



# Community opinion towards a village homestay program in Soe, a small nomadic community in the North-West of Bhutan

Karma Tenzin (M.A. student)  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Naresuan University, Thailand  
Email : starkarma123@gmail.com

Dr. Farung Mee-Udon  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Naresuan University, Thailand

Dr. Rudklaw Prampesit  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Naresuan University, Thailand

Corresponding author\*

## Abstract

Bhutan strongly adheres to a policy of 'High-Value, Low-Impact tourism' guided by the doctrine of Gross National Happiness (GNH) to make Bhutan a high-end tourist destination. In Bhutan, the tourism industry contributed about US\$ 79.87 million in 2017 making it one of the most important economic contributors. However, rural communities are not equally benefitting from tourism activities due to less tourism development. The main objective of this article was to evaluate the opinion of the community towards the opportunities of the village homestay programme. The study was conducted within a small nomadic community in Soe which is located in the North-West of Bhutan. This paper was a qualitative study based on in-depth semi-structured interviews which were limited to twenty key informants due to the small size of the community. Data were analysed with a content analysis approach. The study found that there was some mixed opinion towards the concept of the village homestay programme in the community. The majority of the key informants, particularly the males, expressed quite a strong support for the concept of the village homestay programme. The findings revealed that the male key informants consider that the development could generate additional revenue, enhance health and sanitation and requires less investment for the development. On the other hand, the female key informants expressed somewhat negative opinions towards the concept of the village homestay programme. The key reasons include lack of experiences in tourism, workloads and the general safety of the women. In spite of varied opinion towards the concept, it was found that the majority of the key informants were very supportive of the development of the village homestay programme and were thus able to see the positive benefits and a good future for the village homestay programme in Soe community.

**Keywords:** Bhutan, community opinion, homestay programme, tourism development, tourism impact

## Introduction

The tourism business around the world has been the key driver of the world economy. Studies by various researchers' (Abdollahzadeh & Sharifzadeh, 2014; Del-Chiappa, Atzeni & Ghasemi, 2016) indicate that the tourism industry is one of the biggest and fastest growing industries with the potential of supporting communities in terms of developing economic diversity. In the year 2017, the international tourist arrivals in the world reached a total of 1,326 million and contributed a sum of 7.6 trillion to the world economy and generated 292 million jobs across the globe (UNWTO, 2017). Bhutan's tourism industry in 2017 generated US\$ 79.87 million and contributed significantly towards socio-economic development. Bhutan's tourism industry continued to grow, contributing significantly towards socio-



economic development through revenue generation and employment creation (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2017).

Bhutan, is a small Himalayan landlocked country with a unique and spectacular culture and tradition, rich religious festivals, significant historic monuments, and a pristine environment, and it is situated in South Asia, bordering China in the North and India in the south with an area of 38,394 square kilometres (Royal Society Protection of Nature, 2015). The population of Bhutan was estimated at 735,553 as of May 2017 (National Statistics Bureau, 2018). A very significant approach to life in Bhutan is the notion of Gross National Happiness founded by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth King of Bhutan in the early 1970s who declared that Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product (Ura et al., 2012). Guided by the doctrine of GNH Bhutan opened its tourism industry in 1974 coinciding with the coronation of the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk and a total 287 tourists entered the kingdom for the first time (Ritchie, 2007).

Along with Bhutan's rapid socio-economic development and tourism growth, challenges to the conservation of rich culture and environment have emerged as important concerns. Therefore, community-based tourism (CBT) is seen as one of the most important opportunities to contribute towards the community development, conservation of culture and protection of natural resources. One such initiative under CBT is the establishment of the village homestay programme particularly in the remote villages of Bhutan. The village homestay programme in Bhutan is associated with an opportunity for the visitors to have the options of staying the night in traditional Bhutanese homes offering the experience of the traditional Bhutanese lifestyle, local culture, and cuisines where the guests are meaningfully being engaged with the daily routines of the everyday life of a typical Bhutanese family (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2018). The village homestay programme contributes significantly to the conservation of the local cultural heritage and protection of natural landscape in the remote villages. It also helps to diversify tourist attractions in the remote villages and motivates local communities to earn an additional source of economic benefit deriving from it.

