descriptive analysis. Since the data were conveyed through Email communications, transcribing was not necessary. The text from the respondent emails are printed, coded and put in a table prepared with the performance success criteria found from the literature. A review of the email responses was conducted by all investigators and a meeting was held to code the statements that fit the criteria listed in the table. To ensure the utility of the codes, one investigator undertook the coding while another reviewed the first coded email texts to confirm the functionality of the scheme. Finally, the completed table was used to conclude the respondents’ perceptions with regards to the MHP homestays’ successful performance criteria compared to the CBT success criteria developed from the literature review.

**3.1. Respondents’ View of Success Criteria for the Homestay Programs**

At the time of this article is written, a total of 170 homestays throughout the rural areas in Malaysia were registered under

**Table 1: Participant profiles**

Occupation	Gender	Total	Age range
Researcher	Male	14	36-60
	Female	5	45-52
Ministry of Tourism official	Male	1	36-60
	Female	2	45-52
Malaysia Homestay Association member	Male	1	56
Tourist Guide	Male	8	26-45
	Female	2	28-35
Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board official	Male	8	36-53
	Female	3	29-35
Total		44	

the MHP. Among these homestays, Banghuris Homestay in Selangor, was named as the most successful by the majority of the respondents in this study. As reported by Kayat et al. (2014), the Banghuris Homestay has won numerous awards and recognitions such as the winner of the *Ilham Desa* (Rural Inspiration) Competition in 2003 and 2005, as well as the Malaysia's Best Homestay Award in 2004 and 2013. This homestay program has attracted a large number of tourists since the beginning of 2000. Indeed, a previous study found that rural tourism in Banghuris has provided numerous economic benefits to the villagers (Amran and Ismail, 2003). Other homestay programs indicated as successful by the respondents in this study are Miso Walai Homestay in Sabah, Teluk Ketapang Homestay in Terengganu, Sungai Haji Dorani Homestay in Selangor, Kampung Parit Bugis Homestay in Johor and Santubong Homestay in Sarawak.

The other question was meant to tap on the elements that the respondents feel are responsible in making the homestay programs they mention in question 1 successful. This is an attempt by the authors to develop the success criteria from the experts. One remarkable finding from the data is that the respondents almost always equate "success" with "number of visitors". The respondents insinuate that the higher the number of the visitors to a homestay program, then the more successful is the program, with the programs that can sustain high number of visitors as being very successful. *"The...homestay is successful...because I got to know that they have many visitors there...and they manage to maintain this number for quite a while now..."* explained one of the respondents. Similar response was given by thirty other respondents in this study affirm this discovery.

Analysis on the responses gathered through the interviews reveals twelve criteria which the respondents indicate as crucial for the homestay programs to receive high number of visitors, or what the study termed as the success criteria (Table 2). The criteria are uniqueness and quality products/packages, effective marketing and promotional technique, generating benefits to the community, well-maintained facilities, entrepreneurial ability and capacity to manage, skill in organizational management, effort in conservation, leadership, collaboration and networking, community participation and support, being independent and proactive, and safety. The criteria in this finding indicate the importance of profit sustainability and resource sustainability are expressed by the respondents, although profit sustainability is mentioned more often.

Almost all criteria mentioned by respondents in this study are similar to the criteria written by other researchers, as is shown in Table 3. However, there are also criteria mentioned by others that are not found in this study namely engagement with the private sector; a strong and cohesive host community; genuine community ownership and control; planning for commercial viability; sound market research and demand-driven product development; transparent financial management; appropriate stakeholder support and effective monitoring and evaluation which are mentioned by Armstrong (2012). However, several of these unmentioned criteria may actually be covered by other criteria. "Planning for commercial viability," engagement with private

sector," and "transparent financial management," for instance, may be covered under "entrepreneurial ability and capacity to manage" or "skill in organizational management." In addition, "genuine community ownership and control" maybe be quite similar to "being independent and proactive." However, research, monitoring and evaluation are not found as important criteria in this study as none of the respondents mention them as important criteria for the success of these programs.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to determine the criteria which are used by those who are familiar with MHP programs in Malaysia in assessing the relative success performance of a community-based homestay program registered with the MHP with an aim to establish success criteria that a MHP performance can be measured with. Findings from this study denote that respondents mostly feel the success of a community-based homestay program registered with the MHP is indicated by the quantity of visitors it is able to attract and host. This is easily comprehended since the volume of visitors is seen to generate additional income to the program operators and others who may be involved with the program. It can be concluded that the respondents perceive a community-based homestay program registered with the MHP as a small community-based business entity which perform business activities, and success is linked to profit maximization.

