

## PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: A POSSIBLE RESEARCH METHOD FOR DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THAILAND

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### Abstract

Thailand's economy is primarily reliant on the service industry, which generates a large amount of income for the country, and tourism represents a key cluster of the service sector. The development of sustainable tourism requires cooperation over multiple sectors and, most importantly, the valorization of local community. In order to give rise to said valorization, stakeholders should be involved in the building of a shared local identity. Thus reinforcing a sense of belonging and creating a stronger community in which emigration rates decline and a sustainable tourist economy based on local identities is able to emerge. This process can be implemented through the application of Participatory Action Research (PAR): a method of research that involves the engagement of a community to arrive at best practices in social contexts. The article, Participatory Action Research: A Possible Research Method for Developing Sustainable Tourism in Thailand, aims to explain the concepts, definitions, features and key characteristics of the PAR process, and apply this research methodology to sustainable tourism development in Thailand. Researchers, academics and agencies involved in tourism development can apply and adapt PAR methodology to specific contexts in order to develop local identities, build tourism communities and conserve tourism resources. The goal of the development of community-based tourism is to strengthen local communities' capacity to benefit from sustainable tourism.

**Keywords:** Participatory Action Research, Sustainable Tourism

### Introduction

Thailand National Strategy 2017-2036 focuses on six main strategies: 1) Creating national security for public contentment; 2) Enhancing different capacities to promote content economic development; 3) Promoting multidimensional human

capital development for righteous, skillful, and quality citizens; 4) Broadening opportunities and promoting equality in society; 5) Improving quality of life based on green growth; and 6) Reforming government administration with a focus on public interest (National Strategy Secretariat Office,

Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2017). The National Strategy Plan focuses on strengthening local development. It is the role of the relevant agencies to then adopt the national strategy as a development plan.

The service sector is a central part of the Thai economy, and a key component of this sector is the tourism industry, which, as well as generating considerable income for the Kingdom, has also seen continuous growth. Furthermore, the tourism industry encourages greater productivity and utilization of resources. It also creates employment and income distribution at the local level, within communities, and has promoted business continuity in many sectors, thereby contributing value to other businesses as well, such as spas, souvenir trade and local products, logistics services and employment, etc. As a result, the relevant government agencies have adopted the National Strategic Plan for implementation.

The 12<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan 2017-2021 has the following important goals: 1) the introduction and application of the philosophy of sufficiency economy; 2) putting people at the center of participatory development; 3) supporting and promoting the concept of national reform; and 4) development aimed at stability, prosperity, sustainability, and happiness in society. The Sustainable Community Tourism Strategy 2016-2020 (CBT Thailand) (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2017) has set the following goals: Human

capital development, increasing the value of local resources, creating a marketing balance, strengthening network intensity, and the happiness of communities and tourists. While the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Tourism Development Plan (2017-2021) (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2017) defines the Thailand Tourism Vision 2036 as: “Thailand as the world’s leading quality tourism destination with a balanced growth built around Thai identity. To promote economic, social development and distribute income to the people in a way that is sustainable throughout all sectors”. Overall, this is a policy that promotes community economy and people’s self-reliance so that each community can bring local wisdom and resources to create value. The ability to generate income for the community and obtain quality local identity products with an emphasis on building local wisdom towards internationalization, creative self-reliance, and human resource creation to promote and support local development processes in which people can participate. Tourism development results in several economic and social benefits for destinations (Andereck et al., 2010). The success of tourism depends on the active support of the local population (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004). Residents should be the focal point of the tourism decision making process (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005). There is one principle of sustainable tourism development that promotes the sustainability of natural resources and the environment through

conservation efforts and the restoration of tourist sites at risk of degradation. Capacity management to support tourists and cultivating an awareness of environmental friendliness, promotion of sustainable culture by upholding and preserving Thai identity, traditional values, and local wisdom.