Wijesundara and Gnanapala (2016) suggest that different countries have varying concepts and definitions of the homestay programme. For example, in Australia, the concept is mainly connected with farm stay, whereas in New Zealand, the concept is mostly associated with farm stay and cottage homestay. In the case of Bhutan, the concept of the homestay is connected with the village homestay programme. However, in general, the given amenities and experience of homestays are similar in the world. Homestay is a kind of accommodation where guests are provided with the opportunities to stay with the preferred host family, and it provides a true understanding about the culture, traditions, nature and everyday lifestyle of the local community which is located farther from the. The guests are provided with accommodation, food, beverages, and different cultural experiences, and it is expected to develop as an authentic tourism product in the effort to diversify attractions.

This paper targeted the Soe community for the study area due to a huge potential for tourism activities that exist with numerous natural wonders. and where a nomadic lifestyle is characteristic. However, in spite of the above importance of tourism activities, there are no single homestays for visitors to stay because of the nomadic lifestyle considerations and remote locations. Thus, accommodations for tourists have been of great concern where it is not feasible to build large hotels. Therefore, the development of the village homestay programme is one of the most significant approaches to address not only places to stay in remote locations, but also to serve as an attractive cultural experience for travelers.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the social exchange theory (SET) which was founded on the concept that each human behaviour or social interaction is made because people want to exchange tangible and intangible goods or services particularly relating to benefits and costs. According to Ap (1992: ) “It is a sociological theory concerned with understanding the exchange of resources between individuals and groups in an interaction situation.” Generally, SET incorporates economic, environmental, and a sociocultural exchange process that determines the support of the community towards tourism development (Latkova & Vogt, 2012; Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003).

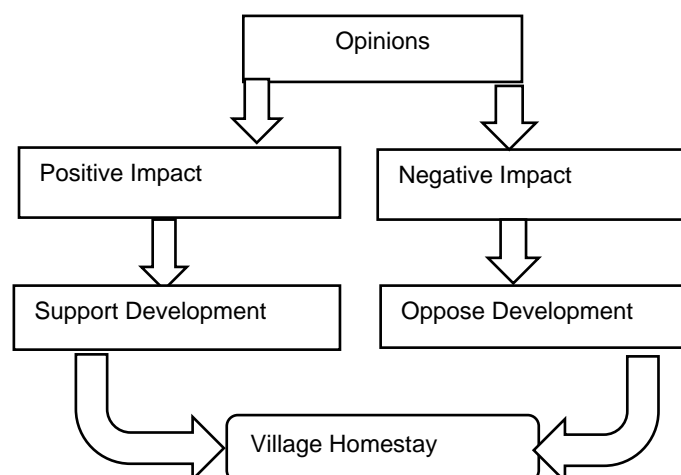
SET supposes that humans choose exchanges after evaluating benefits and costs. According to this idea, their opinions and attitudes are influenced by the perception of the exchange people think they are creating. The theory proposes that those residents who perceive benefits from an exchange are expected to assess it positively, and those who notice the costs are expected to assess it negatively.

SET, from tourism perspectives, means that people calculate costs and benefits as a product of tourism development activities. People who notice tourism activities having a more positive impact (benefit) than negative impact (cost), are expected to encourage tourism development. On the other hand, those people who perceive tourism development as having a higher negative impact (cost) than positive impact (benefit) are likely to oppose the development. The positive impact or benefits are a positive value such as acceptance, support, relationship and income. Negative impact or costs are the negative values such as for example a rapid or progressive deterioration of the environment, cultural changes, pollution, and increased congestion. To support this statement, SET has been adopted in tourism studies as a theoretical framework for developing an understanding of residents’ attitudes towards tourism and found it to be an appropriate theoretical framework (Diedrich & Garcia-Buades, 2009; Latkova & Vogt, 2012; Wang & Pfister, 2008). The findings of these researchers’ have revealed that the residents value tourism in terms of its positive impact (benefits) and negative impact (costs). The results concluded that the individuals who benefited from tourism were positive and support development. On the other hand, those individuals who perceived a more negative impact opposed the development.

