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The Sustainability between Society and Environment: the European Project "ERNEST" in the Province of Rimini

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ABSTRACT

The strong impact over the environment generated by tourism, can produce problems quite difficult to overcome, and which directly involve host communities. These problems have made it necessary reaching a balance between the autonomous development of tourist destinations and the preservation of environment, integrating the attention to sustainability into the tourist activities and into the tourist policies. In this brief work, the main results of the study conducted in the Province of Rimini within the European Project ERNEST will be described, and we will introduce the importance of the "social dialogue" as a tool to boost the participation in decision-making processes of all actors interested on the local touristic project. This can lead to an effective monitoring system of the tourist development, useful to find more sustainable ways to develop the territory, also helping to prevent the destination's decline that occurs when host communities' "limits of acceptance" towards tourism are exceeded, and indentifying new sustainable scenarios for the future of the destination.

Keywords: tourism, social dialogue, participation, sustainable development.

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1. The European Project ERNEST

The increasing arrivals in European destinations, in many contexts have had a strong impact over the environment, generating problems quite difficult to overcome, and directly involving local communities. So that, it has made it necessary and urgent - also in a preventive way as well as resolute - to reach a balance between the autonomous development of tourist destinations - or potentially tourist ones - and the environment, thus integrating the attention to sustainability into the same tourism activities. But, combining the development of competitive economic activities on the one hand, and the conservation of the environment and local communities quality of life on the other hand, it may be a difficult goal to achieve, especially when the decision-making processes and the government dynamics don't preclude to an effective involvement of all territorial actors, insiders and outsiders included. Therefore, in response to these needs, tourist destinations have had to articulate their offer on the basis of characteristics as much as possible consistent with the demands of post-modern society, that is now more inclined to a tourism culture, and to a "how-to-do-tourism" culture, that cares about the environment and the culture of places, that rewards places with a good quality of life, and that pays attention to the condition of local workers, also respecting local communities and their lifestyle.

Thus, the future of tourism in general, and of the European one in particular, heavily depends on the quality of tourists' experience considered in its entirety, which is declined in a good quality of the experience both for tourists and host communities. The project ERNEST - *European Research Network on Sustainable Tourism* - is designed to answer these issues. In particular, it aims to promote research activities in the field of sustainable development in its social component.

The Project, thought to coordinate regional research programs on sustainable tourism to define the level of sustainability for European tourist sites and destinations, aims at reaching its goals through the application of participatory processes involving all local stakeholders. This "exercise" of good practices helps to identify appropriate indicators to apply at the local context to measure the level of sustainability in tourism activities, drawing one or more future scenarios for tourist destinations.

There are two pillars of reference within this *in fieri* path:

- the *social dialogue*, which aims to encourage more active participation and greater involvement of local entrepreneurial and social realities in decision-making and planning processes;
- the *measurements on the field*, conducted by using indicators to highlight the sustainable or unsustainable elements about tourist development decision-making policies.

In this context Rimini¹ stands as "pilot reality" in the regional range. It has been chosen as a case study on microscale to identify good practices in terms of tourist sustainability, and to assess their potential applicability to the macroscale. In fact, over the years, the province of Rimini has carried out a strong and in-depth activity of

¹The numbers that characterize it as a tourist reception basin, show that tourism is firmly confirmed as the main sector of local economy.

analysis in the field of sustainability at local, national and European level, and it has made efforts to realize a new sustainable tourist model. The one undertaken by the Province of Rimini is, therefore, a virtuous practical application of best practices which aim to managing the territorial complexity by a local tourist development point of view².

The "numbers"³ characterizing Rimini as important tourist destination, show that tourism is confirmed as the main stable voice of the local economy. This made it necessary to lay the foundations for a growth not only marked by quantitative but also by qualitative elements, thus implementing a model of tourist development that successfully combines the defense of natural and cultural heritage, and the valorization of the Province, both socially and economically.