Just like other small business entities, profit maximization for a community-based homestay program registered with the MHP will only be achieved through its competitive and entrepreneurial effort in ensuring the sales are high and the costs are kept low. The effort are mentioned in the criteria discovered from the data collected from the respondents this study. These include providing products, facilities and services that are unique, efficient, well-maintained, safe and satisfying; using effective marketing technique which includes utilizing marketing networks; and having and practicing skills and knowledge to operate a tourism business and are pertinent to its success such as organizational management, leadership, and entrepreneurial skills.

Since a community-based homestay program registered with the MHP is, after all, a rural community-based effort, it can be considered as a strategy to increase community wealth through tourism that must be managed sustainably. This can be concluded from the responses given by the respondents in this study when they express that the benefit generated by the programs is an important criteria of success for the programs because if the programs fail to generate any benefit to the community, they may not be supported by the community, which in turn will lead to difficulties in sustaining the programs. Community-based homestay programs registered with the MHP must have the support and participation from the local resident and community. In addition, the sustainability of the program requires the effort taken in conserving its resources and the ability to not depend too much on assistance from outside.

Concisely, Figure 1 illustrates the success criteria for the CBRH programs established in this study. This finding coincides with

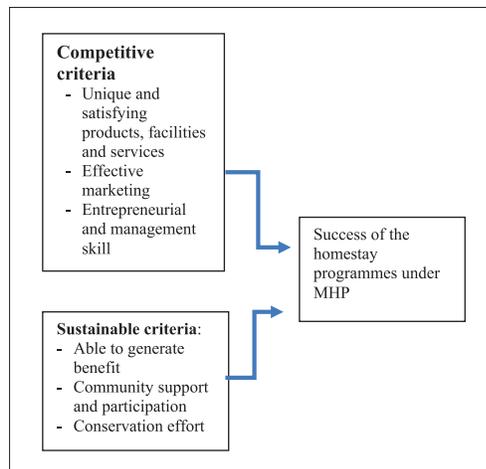
**Table 2: Criteria of success mentioned by respondents**

S. No.	Criteria	Number of respondents who mentioned the criteria	Examples of email responses
1.	Uniqueness and quality products/ packages	38	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...a homestay program cannot attract tourists if it does not have unique attractions and products..."</li> <li>• "...they must have unique packages...different kinds of packages..."</li> </ul>
2.	Effective marketing and promotional technique	30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...they must have something to offer.... products that are unique and attractive..."</li> <li>• "...the homestay is successful due to their good marketing and promotion efforts..."</li> <li>• "...they have many visitors and they use the right promotional and marketing material and technique..."</li> </ul>
3.	Generating benefits to the community	29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...their homestay program gets media coverage...from Malaysia and even overseas..."</li> <li>• "...benefits are generated from the program for the people..."</li> <li>• "...the homestay program becomes an earning to them..."</li> <li>• "...because of the homestay program, the villagers can have social network with those from outside the village..."</li> <li>• "...what the homestay program did is instilled and enhanced entrepreneurial skill in the villagers' minds..."</li> <li>• "...the village community's social and economic levels are elevated somewhat...due to their involvement in the homestay program..."</li> </ul>
4.	Well-maintained facilities	29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...to attract visitors, the homestay must have good and complete facilities...clean facilities and areas..."</li> <li>• "...visitors like to have facilities to make them comfortable"</li> </ul>
5.	Entrepreneurial ability and capacity to manage	28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...the facilities must always be maintained...so that they function well..."</li> <li>• "...they succeed because they have entrepreneurial mind..."</li> <li>• "...they have the ability and skill to take care of the guests...and their needs..."</li> <li>• "...the hosts have the cultural and craft skill...which are useful to in the cultural activities for the tourists..."</li> <li>• "...the homestay people...those who are involved, they are very serious and committed..."</li> </ul>
6.	Skill in organizational management	27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...they have homestay operators who are active and dedicated... that's important..."</li> <li>• "... the committee must be organized and effective..."</li> <li>• "...the homestay members need to be structured...each needs to have specific function."</li> <li>• "... the management of the homestay must strive to make sure that the homestay is active..."</li> <li>• "...they must have a productive and efficient management group..."</li> <li>• "...there should be an entity...like an organization at the community level that manage the homestay activities..."</li> </ul>
7.	Effort in conservation	26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...I think they are good because the maintain the concept of a traditional Malay house..."</li> <li>• "...they make use of their natural resources creatively...and taking care of them..."</li> <li>• "...they maintain the village way of living..."</li> <li>• "Their way of living and their environment that portrays traditional values of local people are preserved and used in the homestay activities..."</li> </ul>
8.	Leadership	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...the homestay program requires a good leader which can inspire the local community..."</li> <li>• "...leadership...I mean leadership among the local community..."</li> <li>• "...leadership is to lead the homestay management..."</li> <li>• "...they are good because they have local champion...who has the ability to lead..."</li> </ul>
9.	Collaboration and networking	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...I think they are successful because they have good relationships and networkings with different agencies like the tourist agencies..."</li> <li>• "...they get assistance from many agencies...they put up efforts to get to these agencies..."</li> <li>• "...the homestay people must get to know who can help them..."</li> </ul>
10.	Community participation and support	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...the community is involved in the homestay...in deciding important things" P</li> <li>• "...the homestay operators and those involved do well because they have responsible attitudes and they work together..."</li> <li>• "...they support and work together..."</li> </ul>
11.	Being independent and proactive	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...It is important for the homestay committee to be independent and proactive...do not just depend on outside help...especially from the government"</li> </ul>
12.	Safety	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...A homestay needs to offer safe accommodation to the guests."</li> </ul>