For this study, the SET was selected as the theoretical framework to understand the community opinions towards the feasibilities of the village homestay programme, and also the relationship between the positive impact (benefit) and the negative impact (cost) from the perception of the local people towards the development (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework**

Source: (Author)



## Methodology

### Location of the study

The study area is located in the North-West of Thimphu District (Figure 3) the capital city of Bhutan, with a total area of 177.866 square kilometres. As reported by the Population Housing Census of Bhutan (2017) the community had an estimated population of 182. To reach the study site, it takes two days from the road point by walking, as the community is not yet connected with infrastructure such as roads which are suitable for motor vehicles due to the rugged terrain and huge mountains. According to the report compiled by the Tourism Council of Bhutan (2017), over the last five years, the Soe community received about 3,664 tourists mainly for nature-based tourism purposes. The economy of the community is primarily based on livestock and services related to the growing tourism sector. The tourists are involved in activities such as trekking, hiking, mountaineering and sightseeing (Figure 2) especially in the morning due to favourable weather.

**Figure 2:** Main tourist attraction  
Source: Author



**Figure 3:** Map of the study site  
Source: (National statistical Bureau 2017)



### Research Design

This study was qualitative in orientation and was based on in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions used to find the utmost suitable and insightful information required. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research method comprised of conducting and understanding with a small number of participants to investigate their perceptions on a particular idea, programme or situation. The in-depth interview was the preferred method to obtain the required data in this study because the local people would be more likely to get involved rather than if they were sent some papers to read on their own. This approach was vital to help the local people feel at ease and accepting because this method suited the oral traditions of a small community. As Miles & Gilbert (2005) pointed out, semi-structured interviews are conversations based on the researcher's questions aimed at encouraging a dialogue where the interviewee feels comfortable and really says what he or she thinks about the topic. In this method of collecting data, the conversation is free to vary if needed and it is likely to change considerably between participants. The interviews were guided by a set of pre-determined questions about the opinions of the village homestay programme. This



research had several limitations, with small sizes of the study area and the small sample of the study, and also the various difficulties posed due to huge mountains and rugged terrain and the very limited time and budget.

### Data collection and Analysis

Data was collected from twenty key informants because of the very small population and fewer households in the community, and for a period of 45 days. The key informants were in the age range of 20 to 55 years of age and included both males and females. Key informants included seventeen participants from the Soe community, and they had been born, raised and lived in the community, two participants from the local government administration elected by the community (village heads) and one participant from the Tourism Council of Bhutan. The key informants were selected based on who actually possessed the experiences and basic knowledge about tourism activities through a snowball sampling technique which enabled in-depth exploration of the study. Additionally, only houses with three-bedrooms were selected according to the guidelines developed by the Tourism Council of Bhutan, because very small houses would not have enough rooms to rent to the tourists.

The interview guidelines were translated into the national language of Bhutan because the majority of the key informants were illiterate. Responses were later translated and transcribed into English. Notes were taken during the time of the interview to check for reliability, and the data was also supported by the recordings. Content analysis was employed to analyse and determine the findings of the research.

### Findings and Discussion

In-depth interviews were held with 20 key informants (13 males and 7 females) representing a gender split of 65% and 35% respectively, with the age group of 20-55 years being interviewed (Table 1). The largest proportion of key informants were in the 31-40 years old category (55%). The education level ranged from 0 to 15 years of study. About 80% of the key informants were illiterate, and 15% had completed primary school while 5% had completed a college degree. The majority (85%) of the key informants were farmers who live in the community.

