

Rethinking informal tourism: Sustainable transitions under climate change in the Mekong delta

Phuong-Uyen Chau (Hokkaido University, Japan)

INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam Mekong Delta (VMD) is celebrated as the nation's most fertile agricultural region and for its distinctive cultural and ecological landscapes that enrich local tourism. Yet it is also among the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, facing rising sea levels, salinity intrusion, unpredictable floods, droughts, and more frequent extreme weather events. These disruptions intersect with rapid socio-economic transitions, including urbanisation, infrastructure development, and tourism modernisation. Together, they pose growing risks to livelihoods, and to food and water security for more than 17 million residents.

Tourism in the VMD functions not only as an economic driver but also as a setting for social interaction and cultural continuity. Much of this tourism economy, however, depends on informal workers. In 2021, around 33 million people worked informally nationwide, and 80.9 percent of the VMD workforce was in the informal sphere (GSO, 2022). In tourism, informal workers include market traders, hawkers, food vendors, boat drivers, and household entrepreneurs who sustain everyday visitor experiences while often lacking legal protections and formal recognition.

Although informality is sometimes treated as an exception in welfare-state settings, it is more commonly understood in many Global South contexts as a structural feature of the economy and urban life. This perspective matters for the VMD because informal tourism work is shaped by overlapping pressures: climate risks, development priorities, and policy agendas that promote productivity and formalisation. These pressures can generate tensions and contradictions for workers whose livelihoods depend on flexibility, local networks, and access to public space.

Against this background, this study investigates how informal tourism workers in the VMD navigate climate change impacts while being shaped by broader sustainable development agendas. It aims to clarify how informal tourism activities contribute to local economies and community resilience, and how they connect with sustainable development initiatives and climate change adaptation strategies. The study is guided by one main research question: How is the informal tourism sector positioned within the broader tourism landscape of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta, particularly in relation to sustainable development and climate change adaptation narratives?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining the informal tourism sector

The informal economy remains central to academic and policy debates because it is widespread and closely connected to development outcomes. In tourism research, Wahnschafft (1982) was among the first to define the informal sector by describing tourist resorts through a formal–informal dichotomy and focusing on activities rather than legal status alone. Building on this activity-based approach, later scholars describe the informal tourism sector as individuals and entities operating outside formal organisations while engaging tourists directly or indirectly (Slocum et al., 2011; Çakmak & Çenesiz, 2020; Carlos et al., 2023). Empirically, tourism informality is commonly associated with self-employment, the absence of formal contracts, and limited regulatory oversight (Slocum et al., 2011; Çakmak & Çenesiz, 2020). A further boundary concerns legitimacy. Informal activities can be socially and economically legitimate even when unregistered and should be distinguished from illegal activities (Cross, 2000; ILO, 2018). Despite extensive discussion, no single widely accepted definition of the “informal tourism sector” has emerged, and this definitional looseness can obscure informal actors' lived experiences and contributions to sustainable development. To tighten scope, this study adopts Wahnschafft's (1982) activity-based definition and focuses on informal tourism activities occurring in public tourism spaces.

Interpreting informality in development and governance debates

Beyond definitions, scholarship differs in explaining why informality persists and what it implies for development. Some approaches treat informality as a residual sphere expanding when formal employment is limited. Others view it as structurally produced through unequal development, selective regulation, and shifting labour arrangements. A further strand highlights how complex or exclusionary rules can encourage informal work, while institutional perspectives stress that informal economies are shaped by social norms, relationships, and everyday negotiation, not simply by state absence. These perspectives are particularly relevant for tourism because tourism spaces concentrate visibility, competition over public space, and regulatory attention. Informality therefore becomes politically salient, especially when tourism modernisation agendas promote order, quality, and standardised destination images that can marginalise informal livelihoods.

Sustainability, institutions, and the position of informal actors

In sustainability debates, informality is often framed negatively as an economic trap that reduces productivity, weakens institutions, and perpetuates poverty and inequality. However, critiques argue that such portrayals frequently reflect neoliberal assumptions about what counts as “good” economic participation rather than inherent features of informality (Özgür et al., 2020; Sultana et al., 2022). When institutional structures and social norms are overlooked, analyses risk becoming incomplete and potentially unjust, especially under climate disruption (Hillenkamp et al., 2013). In tourism, this critique is important because sustainability is shaped through governance and participation. UNWTO (2017) positioned tourism as a catalyst for Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting pillars that extend beyond conventional economic, social, and environmental dimensions to include cultural values and mutual understanding. Yet informal actors are often overlooked as stakeholders in tourism planning and sustainability initiatives (La Porta & Shleifer, 2014; Steiler & Nyirenda, 2021; Sultana et al., 2022). This matters because informal tourism workers can be simultaneously constrained by limited protections and enabled by flexibility, local knowledge, and social networks that support everyday visitor experiences.