In this brief work we will describe the main results of the study conducted in the Province of Rimini within the ERNEST Project, and we will introduce the importance of the "social dialogue" as a tool to boost participative processes. The continuous participation, in decision-making processes, of all territorial actors involved in the local touristic project can lead to an effective monitoring system of tourist development to find more sustainable ways to develop the territory, also helping to prevent the destination's decline when host communities' "limits of acceptance" towards tourism and its expressions are exceeded, and to identify new sustainable scenarios for the future of the destination.

² In this regard, the analysis conducted so far, and based on the use of dedicated tools such as TCCA, highlighted guidelines for finding ways compatible with local environmental characteristics - in the broadest sense of the term - to promoting a sustainable land use:

- the concept of integrated local development;
- the prediction of future scenarios of alternative development;
- the development seen in terms of sustainability indicators and in terms of quality of life;
- the importance of partnership with the private sector and of citizen participation;
- the goal of achieving a series of action programs in the short, medium and long term.

³ In 2007 during the summer the Province's population increased from about 380.000 inhabitants to 1.300.000 approx. Instead, in 2009 there were more than 45.000 start-ups in the accommodation and catering sector, 30.000 small and medium enterprises linked to tourism phenomenon, 3.105.012 yearly arrivals, 17.624.143 tourists / visitors, 2.274 accommodation facilities (in hotels, residences, apartments).

2. The “social dialogue” as a tool to enhance sustainable development.

In order to identify a transferable research path, the Emilia-Romagna Region and the Province of Rimini, together with the scientific support of the Faculty of Economics in Rimini, Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna, have organized four workshop⁴ aimed at creating an exchange of views between all actors involved in the local tourist development project.

Fig. 1 ERNEST workshops' posters.



Source: author's personal archive. Years: 2010, 2011, 2012.

Through the concrete application of the “social dialogue” as a tool for enhancing communication among actors, and following the operational directions provided by the Value Stretch Model (VSM)(Mansfeld Y.J.2006), some indicators have been selected to highlight strengths and weaknesses of local tourism sector.

The Value Stretch Model, here used to measure the impact of intrinsic characteristics of local tourist system over the community, can be considered as a tool for a dynamic

⁴ “Tourism and territory for a sustainable future. Practicing social dialogue” (September 28, 2010, Rimini), “Tourism and Community for a Sustainable Future. Practicing social dialogue” (May 4, 2011, Rimini), “What Rimini would you like for a sustainable future? Practicing social dialogue” (November 9, 2011, Rimini), “ERNEST final workshop. Social dialogue and governance: new tools for the development of a tourist destination” (June 29, 2012, Rimini).

monitoring of effects generated by the presence of tourism in the host communities. Moreover, it is especially useful for turistically mature communities, which want to take up the concept of "sustainability" as the predominant character of their own local development: since it is a model that can predict and avoid the decline of a destination, it helps to understand what directions have to be chosen to plan a tourist product that is not necessarily linked to unsustainable forms of territory tourist development.

Through the VSM it is possible to measure the LAC (Limit for Accettable Change) of an host community, starting from the assumption that many can be the effects on host communities and residents due to the presence of tourism. In other words, it is possible to define the limits within which to implement a tourism project, thanks to the persistence of an exchange between tourism and local communities in terms of benefits. The community gives up some points in exchange for improvements that may come from tourism. If this exchange is lost, the community might take active behaviours against the tourist project, as possible "retaliations" on tourists or, in general, in a social safety lack.

The gap between the level of "tolerance" and the one of "reconciliation", with respect to local tourism development project, that provides an indication about the stress to which the host community is subjected due to presence of tourism, can be filled by immediately handling what is not tolerated or hardly accepted / acceptable. Obviously, the broader the gap, the more are the reconciliation activities that can be implemented, with greater chances to act. Instead, if this range is restricted, it means that few and expensive actions can be taken for reconciliation, and even hardly applicable to the context of reference except with the risk of a potential worsening of the current situation.

In other words, the "stretch value" measures the gap between the limits of tolerance and the level of expectations of a local community, whereas a low value of both levels makes it easier to work on a new project. So, in this case, we no longer speak about a limit, but about a range of actions to increase the tolerance toward the tourist project. Within such range, communities are still willing to negotiate the inclusion of the tourist project; therefore, it provides a measure of the challenges to face in order to ensure that local community will support the local tourist development.