#### The social demographic profile of the key informants

**Table1. Key informants demographic profile**

Information	Total	Percentage (%)	Remark
Gender			
Male	13	65%	Female (7), Male (13)
Female	7	35%	
Total	20	100%	Total= 20
Age			
20-30	5	25%	Female (3), Male (2)
31-40	11	55%	Female (4), Male (7)
41-55	4	20%	Female (0), Male (4)
Total	20	100%	Total= 20
Education level			
Illiterate	16	80%	Female (7), Male (9)
Primary	3	15%	Female (0), Male (3)
College Degree	1	5%	Female (0), Male (1)



Total	20	100%	Total= 20
Occupation			
Farmer	17	85%	Female (7), Male (10)
Government Service	1	5%	Female (0), Male (1)
Local government official	2	10%	Female (0), Male (2)
Total	20	100%	Total= 20

The followings are the positive and negative opinions of the community towards the development of the village homestay programme in Soe which can be organised under two themes explaining their opinions: economic reasons and social reasons (Table 2).

### **Reasons for positive opinions towards the development of a village homestay programme**

The findings reveal that the majority of the participants (65%), in particular the male key informants, had positive opinions towards the concept of the village homestay programme and were supportive of additional tourism development initiatives. The majority of the male key informants indicated that the most vital factors affecting positive opinion towards the concept are the opportunities to benefit the community in terms of socio-economic gain from the development of the village homestay programme: economic reasons, income generation, enhancement of health and sanitation and requiring less investment.

#### **Revenue generation**

As mentioned earlier, Soe is a typical nomadic community and the primary source of income generation is through livestock and pastoralism. The income that is generated from their animal products is not sufficient for the family because the products are mainly for the purpose of family consumption and very few products are for sale. As a solution, local people want to find alternative income sources and they consider that through tourism activities they can likely earn extra income. The majority of the male key informants explained that the idea of the village homestay programme is an opportunity to generate greater economic benefits from hosting the programme. They mentioned that it offers the needed opportunities to generate extra revenue through room charges, foods, drinks, and cultural programmes. This finding is similar to the explanation embedded in the Social Exchange Theory (SET) in which the positive opinions were gained from the benefits that an individual achieved from tourism activities. Furthermore, this was in line with the research conducted by Sharma and Dyer (2009) who also found that those individuals who generate revenue from tourism activities would have a positive opinion and be likely to support tourism development. As one male key informant said;

“We mainly depend on livestock activities for the income generation, which is not sufficient for the family. To supplement our revenue generation, we welcome and support the concept of the village homestay programme in the community as it will help us to increase our family income” (male key informant, 7<sup>th</sup> August 2018).

Further, the key informants believe that the benefits from village homestay are higher than the negative social impacts resulting, and they assume that it can diversify their economy and encourage the sale of local products, thus strengthening the community. This finding is supported by the studies conducted by Imran and Nguyen (2018) about the homestay development in India, which found that the development of homestay would be good for the economy and enhanced the development of the local community.



### **Enhance health and sanitation**

The majority of the male key informants consider that the development of the village homestay programme would help to improve the sanitation and the overall health of the people. They expressed that so far, the community is not able to maintain proper toilets, kitchen and bedrooms due to traditional nomadic characteristics. They consider that the development of the village homestay programme could enable them to improve the toilet facilities, provide clean drinking water and maintain clean rooms and bedding. The result is consistent with several previous studies which also stated that the development of the homestay provides income generation, develops cooperation, enhanced living quality and improve cleanliness level of the villages (Shukor et al., 2014; Peaty, 2009).

### **Investment**

The construction of tourist hotels and accommodation venues is difficult in the community due to a lack of roads, rugged terrain, and the huge development costs which preclude it. Therefore, the participants in favour of the concept of the village homestay programme were excited to welcome and support the development of the village homestay programme in their locality. They expressed the idea that the development of the village homestay programme in the community is more feasible according to their geographical location and requires less investment for the development. The key informants pointed out that the community is not in the position to invest huge amounts of revenue for the construction of tourist hotels as they are nomadic, thus it is better to establish the village homestay programme which costs less in terms of needed investment for the required development. The head of the community stated;

“The development of tourist hotel and resort in the community is not possible, therefore, the local government administration would like to motivate and promote the concept of village homestay programme” (Male village head, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2018).

