

Fostering socio-economic development of rural areas through cultural and religious tourism: innovative solutions for involvement of private sector

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Summary

Sustainable cultural and religious tourism of good quality with effective territory management and solutions that integrate socio-cultural and economic values can foster development of rural areas with rich sacral cultural heritage (pilgrimage churches, monasteries, etc.) and support preservation of heritage.

Due to the present economic crisis and lack of public investments, a more active involvement of the private sector in initiatives connected with preservation of church cultural heritage and its valorisation through cultural and religious tourism can be of key importance. This paper presents selected good practices that foster involvement of entrepreneurship and cultural and religious tourism connected with church cultural heritage of rural areas. Besides, these good practices consider also social projects that support inclusion of the disadvantaged – people with physical and/or mental disabilities, people with mental health problems, the long-term unemployed, the young, etc.

Involvement of the private sector can be fostered through special financial mechanisms (tax systems connected with sponsorship and donations) that can support development of cultural and religious tourism connected with church cultural heritage in an effective way. However, the issue of such financial instruments is complex and differs from state to state.

Keywords: cultural heritage, cultural tourism, rural areas, private sector

1 INTRODUCTION

Rural areas are facing significant social, economic, demographic, environmental and other problems, such as depopulation, lack of financial resources and innovations, a peripheral position, lack of employment opportunities and high quality services, etc. To foster development of rural areas, it is of key importance to identify specific resources of these territories. Linking nature, traditions, monuments, authentic products (arts and crafts, food, wine, etc.), social networks, etc. can represent an important factor for development of these peripheral areas. Sacral cultural heritage with an often great artistic and historic value plays an important role in this process, because churches, usually centres of rural communities and their cultural life, monasteries and other shrines could be the main drivers of sustainable socio-economic and cultural development of many European rural areas.

Due to the multi-dimensional value of cultural heritage that depends on the variations in the process of social construction and selection, the passage from the element of cultural heritage perceived as goods to the one perceived as a resource is very complicated and requires a complex system of territory management which should include human, technological, administrative and financial resources (Cicerchia 2012: 30, 133).

2 CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM AS A GENERATOR OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS

Development of rural areas with rich sacral cultural heritage can be fostered through sustainable cultural and religious tourism of high quality. In the last years, tourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors of the world economy. The policies which are oriented to foster tourism can also encourage growth in other sectors. There is a very positive connection between tourism receipts and economic growth. An increase of one standard deviation in tourism activity (tourism specialization) means an increase of around 0.5 percentage point in annual economic growth, given that all other factors are stable. However, a solely tourism-based strategy is not enough, because in order to be inclusive and sustainable, it should be part of a strategy of economic diversification (Arezki 2012: 183-212).

Tourism is a complicated phenomenon which is even more sophisticated and specialized. Cultural tourism still privileges the main cultural destinations, especially cultural cities, such as Venice, Rome, Pompeii, Florence, Paris, etc., thereby causing problems regarding sustainability and overpopulation. On the other hand, there are a lot of rural areas with rich and unique cultural heritage that are overlooked and do not receive enough attention in terms of development of rural areas through cultural heritage. The main cultural destinations should function as anchor sites that would divert the flow of visitors to alternative, less overloaded rural destinations in order to balance this flow and mitigate great development disparities between urban and rural areas. This process should be stimulated systematically by decision makers (THETRIS Review report, Graz-Seckau 2013: 7; Region SWOT analysis, Małopolska region, [2013]: [5]; Cicerchia 2012: 28-29, 54).

Cultural tourism in rural areas can offer inhabitants access to cultural events, different forms of entertainment and other services and increase the number and level of services that would otherwise not even exist due to lack of demand given the small number of inhabitants (Cicerchia 2012: 80-86). Moreover, cultural tourism can contribute to necessary financial resources for the maintenance and development of a cultural heritage site and its region, as long as it is managed in accordance with the needs of the local population and the sustainability of the site and its region.

Depopulation of rural areas has been causing great economic, social, demographic, cultural and environmental problems; it is therefore important to consider the fact that well-developed and managed cultural heritage assets could be an important driver of employment preventing depopulation and stimulating regional and local economy and creativity. »This form of tourism includes experiencing local culture and traditions; participating in arts-related activities; visiting museums, monuments and heritage sites; but also focusing on landscape, nature, traditions, wine and food, handicraft products. Actually, it promotes the use of forgotten or under-explored resources enabling economic sustainability and providing funds for cultural activities. It includes not only urban areas, but also rural areas showcasing the traditions of indigenous cultural communities, their values and lifestyle« (Pultrone 2014: 1468).