During the two first workshops, held in the structures of the Rimini Campus, participants discussed about the issues of sustainable tourism, and about the future of their territory, within a focus group (applying the Nominal Group Technique⁵). The workshops were divided into three sessions aimed at identifying the tourist scenarios (and linked effects) that local community wants to avoid or wants to achieve, and to which the community appears to be particularly sensitive.

The need to better represent the community has led to the involvement of territorial actors operating in the Province of Rimini as economic / entrepreneurial and social parts, directly or indirectly involved in tourism sector, and which act to support the territorial development. While, in the first workshop, practitioners, opinion leaders and representatives of local Professional Associations have been involved, representatives of social community and academics participated in the second workshop.

The third workshop was dedicated, instead, to visitors and tourists whose presence in the territory affects, for better and for worse, the choises about local development.

⁵The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was invented by Delbecq and Van den Van in 1968. It is used in strategic planning as a tool to support decision-making processes.

This workshop only foresaw participants to filling out an *ad hoc* questionnaire including indicators which could better highlight the respondents' perception about those positive and negative elements which emerge in the assessment of the local reality from an outer perspective. The workshop was held during an important trade exhibition; this helped to achieve a large and diverse sample of stakeholders, and to count on more representative data for our purpose. On the other hand, tourists, with their "tourism gaze", helped to shape more reliable and complete typologies of intervention to be implemented in the territory, which they identified as priorities for the local tourist sustainability in its economic, social and environmental components.

Fig. 2 ERNEST third workshop, during Ecomondo - 2011 edition.



Source: author's personal archive, 2011.

The ERNEST final workshop was, instead, a public event to disseminate the results of the research study carried out within the Project. As a conclusive parenthesis of this *in fieri* path, it was an occasion to highlight the good practices implemented at a regional level, and to present the set of indicators identified by local stakeholders as a tool to be applied in the analysis of the territory, to support local institutions in tourist planning in view of a present and future perspective of action.

3. The main results: what scenarios for the Province of Rimini.

This experiment of "good practices" enabled participants to establish priority themes and to discuss about the present issues linked to the local development, and about the future of their territory.

Through participants' points of view and perceptions, and thanks to their choice of specific indicators identified as representative of the local weaknesses and strenghts, the "level of intolerance", the "current level", and the "level of local expectations" were then detected. Thus, these indicators represent those critical elements (both negatives and positives) that should be considered as structural variables in the

planning of regional development policies, and that have to be used in measuring the level of tourist sustainability.