In order to achieve holistic sustainable tourism development, all these elements should be taken into account. In particular, the involved communities need to actively partake in the decision-making process. There are many possibilities for overcoming sustainability challenges in tourism and including communities in the process, such as Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which focuses on direct contact and cultural exchange between tourists and locals (Murphy & Murphy, 2004) or Creative Tourism, which aims to have travelers actively participate in the host community's culture (Carvalho, Ferreira, & Figueira, 2016).

Research is the harnessing of knowledge to affect change. Research refers to the process of researching natural facts or phenomena, systematically searching for new knowledge, regulation, procedure, and has a certain aim to obtain reliable knowledge. Research focused on finding local community knowledge and getting people in the community to accept their findings is not easy. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is defined as a methodology focusing on relational and participatory approaches to research, aiming to include all those involved in a matter and intertwining

inquiry and action (Reason & Bradbury, 2013). It involves stakeholders in the research process, promotes community participation to co-create and produce contextual knowledge and to implement sustainable solutions according to their own needs and socio-cultural contexts (Benham & Daniell, 2016; Morales, 2016; Zeller-Berkman, Munoz-Proto, & Torre, 2015). Given these distinct research values, we hold the assumption that PAR can be a prospective approach for sustainable tourism; a research practice of sustainable change and empowerment of communities in the context of a highly dynamic tourism industry (Goebel, Camargo-Borges, & Eelderink, 2020). PAR has three implications (Sutthinarakorn, 2014): 1) research to gain knowledge; 2) actions to apply knowledge and reflection on the results of the practice that comes from the use of knowledge; and 3) effective participation in the meaning of being the owners of change, creating love, attachment, and hope in the transformation process. Which consists of three changes which are 1) Develop critical awareness of researchers; 2) improve the lives of the participants in the research process; and 3) Change social structures and social relations. While the initial research is conducted by one person, it expands to include other participants until reaching the macro level.

### **Key Characteristics and Definition of Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

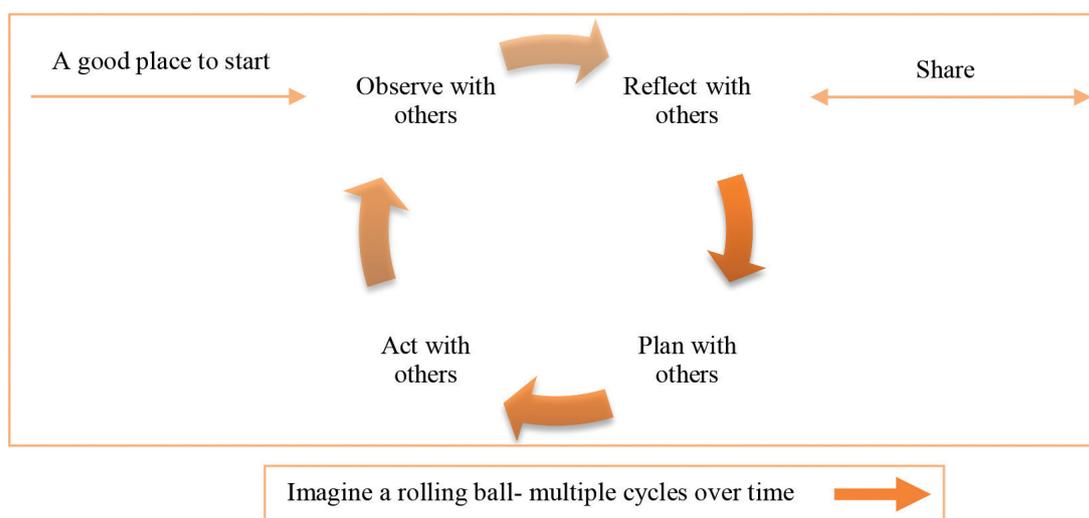
Participatory Action Research (PAR)