Climate change, vulnerability, and informal tourism work

The IPCC (2023) describes climate change as a defining emergency that disrupts ecosystems, intensifies extreme weather, and accelerates sea level rise. These changes threaten tourism by reshaping destination environments, damaging natural and cultural heritage, and increasing hazards in vulnerable areas such as low-lying coasts and river deltas. As impacts intensify, tourism-dependent communities face growing challenges in sustaining livelihoods and adapting (Scott & Gössling, 2022). At the same time, tourism contributes to emissions and uneven climate harms (Becken & Hay, 2007). Despite this dual role, the specific ways climate change affects informality in tourism remain under-researched (Biggs et al., 2012). Informal tourism workers often operate micro-businesses with limited capital and small workforces, increasing vulnerability to climate-related disruption (Lo et al., 2019). Their work frequently occurs in open or environmentally fragile spaces, heightening exposure to hazards such as flooding and storms (Scott et al., 2019). Limited access to finance, information, and technical support can constrain recovery and adaptation, especially for vulnerable groups (Scott et al., 2019; Ngu et al., 2023; Phuong et al., 2023). As Espagne et al. (2021) note, informal economies are often among the first and hardest hit by climate shocks, deepening vulnerability and social marginalisation.

Research model

Synthesising these strands, this study develops a conceptual model linking climate risk, development agendas, and the everyday realities of informal tourism work. Climate hazards alongside tourism modernisation and formalisation narratives, create shifting pressures in public tourism spaces. These pressures are mediated by institutional conditions, including rules, enforcement patterns, and access to programmes, as well as by the protection gaps and resource constraints associated with informal employment. Within these conditions, informal tourism workers draw on resources such as skills, limited capital, and social networks to enact adaptation strategies accordingly. These practices shape outcomes such as livelihood resilience, wellbeing, and degrees of inclusion or exclusion from tourism governance and sustainability initiatives. Overall, the literature indicates the need to examine how

informal tourism workers navigate climate disruption while negotiating sustainable development agendas, and how their positioning within governance narratives shapes both vulnerability and adaptive capacity.

METHOD

The study explores the adaptive practices of informal tourism workers and their interaction with state-led climate adaptation and modernisation agendas. Data is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork across three sites: Cái Răng Floating Market in Cần Thơ (urban riverine area), Mũi Nai beach (coastal tourist area), and Núi Cẩm Mountain (religious mountain area) in An Giang. Methods included semi-structured interviews with boat drivers, street vendors, and micro-entrepreneurs; participant observation; and policy and planning document analysis. Narrative analysis was applied to interpret lived experiences and practices.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Climate impacts and adaptive projects present major barriers in the VMD, yet informal tourism sector continue to navigate uncertainties with resilience and creativity. The Delta's futures depend not only on infrastructure robustness but also on the wellbeing of those often left at the margins. Recognising informality as integral to the tourism economy could support more inclusive strategies that balance ecological, economic, and social goals.

Environmental disruptions intensify risks for tourism destinations and amplify the precariousness of informal livelihoods. Yet the findings also show that resilience is not absent. It is often enacted through informal networks, neighbourly coordination, and the continual reinvention of work identities. Informal actors draw on cultural knowledge, local narratives, and everyday hospitality practices to maintain competitiveness as tourism markets become more regulated and formalised. These adaptive strategies reveal both creativity and fragility, because they remain highly dependent on seasonal rhythms, open-air work settings, and volatile visitor demand.

State interventions and tourism modernisation projects are frequently introduced to reduce climate risks and enhance destination appeal. However, the study suggests that such initiatives can produce unintended consequences for informal workers. Informal activities may be framed as disorderly, unsafe, or outdated, while formal enterprises are implicitly positioned as the legitimate beneficiaries of development. In practice, this can reshape access to space, customers, and public resources in ways that deepen existing inequalities, even when policy language emphasises sustainability and inclusion.

Despite these pressures, informal actors continue to exercise agency. They negotiate with authorities, adjust how they position their services and identities, and engage in everyday forms of micro-resistance to protect their right to work. These practices illuminate a central theoretical implication: informality should not be treated only as a condition of absence or deficit, but as a relational and contested field shaped by governance, power, and social norms. The study therefore contributes to debates that move beyond binary views of formal versus informal, showing how informality is continuously produced and reconfigured through climate disruption, modernisation agendas, and the politics of recognition in tourism spaces. By foregrounding informal workers' lived experiences, the study highlights the need to evaluate sustainability not only by environmental performance or economic growth, but also by whose livelihoods are protected, whose voices count, and whose forms of work are deemed acceptable within "modern" tourism.

Practically, the study implies that climate adaptation and tourism planning in the VMD should treat informal workers as part of the tourism system rather than as a residual problem to be managed. Recognising their role can improve the effectiveness of adaptation initiatives, because informal actors often hold granular knowledge of local conditions, visitor flows, and workable safety practices in public spaces. More inclusive governance could involve: clearer and fairer rules for trading and access to public tourism sites; participatory mechanisms that allow informal workers to be consulted in planning; and support measures such as training, risk communication, and accessible financial tools that strengthen adaptive capacity without forcing immediate formalisation. Importantly, interventions

should be assessed for distributional effects, ensuring that climate and modernisation projects do not displace vulnerable groups while concentrating benefits among already advantaged formal enterprises.

Overall, the study argues that the Delta's tourism futures depend not only on infrastructural robustness but also on the wellbeing and capabilities of those commonly left at the margins. Viewing informality as integral to the tourism economy supports more realistic and equitable strategies that balance ecological protection, economic opportunity, and social justice.

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