In the framework of the project THETRIS - *THEmatic Transnational church Route development with the Involvement of local Society*, supported by the European Union and the European Regional Development Fund between 2012 and 2014, different good practices

regarding preservation and valorisation of church cultural heritage in rural areas and development of cultural tourism in these areas have been presented and studied. The regions included in the project were the Szatmár Region in Hungary, the Prešov Region in the Slovak Republic, the Šluknov Region and the Bohemian Switzerland Region in the Czech Republic, the Małopolska Region in Poland, the Piedmont and the Veneto Regions in Italy, the Meissen District in Germany, the Styria Region in Austria and the Goriška and the Gorenjska Regions in Slovenia.

Regarding the development of cultural tourism in rural areas and the involvement of the private sector in this process, I would like to point out two good practices from the Susa Valley from the Province of Turin (Italy). This valley with a rich cultural heritage and marvellous landscape has been an important European transit area for centuries and has therefore witnessed important historical events and processes. The valley keeps many artistic and historical treasures of archaeology, military fortifications, sacred art, etc. The area has long been struggling with problems of a dichotomy between urban and rural, a high rate of commuting to the city of Turin, few employment opportunities and depopulation in marginal areas. Especially problematic is the disparity between the high-/mid-valley and the lowland areas, which are strongly connected with the nearby city of Turin, while the high valley has a high incidence of seasonality of ski tourism (Culture and nature 2010: 3-5; Susa Valley – Regional SWOT Analysis 2013: 3-15).

The initiative "Valle Susa Card", undertaken between July 2010 and January 2011, can be considered an interesting tool to promote cultural tourism and involvement of the private sector in the field of cultural heritage. Not only was the customer's loyalty promoted and was the will aroused to discover the territory's treasures (art, culture, nature, food and wine products), also the number of tourists increased. The initiative involved museums, artistic and natural sites, small hotels, holiday farms and houses, and bed & breakfast. All these facilities ensured high level of services certified by the "Yes! Torino Quality" label, released by the Turin Chamber of Commerce, the "B&B Doc" label of the Province of Turin and the "Ecolabel", the European label for ecological quality. With this card which was valid for one year it was possible to collect rebates and discounts and gain a final prize if one collected all the required stamps. Besides raising awareness of art and alpine culture, the initiative proved a useful tool to foster involvement of the private sector in the field of culture and to stimulate a competitive and integrated cultural tourism. Moreover, another aspect that speaks in favour

of the initiative was the fact that the initiative was implemented through the agreement among public and private operators. Two working groups were organized, one for associations and managers of cultural heritage sites and another one for food, wine and facilities management operators. A training for private operators was organized and the locals were also involved (Good practice collection 2013: 32-34).

In the Province of Turin, another important initiative connects the public and the private sector successfully and advances the cultural tourism of the Susa Valley; "Via Francigena-Valle di Susa" promotes the historical itinerary through the Susa Valley and the Alpine passes from Italy to France. From the Middle Ages, Via Francigena has connected Northern Europe with Rome, which together with Santiago de Compostela and Jerusalem was one of the destinations of the so-called "peregrinationes majores" (<http://www.la-via-francigena.it>). The Association of 34 Italian Municipalities of Via Francigena was founded in Fidenza in April 2001 in order to promote the ancient pilgrimage route. In 2006, it was renamed the European Association of Via Francigena. By 2013, Via Francigena of the Susa Valley had joined 122 associate operators responsible for accommodation, restaurants, local products and stores, three natural parks, etc. One of the activities was the selection of food service operators that would offer an agreed menu at fixed costs, another one was the training for private operators. The target groups of the route are pilgrims, trekkers, pupils, couples, families, and small groups of tourists that are not interested in mass tourism. This territorial marketing tool is supposed to take care of a high number of tourists, the increased visibility of the territory and its cultural heritage and the development of niche cultural tourism in the lower part of the Susa Valley (Good practice collection 2013: 34-35).

Some initiatives which were presented and studied in the THETRIS project show that it is possible to foster entrepreneurship and cultural tourism, paying special attention to involvement of the disadvantaged people. The social work project Domenico whose main aim was to minimize the exclusion of people with special needs is one of these good practices. In 2004, the charitable organization Domenico was founded by the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of St. Lambrecht and St. Lambrecht mayor (Austria). The employees of the organisation revitalized the garden of the monastery, where they now grow vegetable and herbs and make products out of wood and willow. The garden has become a significant tourist attraction where the employees also sell their products. The initiative offers persons with special needs (an average of 8 to 11 employees) a chance to be integrated into the society with

professional guidance and care (Good practice collection 2013: 42-44).

3 CULTURAL HERITAGE AND MORE EFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF PRIVATE SECTOR

The document *Cultural Counts. Towards new Strategies for Culture in Sustainable development. La Culture Compte. Vers de Nouvelles Stratégies pour la Culture dans le Développement* pointed out the importance of a more advantageous fiscal policy for private owners, occupants and investors in cultural heritage already in 1999 (Cultural Counts [1999]: 20). However, until today, many European countries have failed to make enough effort in that direction or reach satisfactory results. Specific mechanisms have to be developed to stimulate a more effective inclusion of cultural heritage in the economic cycle. Due to the present economic crisis and lack of public investments, more active involvement of the private sector is of crucial importance in initiatives connected with preservation of church cultural heritage and its valorisation through cultural and religious tourism.