is collaborative research, education and action used to gather information to use for change on social or environmental issues. It involves people who are concerned about or affected by an issue taking a leading role in producing and using knowledge about it (Pain, Whitman, & Milledge, 2011). PAR is considered democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing qualitative inquiry that remains distinct from other qualitative methodologies (Koch & Kralik, 2006). Using PAR, qualitative features of an individual's feelings, views, and patterns are revealed without control or manipulation from the researcher. The participant is active in making informed decisions throughout all aspects of the research process for the primary purpose of imparting social change; a specific action (or actions) is the ultimate goal. (MacDonald, 2012) and Singhalert (2008) argues that PAR is a combination of two concepts: Action is an activity that a research project must undertake and participation is the involvement of all parties participating in research activities, to analyze the problem or situation and engage in decision-making and action until the end of the research. While Chantarasombat (2008) holds that PAR has the following characteristics: the production of knowledge by combining knowledge from scholars with local knowledge, the form of knowledge has Interactive Interdisciplinary and Tran-disciplinary characteristics, reflection

of tacit knowledge or thoughts. Also take action in a concrete way, the application of knowledge to practical, inclusive processes that use resources efficiently and effectively, continuous process with no time limit. It is a constant change, an open form that cannot be planned in advance, self-awareness to build self-confidence and self-concept development of the people, creating an ecological society in which people in the community depend on each other in the manner of democracy, future-oriented in creating a way of action, practice, develop the structure to achieve the desired future and optimistic (Elliott, 2011).

PAR refers to research that is open to the public or most members of the community to be involved in all stages of the research process. The researcher acts as a coordinator and manages the research in accordance with the objectives. Principles and basic characteristics of PAR are as follows: (Crane & O'Regan, 2010)

**PAR is cyclical.** The basic cycle of PAR is depicted. This sequence has been extended in light of experiences in undertaking PAR in the Reconnect program (Ampansirirat & Wongchaiya, 2017). The cycle of PAR consists of five key components: observation; reflection; planning; action; and sharing of knowledge in the last step of the cycle (Crane & O'Regan, 2010).



**Figure 1** The PAR Cycle

Source: Crane & O'Regan (2010)

**PAR is participatory.** The focus of PAR is on people changing their own practices and behaviours, not those of others (Na ChiangMai, 2002; Stringer, 2007). Those who are affected by the practice should be engaged and involved in the process of understanding and change. This makes PAR a tool that can be used to enhance social inclusion and social justice. Various metaphors have been used to describe what you might do to build this participatory character, including being a “go-between”, and a dinner party convenor (Wadsworth, 2005). Certainly you will be looking for ways to invite people’s potential contributions, communicating a lot, explaining, reframing, seeking common ground and language, facilitating and encouraging, even marketing and “selling”, all the time trying to respect those you engage with, and do what you can to set up an environment for “good conversation”. One service in a particular cultural community discovered the value of engaging “cultural brokers” to

enhance the participation (Crane & O'Regan, 2010).

**PAR is practical.** It is research tool that focuses on practice. Especially the practices that arise from the interaction of people in society, focusing on the understanding, the methods and the results of the existing practice. Study how to do better and learn from the practice processes and the results it produces, the knowledge gained from research will form the basis of practice (Stringer, 2007).

**PAR is emancipatory.** The research is to create freedom, to raise awareness so that people realize the essence of the problem, solve problems and overcome obstacles stemming from being exploited in the structural injustice. People learn to share and co-create a society that is fairer and more peaceful (Ampansirirat & Wongchaiya, 2017).

**PAR is critical.** Focus on critical processes. Self-reflection in all stages of

research, during practices and development. Being critical also means we recognise that people's situations are not only a result of their own actions and relationships, but arise from the social and economic structures around them. It means that PAR appreciates that some people get less say in things than others and that the people who are most affected should have a voice and a role in the process of working out what to do (Crane & O'Regan, 2010). In this sense PAR is underpinned by values of relationship, inclusion and justice. Critical reflection includes examining our own assumptions and norms, appreciating the nature of your own agency's interests and acknowledging the broader systemic factors that maintain vulnerability and undermine the wellbeing of particular individuals and groups (Elliott, 2011).