### **Negative opinion towards the development of village homestay**

In contrast, there is opposition towards the concept of the village homestay programme in particular by the female key informants. Seven out of twenty key informants highlighted that they are not interested in the concept of the village homestay. The female key informants believe that the most significant factors affecting them are due to social issues, and the reasons posited include lack of participation in tourism activities, additional workload and safety related matters of the women in the community.

### **Lack of participation in tourism activities**

Most of the female key informants expressed that, usually they do not participate in any form of tourism activities in the community because most of the time they are involved in other traditional activities such as pastoralism which resulted in an absence of skills and experiences about tourism. Due, to the absence of skills and experiences in tourism activities, the female key informants are not confident when it comes to organising the programme successfully. They often express their inability to communicate effectively with the guests due to a lack of skills and experiences, therefore, they may not be in the position to manage the homestay programme appropriately. The study is consistent with some previous study of Granovetter (2005), In which it was found that limited communication between the local residents and the visitors led to the negative opinions and attitudes towards tourism development:



“I have never participated in any kind of tourism activities in the community, and I do not possess any skills and experiences. In my opinion, I feel that I cannot manage the programme successfully” (female key informant, 29<sup>th</sup> August 2018).

### **Workload**

The female key informants explained their negative opinion towards the concept due to their everyday busy household chores. Females in the community are engaged in activities such as washing clothes, preparing meals, taking care of the children and significantly contribute to livestock and pastoralism. The women key informants believe that homestay is a programme where the woman has extra responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and managing, and consider that it is an additional workload for them. The majority of the women in the community do not want to take the unnecessary extra burden. As one of the key informants said;

“The women in the community are already busy and have heavy daily works. If we establish the village homestay programme, it will be an extra workload for us, therefore, I think the women are not interested with such idea” (female key informant, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2018).

### **Safety issues**

In terms of the safety-related issues, the female key informants had concerns about the security of the girls and women in the family as the guests will be staying in the house of the family. They said that some guests might misbehave and act inappropriately and there are chances of women becoming the vulnerable victims. The female key informants stated that the development of the village homestay in the community could lead to the higher risk for women and young girls as most of the time their male partners are out to work in other places. This finding is supported by previous research done by Sood et al. (2017) which found that safety-related issues concerning women and children were of great concern because some of the tourists engaged in excessive alcohol consumption and drug abuse, which lead to unethical behaviours’ of the guests.

**Table 1. Gender-based opinions towards the development of the village homestay programme**

Gender	Positive opinion			Negative opinion		
	Income Generation	Enhance health & sanitation	Less investment	Lack of participation	Workload	Safety issues
Male	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x
Female	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The findings of this study revealed that the community values tourism development in ways consistent with the SET. It was found that the male key informants perceive the concept of the village homestay programmes positively and support their development. On the other hand, the female key informants perceive the idea of the village homestay programme negatively and oppose the development. In this research, positive opinions are connected with the belief that the village homestay programme could generate extra revenue, improve health, sanitation, and better living standards.

Conversely, negative opinions are associated with the belief that the village homestay programme could be an additional workload for the women, safety-related concern of the





women and girls. One of the reasons the women of Soe interviewed may have had negative feelings about the concept is because the job is laborious and it would be still another extra duty imposed on them. If they had information on for example, how help is available to hire people to clean rooms, cook, etc. then they may be more agreeable. The majority of the key informants were very supportive of the development of the village homestay programme and thus, they were able to see the positive future of the village homestay programme in the Soe community.

### **Several recommendations can be considered for future research:**

1. Local government administration should consider the needs of both male and female local people to empower them to participate equally in tourism activities, especially developing new programmes like the village homestay. The first step should begin with basic information, awareness programs including basic training and place greater attention on female participants.
2. Tourists should be involved in the study to investigate their preferences and opinions about the developing village homestay programmes.
3. Future studies should employ more tools to collect data such as participant observation and focus group discussion.

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