**Table 3: Criteria of success mentioned by previous authors**

S. No.	Success criteria	Authors
1.	Organizational management	Ibrahim and Ahmad (2009) Yusnita et al. (2012) Hamzah and Mohamad (2012) Lucchetti and Font (2013)
2.	Leadership	Yusnita et al. (2010) Ibrahim and Abdul Razzaq (2010) Pusiran and Xiao (2013)
3.	Capacity and ability (including community empowerment)	Manyara and Jones (2007) Abdul Razzaq et al. (2011) Abdul Razzaq et al (2012) Hamzah and Mohamad (2012) Lucchetti and Font (2013) Ellis and Sheridan (2014) Manyara and Jones (2007) Ghasemi and Hamzah (2011) Goodwin and Santilli (2009)
4.	Benefits to community	Mansuri and Rao (2004) Mansuri and Rao (2004) Manyara and Jones (2007) Goodwin and Santilli (2009)
5.	Collaboration and networking with agencies including NGOs	Ghasemi and Hamzah (2011) Okazaki (2008) Kamarudin (2012) Ibrahim and Abdul Razzaq (2010) Abdul Razzaq, Hadi, and Mustafa (2011) Hamzah and Mohamad (2012) Lucchetti and Font (2013) Ghasemi and Hamzah (2011)
6.	Community participation and support	Pusiran and Xiao (2013) Okazaki (2008) Sebele (2010) Mansuri and Rao (2004) Ibrahim and Abdul Razzaq (2010) Braun (2008) Ibrahim and Abdul Razzaq (2010) López-guzmán et al. (2011) Salazar (2011) Abdul Razzaq et al. (2011) Goodwin and Santilli (2009)
7.	Conservation effort	Ghasemi and Hamzah (2011)
8.	Marketing and promotion effort	Ibrahim and Abdul Razzaq (2010) Pusiran and Xiao (2013)
9.	Maintenance	Abdul Razzaq et al. (2011) Braun (2008)
10.	Independence	Ibrahim and Ahmad (2009)
11.	Products and services	Dixey (2005) Ibrahim and Abdul Razzaq (2010) Pusiran and Xiao (2013)
12.	Safety	Bhuiyan et al. (2011)
13.	Engagement with the private sector	Armstrong (2012)
14.	A strong and cohesive host community	Armstrong (2012)
15.	Genuine community ownership and control	Armstrong (2012)
16.	Planning for commercial viability	Armstrong (2012)
17.	Sound market research and demand-driven product development	Armstrong (2012)
18.	Transparent financial management	Armstrong (2012)
19.	Appropriate stakeholder support	Armstrong (2012)
20.	Effective monitoring and evaluation	Armstrong (2012)

**Figure 1:** Success criteria of the community-based rural homestays in Malaysia Homestay Program



the side of sustainable tourism development which focuses on the balancing act between profitability of the development and sustainability of the resources mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

Several criteria mentioned by others, for example by Armstrong (2012) do not surface distinctly in this study. The criteria, which are mostly geared towards profit maximization which is suitable for a tourism business corporation, include engagement with the private sector; a strong and cohesive host community; genuine community ownership and control; planning for commercial viability; sound market research and demand-driven product development; attractive, transparent financial management; appropriate stakeholder support and effective monitoring and evaluation. All of the community-based homestay programs registered with the MHP are implemented by rural community members who may need further awareness, knowledge, skill and experience to operate the program as tourism businesses, thus practicing these criteria. As for now, the community-based homestay programs registered with the MHP may still be categorized as rural entrepreneurship entities although they fit the CBT description given by Russell (2000). The programs may eventually evolve into community business cooperatives. Towards that end, it is safe to conclude that the criteria required for the community-based homestay programs registered with the MHP to be successful, in terms of its competitiveness and sustainability has been empirically established through this study. The criteria can be a basis to evaluate the performance of a community-based homestay program registered with the MHP which in turn may assist decisions to be made for its improvement.

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