**PAR is dynamic.** PAR needs to have an "elastic quality" which means it can be adapted, changed and redesigned as the process goes along (Grant, 2008). This is why you should not adopt an unchangeable formula for doing PAR but rather start simply and develop your confidence in thinking about what process best fits your context (Crane & O'Regan, 2010).

**PAR is developmental.** PAR is not operated by an on-off switch. It is strengths oriented, starts where people are at, and should try to maximise participation and scope over time (Crane & O'Regan, 2010). It can take quite a long time to develop your confidence in PAR and to develop a clear PAR project. In PAR, people are often keen to start with

a big and meaningful question. To develop confidence in the research though, it is sometimes better to start with quite small, concrete and localised questions, so that several cycles can be tried quickly (Stringer, 2007).

PAR does not have a specific framework on the method. It uses a critical research approach, which is a combined approach (Pain, Whitman, & Milledge, 2011). The pivotal technique is self-reflection, choosing techniques of collecting and analyzing data that are appropriate for the situation and as a means of learning and collective action. Risk or error must be shared by both external researchers and members of the community (Traimongkolkul & Chattaporn, 2010), which corresponds to Crane & O'Regan (2010) PAR is emancipatory to the extent that it includes as active participants those who are most affected by the issues under investigation, especially the least powerful. In human services this is typically the clients and target groups of service delivery. Social programs should benefit those vulnerable individuals, groups and communities who experience the issue being targeted by the intervention (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). PAR conceptualises the participation of service users and other target groups of intervention as important for philosophical reasons (respect, voice, and rights), to ensure the most responsive strategies are developed and to achieve the best possible outcomes (Stringer, 2007). We use the term PAR to refer to a category of techniques that go under several names in social science

research and evaluation, including participatory monitoring an evaluation, participatory community research, community-based participatory research, practitioner research, action research, participatory rapid assessment, participatory rural appraisal, empowerment evaluation, and participatory learning and action (McGarvey, 2007).

Therefore, considering PAR's core characteristics, a definition of PAR is defined as research that allows the public or most members of the community to be involved in all stages of the research process. The researcher acts as a coordinator and manages the research in accordance with the objectives

### Key Features and PAR Process

The process of PAR is considered as a social practice, and a learning process with involvement of stakeholders in every step throughout the whole process (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; Pain, Whitman, & Milledge, 2011). Moreover, the stakeholders exchange experiences with each other. It is an empowering process, providing freedom, building individual consciousness, promoting critical thinking, and reflective thinking about social issues. The six main features of PAR include being a research process cycle, a participation of stakeholders, a systematic learning, a dynamic system, a development process, and a critical analysis of situations (Ampansirirat & Wongchaiya, 2017). PAR is an approach to research. It is a set of principles and practices

for originating, designing, conducting, analyzing and acting on a piece of research. Within PAR projects, many different methods may be used-group discussion, interviews, diagramming, video, photography, art, surveys, and mapping, the collection of environmental data, computer analysis of datasets, etc. (Pain, Whitman, & Milledge, 2011)