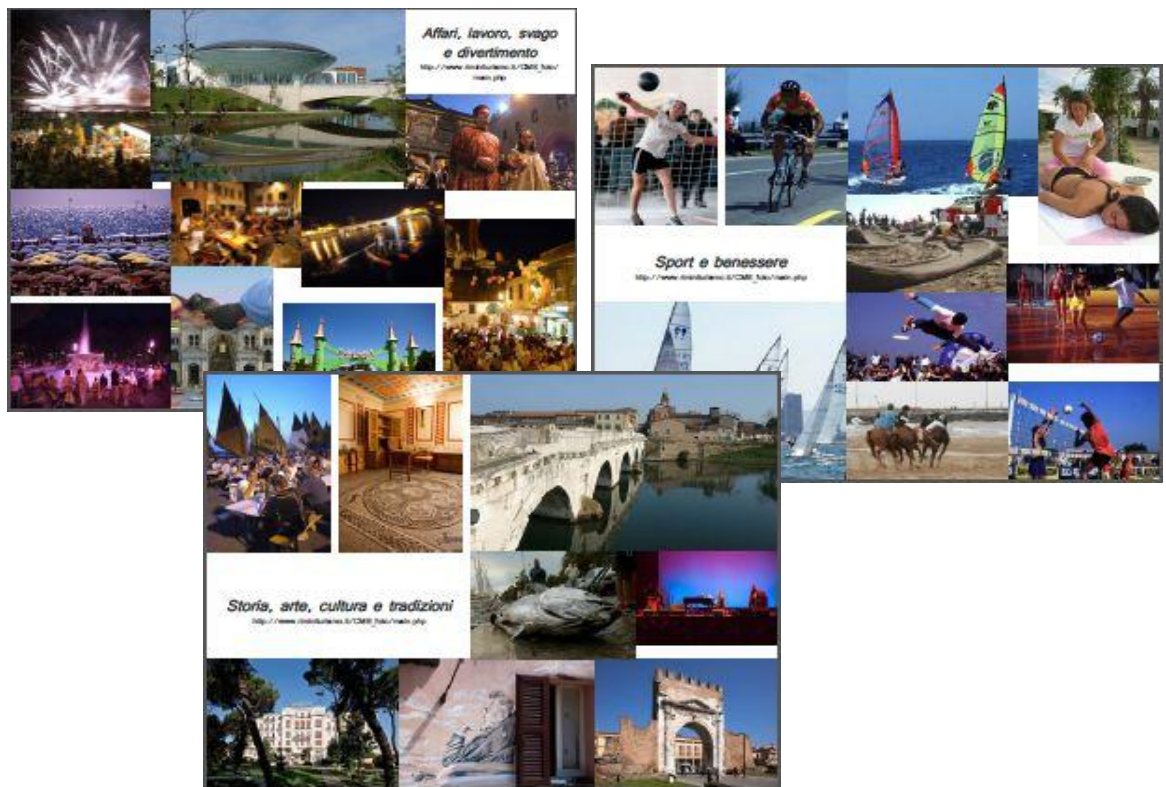
From gathered data and information, a clear congruence appears between what emerged from the questionnaires, and the issues pointed out during the workshops. The workshops made it possible to create a common and shared moment of reflection around the *status quo* of the tourism development, highlighting those elements that already appear in the perception of the local community, and which may turn particularly critical with respect to the future development of the territory.

Moreover, in general, the participation of people coming from different origins and backgrounds, but with a strong bond with the territory, and which represent the lively local social and economic structure, has enriched the "social dialogue practices" with different visions. This allowed the coming out of additional reflections about the present of Rimini, and the possible evolution of the destination, to answer the need of innovation imposed by the continuous demand evolution in the tourist market.

The typical tourist vocation of Rimini, together with its capability to mix tradition with innovation, and to providing visitors a wide and varied range of choices, makes it a "chameleon reality" in constant evolution, whose local resources, which are limited, continue to play a primary role in maintaining this competitiveness at European level. Hence, the need to protect these resources, and to promote their valorization through a diversification of the local supply – Rimini as "City of Tourism(s)" -, whose benefits have necessarily to pass through a long term requalification of the territory, combining socio-economic and environmental goals: an environmentally friendly requalification, and careful about local culture and traditions, which implies the ecological conversion of disused structures and buildings along the sea in host structures, the improvement of the marine landscape (waterfront), and the improvement of connections to ease access to territory, and to empower fast and sustainable ways to travel within it. Moreover, it is necessary acting to promote the realization of development scenarios that go by the growth of cultural tourism to the rediscovery of landscapes, tastes and flavors of the hinterland, even creating new opportunities related to wellness and entertainments for all seasons (the "Sea Park"), but abandoning the image of "divertimentificio" ("fun factory") bound to the destination since a long time.

These are the directions indicated and considered as preferable, and more capable to combine socio-economic and environmental goals together. For this reason, it is important to recover the centrality of communication, and to extend the practice of non-governmental and governmental actions based on a strong participation, and on an effective territorial cooperation to assure a continuing dialogue between all local stakeholders.

Fig. 3 Rimini future scenarios.



Source: author's personal archive, 2012.

Referring to what emerged from the analysis of workshops' results, it nevertheless seems clear that, in the context of Rimini, what is called "area of reconciliation" by the VSM, is actually very wide. In fact, here, we are far from a level that can be defined as absolute intolerance toward the tourist phenomenon. In fact, those identified as critical elements into an authentic perspective of government and land management, have to be rather seen as the consequences - more or less predictable - of required choices for the territory development, and, therefore, as the things to work on harder for mitigating the effects and reconducting the community towards a major level of acceptance of the tourist project. This means that, what we generally see as "tourism pathologies", in this context should be rather considered as "land management pathologies". This is especially true when considering the importance that tourism has always played in these areas, where it is not considered as a problem, but as the form of territory development in which community recognizes itself more, and on which it has chosen to invest more over time.