Involvement of the private sector can be fostered through specific financial mechanisms that can support development of cultural and religious tourism in an effective way. Governments in most European countries are the most important investors in culture and cultural heritage, but different models of cultural policies can be recognized. A model dominated by public intervention is especially characteristic of continental European countries. On the other hand, a model that combines the above-mentioned orientation with a reduced public intervention is typical of the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the Nordic countries. In the last fifteen years, the first model has acquired a tendency to shift in the direction of the model characteristic of the northern European states; furthermore, increasing importance of the private sector in the field of culture has been recognized. In some countries (Italy, the United Kingdom), the necessity to involve the private sector and introduce fiscal incentives is considered crucial. In the process of stimulating involvement of the private sector, there are two important factors to consider: the significance of tradition of private support, characteristic of countries, such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, and the important role of the state as a facilitator (Klamer, Mignosa, Petrova 2014: 215-220). Excessive protection and regulation (with many examples of inefficient public institutions due to an automatic annual financial support) debilitate the vitality of cultural markets. The

Anglo-Saxon liberalism has encouraged development of the cultural market (Benhamou 2004: 145-146). A more extensive participation of the private sector can only be efficient in connection with better strategic planning and orientation on different levels of the public sector (Cicerchia 2012: 43).

In some European countries (e.g. Italy), the savings banks have the obligation to assign a part of their income to activities connected with cultural heritage through bank foundations (Benhamou 2004: 140). Through these non-profit private corporations, the private sector plays an important role in preservation of cultural heritage by financing or assuring financing of activities dedicated to preservation and valorisation of cultural heritage. Unfortunately, this practice does not exist in all European countries, especially in the East European countries, therefore, the transfer and adaptation of such corporations is recommended for other European countries as well. Incentives in other European countries include, for example, donations of cultural heritage to museums (Greece, Austria), interventions on architectural heritage (Italy, Belgium) or maritime cultural heritage (Finland), systematic archaeological excavations (Romania), etc. Governments stimulate private support to culture through matching grants, public-private partnership, lottery funding, etc. (Klamer, Mignosa, Petrova 2014: 220).

The economic value on the one side and the cultural value on the other represent an important issue in decision making regarding heritage. Some heritage sites have an important cultural value, but a low economic value, while others have the opposite problem. In such cases, we face a question of how much economic value individuals and the society are prepared to leave off for protecting a certain level of cultural heritage, and vice versa (Thorsby 2012: 56-58). For identification and classification of cultural heritage assets, a societal agreement is very important. Based on that, an efficient and remunerative set of policy instruments and financial (fiscal) mechanisms can be developed and implemented to produce optimal economic returns and preserve and protect non-market values of cultural heritage sites (Thorsby 2012: 45-72; Trupiano 2005: 337-343). Fiscal incentives should include donations in order to encourage development in the field of cultural heritage. This practice is set up on the awareness that »the resulting increase in the resources for culture should outweigh the cost of the benefits themselves« (Trupiano 2005: 337-343). Indirect fiscal means are realized through financial mechanisms, such as special credit lines, property tax deferment, fiscal incentives, loans, grants, waiver of development fees (Thorsby 2012: 64-72), fiscal treatments for cultural organizations or fiscal benefits on private and corporate

patronage, donations and sponsorship etc. (Trupiano 2005: 337-343). Sponsorship has always played an important role in financing culture; numerous English museums were founded thanks to private sponsorship. Nowadays, sponsorship is relatively well represented in the United States of America, but very scarce in France (Benhamou 2004: 140).

Incentives should be big enough to assure an effective inclusion of the private sector. It is also important to involve the private sector in large-scale, long-term cultural heritage activities, because its support has so far been limited to small-scale activities with short-term results and an immediate promotion of its collaboration (Jakub Ivančo: THETRIS Transferability training 2014). Financial mechanisms should also stimulate collaboration of small and medium enterprises, because their involvement could prove very sustainable in terms of invigorating a local/regional identity and building a regional image of small and medium enterprises, etc. In this framework, special workshops and trainings for local entrepreneurs, associations and inhabitants are recommended to teach them how to link tradition with innovation (THETRIS Transferability training 2014).

For successful and sustainable preservation and management of cultural heritage sites, more effective collaboration between experts, local authorities and local residents, who live in the area and change and sustain cultural heritage elements, is indispensable. As experts often do not recognize the values and meanings that the local population ascribes to cultural heritage elements, this might result in a situation where these values are neglected and only experts' values and criteria are taken into account (Bajec 2014: 152-155).

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