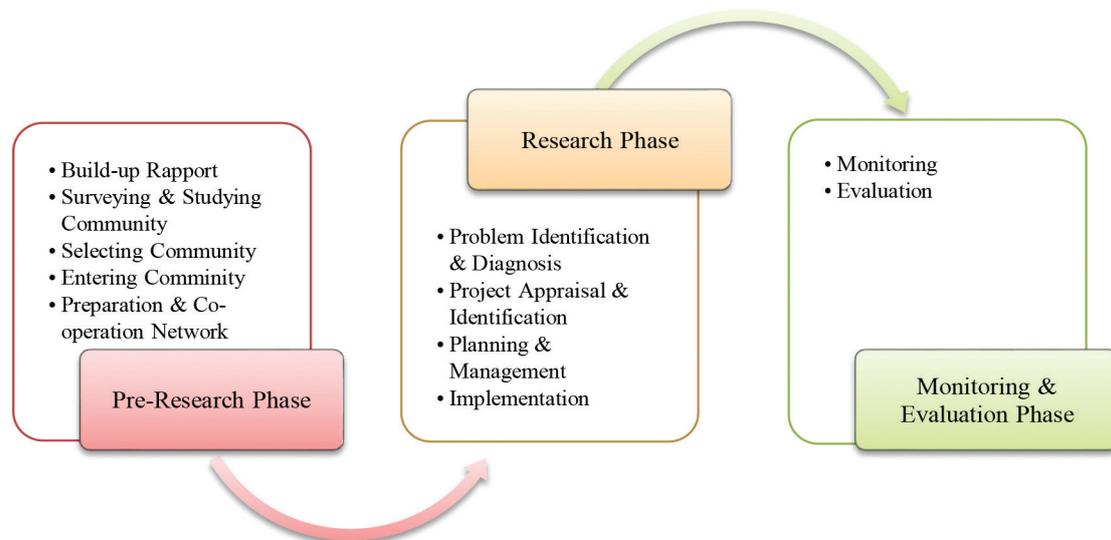
From many research found that the PAR process is not specific, can be adapted to each context of the target area or community (Morales, 2016). Kamjadpai (2010) has defined 6 phases: preparation; problem study and formulation of approaches or solutions; problem-solving action planning; project-based planning and evaluation, implementation plan; and the preparation for withdrawal of the project and dissemination. Chalarak (2006) explained that, if considered in the form of a research process, the involvement of various parties can be identified by hierarchical or multi-step of PAR processes. This helps to clearly see the roles and functions of each research participant, and in practice, the research process must be carried out in cooperation with a continuous sequence of activities from start to finish as follows: 1) Contextual Education Stage; 2) Problem Determination Stage; 3) Research Planning Stage; 4) Tracking, Check and Improve Stage; and 5) Conclusion Stage. Subpha-asa (2008) defines four processes as follow: partnership relationship building; participatory problem analysis; participatory action planning; and participatory practice and practice. And in the same year, Chantarasombat

(2008) divided the PAR process and procedure for the implementation of development activities into a series of dimensions: the first dimension joins the study and analysis of the problem; the second dimension joins the planning; the third dimension joins the action, the fourth dimension joins the benefit, and the fifth dimension joins the evaluation.

Crane & O'Regan (2010) define five elements: Observation; reflection; planning; implementation, and exchange of knowledge. After that Na ChiangMai (2011) has determined the PAR procedure has a 1) Pre-research Phase, 2) Research Phase, and 3) Monitoring and Evaluation Phase. And Puangsomchit (2014) has concluded that the steps are as follows: 1) the preparation process is to select the community, building good relationship with the community; 2) the research initiatives with respect to the community process are the study of community problems and needs, formulating problems, collaborating in designing analysis, analyzing data, and presenting information to the community; and 3) the development stage is aimed at solving community problems. In line with research by Pathumporn & Nakapaksin (2015) that the PAR model in this study consists of three circles starting with: 1) the investigation of problem finding and the analysis of tourism capacities; 2) the policy development and practicing of community-

based tourism at the site; and 3) the evaluation of sustainable tourism development and plan revising. For Topanurakkun (2015) and Ongthun (2017) opined that PAR process can be divided into five stages as follows: 1) Pre-research Phase; 2) Research Phase; 3) Planning Phase; 4) Implementation Phase, and 5) Monitoring and Evaluation Phase.