The Province of Rimini, whose main industry, the "seaside tourism", has an increasing and articulated basin of competition in the world, during the last thirty years has had to deal with the need to reorganize its offer for tourists, even to deseasonalizing and to address the problems of labour, employment and job insecurity, especially among young people. So, when tourism tout court - referring to the tourism of sun, sea, seaside - didn't get the answers to be given to the community, this would have exposed Rimini and its economy to very critical problems in a development perspective. Thus, this required the destination to move towards programmatic

decisions not fully compatible with the environmental constraints imposed by the territory and by the "good sense". Ultimately, speaking about sustainability today does not imply to take into account only the environmental aspect, but also the social one, which is precisely the starting point to reach the environmental sustainability. The sustainability, considered as mere attention to the environment, is thus overcome, because a community may still be willing to make certain sacrifices on the environment side to achieve a greater social and economic sustainability.

In conclusion, tourism is a leading voice for the local economy and, as such, it is necessary to create the conditions to keep it in good health. But the connotation of "organized destination", as the reality here considered is, implies to be able to propose and deliver a range of competitive services market. So, faced with the need to modernize in order to stay competitive in the market, and to contain the negative effects of this evolutionary process at the same time, the attention should be therefore directed towards the increase of sustainable forms of tourism to reduce the impact on the territory. But, to achieve such a management, it is needed the support of the community context, and the participation of all concerned stakeholders to create an effective structure / network of communication, within which cooperation and social dialogue should be more facilitated. This is a crucial step to create solid and shared foundation from which to harmonize local needs. That is, to be able to implement a tourist development plan that is in line with characteristics, priorities and limits of the territory, in its entirety considered.

7. Conclusions.

As the tourism industry is closely related to the development and management of the Province territory, what was expected to get from the workshops was the participants' ability to outline a series of scenarios, together with the definition of guidelines for the future tourist development through the creation of a "moment of projectuality" in a sustainable social and environmental perspective. And this result has been reached.

The involvement of most part of the stakeholders interested in the new tourist development project of Rimini, provided a reliable picture of the current situation of the destination, even outlining ways to enhance the local development which could be desired and desirable, consistent with the main characteristics of territory – social, cultural and environmental - and with the available resources; but, above all, in line with the priorities identified by the economic and social parts involved in the workshops.

The policies arising from the need to stay competitive in the market, must not be neither detrimental to the environment, nor to the communities that depend on its resources as fount to boost the economic growth, and the development of the territory. Thus, a sustainable management of destinations is crucial to the tourism development, especially in terms of effective use of space, general control over the "shapes" of development, and investment in infrastructure and services to be requalified and modernized.

With this brief summary of the research made within the ERNEST Project, supported by current and effective analysis tools, we tried to outlining those critical elements that

should be considered as structural variables in planning territorial development policies from a tourist perspective, but even when measuring the level of tourist sustainability. To ensuring that the tourism development remains at levels which are consistent with the needs of local communities and environment, a sustainable management of the tourism industry can boost economic performance and competitiveness of a destination on the long term. To get such a management, however, it is necessary to support the community participation, and the participation of all involved stakeholders, in order to create a "dialoguing system" which facilitates the partnership and the social comparison, and which creates solid and shared foundations to reach the harmonization of local needs and launch a more effective and sustainable tourist project.

Therefore, to achieve the goal of tourist sustainability, it is necessary to seek the *placet* of local community, without which any development project could be hardly implemented. But this consensus is primarily built by listening to the community, and by promoting a constant dialogue around the management of the territory and its resources. These elements may sustain and nurture the tourist competitiveness of the Province and, at the same time, they are essential to pursue policies for an economic, social and environmental sustainability within the territory's development project, according to a present and future perspective of realization.

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