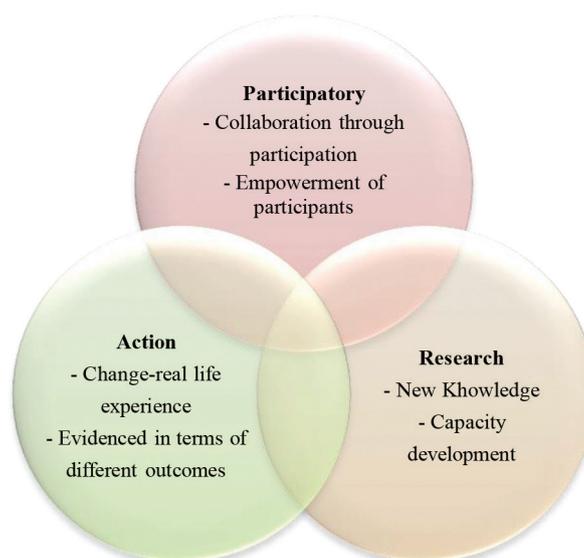
In summary, the PAR process has a lot of processes and aspects that researchers need to take into account from the preparatory stage, the coordinating process, the research with the community process, to the development stage that addresses community problems. The researchers will need to engage in concise preparation and planning. It is also important to focus on each stage of work as a continuous cycle, in which the final stage is monitoring and evaluation. This stage then leads back to the pre-research phase, reporting what happened in the community as the first step to seek common modes of development and continuous improvement. Each of these steps will be detailed for an action to obtain information, which may be used in conjunction with other research tools. From the PAR processes detailed above, we have summarized 3 steps: Pre-Research Phase; Research Phase; and Monitoring and Evaluation Phase.



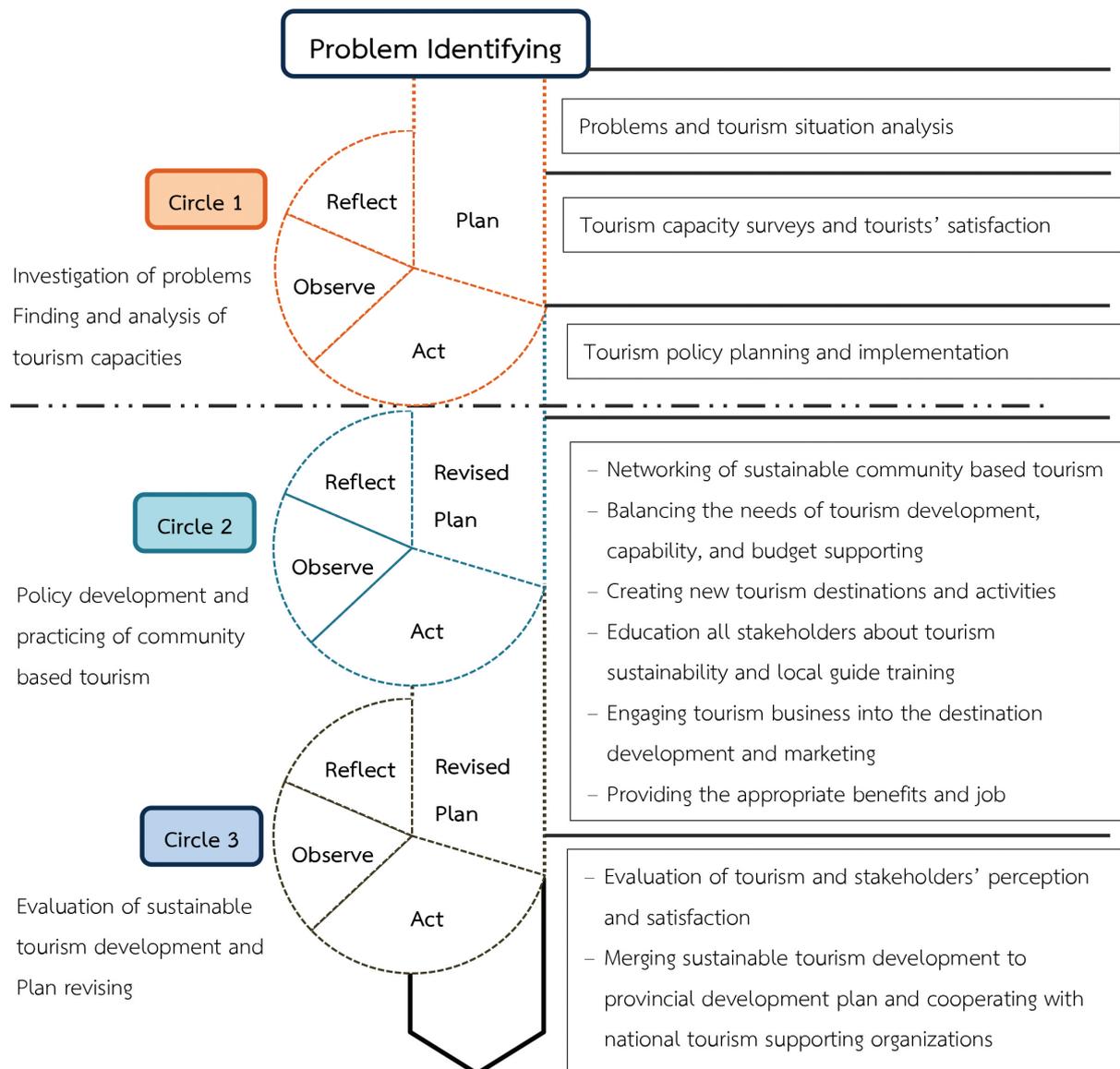
**Figure 2** The Process of Participatory Action Research  
**Source:** Pangkesorn, Tubtimcharoon, & Treetrong (2018)

From the tourism development plan that has been implemented according to the national strategy, there is a large amount of research in Thailand studying and developing Thai tourism, targeting communities that own tourism destinations or tourism products, focusing on finding tourism product identities, building strong communities, and conserving

tourism resources for sustainable tourism. To implement PAR for sustainability, a key component is the involvement of communities that seek to improve the quality of life in each community in a different context. The research process will also be involved in the development of new knowledge or community capacity.



**Figure 3** Development for Sustainability



**Figure 4** The PAR Model for Community-Based Tourism Development

**Source:** Adapted from Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) and Kindon, Pain, & Kesby (2007)

For research focused on finding tourism identity, building tourism communities, conservation of tourism resources, and sustainable tourism, The PAR method was carried out in various perspectives (Prajong, Boonkoun, & Sangruga, 2017). The goal of community-based tourism development is to strengthen local communities' capacity, benefit from tourism and sustainability (Chaiprasit, 2014; Morais et al., 2016). In

order to develop sustainable tourism, there must be cooperation among all sectors, and this should be focused on the local community: the cornerstone of sustainable tourism development. (Thonghor, 2008; Rolfes, 2010; Tiengthum, 2010; Morais et al., 2015; Ngamyinyoung & Silanoi, 2017). Community participation to conserve the environment for sustainable tourism (Balsiri, 2016; Pichayapaiboon, 2016; Kirdsung, 2017).

Restoring and preserving local culture in a tourist destination (Sub-In, 2008). Including the transmission of tacit knowledge to next generations to maintain and extend to explicit knowledge (Topanurakkun, 2015), to develop a strong community in tourism (Sangluea, Thammathiwat, & Mangep, 2012; Suthamdee, 2015). This will strengthen the network and create potential in community tourism, including connecting the community business network, leading to the development of a sustainable community network. (Soonthonsmai & Thammachart, 2016; Dinkoksung, Thangchan, & Thanee, 2018) and the developing model of community-based tourism management for sustainable

community (Putjorn et al., 2013; Ongthun, 2017; Kongdit et al., 2018). PAR has the potential to actively involve tourism-affected communities in the decision-making processes that impact their living environments and facilitate their participation in co-creating community-specific initiatives for sustainable change (Goebel, Camargo-Borges, & Eelderink, 2020). Overall, the PAR process helps to strengthen the local community connected to the tourist attraction or to whom the tourist attraction belongs and it is this strengthening of local bonds that in turn leads to sustainable tourism. In summary, the PAR for Sustainable Tourism in Thailand as diagram.

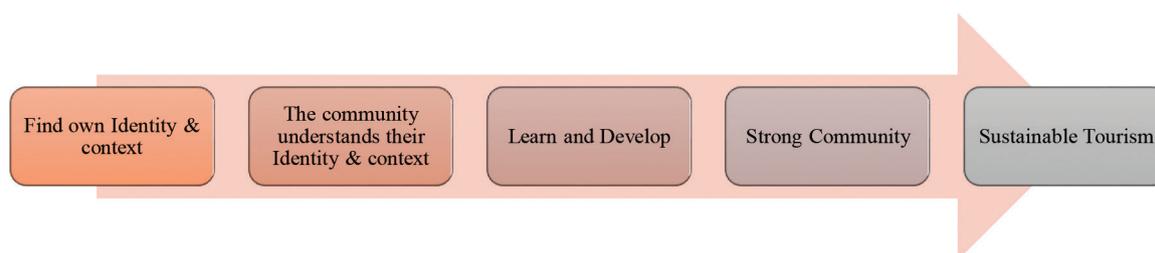


Figure 5 PAR for Sustainable Tourism in Thailand

### Key Success Factors and Limitations of PAR for Sustainable Tourism Development in Thailand

Based on research on PAR implementation in sustainable tourism development by Sangluea, Thammathiwat, & Mangep (2012), Chaiparsit (2014), Suthamdee (2015), Balsiri (2016), Soonthonsmai & Thammachart (2016), Ongthun (2017), Prajong, Boonkoun, & Sangrugsu (2017), Dinkoksung, Thangchan, & Thanee, (2018), Pangkesorn, Tubtimcharoon & Treetrong (2018), and Junead, Jamnongchob &

Manirochana (2019). The success factors and limitations of implementing PAR have been summarized as follows:

Key success factors in using PAR implementation for sustainable tourism development:

1. Conducting research according to Participatory Action Research (PAR) creates knowledge. This can be practical, the community that participates in the research project will benefit and get positive results when using knowledge to develop communities.

2. With the research process bringing the community to participate in every step, it creates an opinion, a platform to meet, exchange learning, gain knowledge and search for tacit knowledge from people in the community (community scholars) and brings knowledge into the research process.

3. People in the community take pride in being part of the research, love and care for local resources that benefit the community and create sustainability for tourism within the community.

4. Integrating research with teaching and learning that allows students to participate in conducting research to learn from real situations and apply theoretical knowledge, thus collaboratively creating new knowledge.

Limitations of using PAR implementation for sustainable tourism development:

1. During the initial pre-research phase of evaluating the information in concert with the communities, it was found that the community was lacking knowledge and confidence required to take part in a research project, so it was necessary to make use of community embedding to build familiarity and ultimately trust.

2. Communities are ready for development, but there is still a lack of serious support from government agencies at a local level and in some areas, a lack of personnel and budget to support continuous development.

3. The resettlement of working-age people, leaving only the elderly in the community in some communities, is an obstacle to conducting research.

## Conclusion

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is research that combines participatory research with action research, and qualitative research methods to acquire new knowledge in solving problems in the community through research, community participation and community leaders who participate in each step of the research. From ideation, participating in making decisions, participating in investigating and mutually beneficial participation in the learning process of the community. By using people centered development and solving problems by using the problem learning process, the community participates in thinking, action, finding solutions, and shared ownership. This brings about love of their community, and an unconditional willingness to embrace this form of development. When using the PAR process to develop the community to become a tourist attraction. The PAR process focuses on finding community tourism identities, building tourism communities, and conserving tourism resources for sustainable tourism. The goal of community-based tourism development is to strengthen local communities' capacity to benefit from tourism and developing sustainable tourism in Thailand.

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