

## **Establishing a Network of European Rural Villages for the Development of Sustainable Tourism**

*Mariangela Franch, Umberto Martini, Federica Buffa and Fabio Sacco*

### **Abstract**

The paper deals with the research activity carried out by the Authors in the context of the European Project “Listen to the Voice of Villages”. The focus is on the governance asset and tools able to enhance sustainable tourism development in European rural villages. The subject of the research activity regards the Project’s first year, dedicated to structural analysis of the target territories and the definition of the methodology in order to identify existing governance networks. The Authors have elaborated on such basis a governance model, adaptable to the peculiar characteristics of every area, able to foster the creation of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) where they do not as yet exist, or to improve their activity. In the following two years the implementation of a transnational association is foreseen (Vital Villages Association) to support local development and to certify the sustainability of the process, in order to raise international visibility of European rural villages as tourism destinations.

Keywords: rural villages, destination governance, sustainable tourism, networking

### **Aim and theoretical background of the research**

The paper is part of the European Project “Listen to the Voices of the Villages” promoted by the Central European Programme of the year 2008. The general aim of this project, coherent with the topic of Priority 4, “Enhancing competitiveness and attractiveness of cities and regions”, is to improve the life quality in cities and regions and promote sustainable urban development. The project will support a poly-centric development to avoid disparity in urban areas due to social and spatial segregation and will address demographic and social change, as well as the protection, preservation and exploitation of cultural resources ([www.listentothevoiceofvillages.org](http://www.listentothevoiceofvillages.org)).

The aim of this three-year research project involving the Authors is to define the most effective and efficient tools for sustainable tourism development in areas with unexplored potential and tools of governance public - private, capable of contributing to the tourism development of the site and having positive spin-offs on the area and capable of maintaining and increasing attractiveness both for users and for local residents.

*This paper focuses on the research activities carried out during the first year. The aim is to highlight the methodology adopted:*

1. to select the territory in which to conduct the field research (pilot areas);
2. to identify the development process of an area in order to become a tourist destination from simply a place/village;
3. to assess the impact of management and governance actions within the destinations.

*Units of analysis* are the rural villages in developed European countries. The contributions matured within the research of tourism management on rural tourism suggest a number of definitions concerning rural areas rather than rural landscape and/or countryside highlighting various shades of terminology referring to tourism and/or recreation within these areas (Lane, 1994; Oppermann, 1996; Page, & Getz 1997; Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006). In accordance with Tribe, Font, Griffiths, Vickery, & Yale (2000, p.4) in this paper we refer “to *countryside* as those areas with low population and traditional society structures (Lane, 1994) and to *rural* as activities and lifestyles in the countryside”.

The rural villages taken into account by the research are characterized by being emerging and marginal areas with high potentiality in terms of natural, historical and cultural resources, in which the tourist development is at the beginning of its vital cycle. These areas are, therefore, not capable – as of today – to define, manage, promote and commercialize the tourist offer of the territory.

As highlighted by Long & Lane (2000), Hall, Roberts, & Mitchell (2003) concerning rural tourism development in Europe and North America, the tourism development of these rural villages is particularly complex since tourism is one of the economic activities, but not the only one, that interests the territory. The search for integration and coordination among actors involves, therefore, not only subjects of the tourism system in the narrow sense, but it also interests enterprises that operate in other sectors (such as, for example, agriculture and zootechnics). If, therefore, on the one hand, one of the elements of strength of the tourist offer in rural villages is the specificity of the territory, on the other, its development requires complex activity of coordination both among operators of the sector and between them and the bodies of governance and government.

In relation to such specificity the rural villages can be associated in community-type destinations (Murphy, 1985; Kaspar, 1995), or else, territories in which resources are spread among many autonomous actors and of small size, family-run and local origin enterprises. The tourist offer of these destinations involves the local community and is the result of the interaction among a

number of public and private actors who operate with distinct roles, capabilities, competences and power, enabling them to manage a part only of the wider offer of the territory (Keller, 1998; Bieger, 2005).

The study of the tourism development process and the impacts of the management and governance actions in these rural villages tackles two topics of special interest in studies of tourism management.

The first concerns the creation of a tourist offer capable of respecting the carrying capacity of the territory, that is, the environmental, socio-cultural and economic equilibrium that marks it. This objective is in turn linked to the tripartite theoretical framework of tourism impacts as defined by Butler (1974) and taken up again by several Authors (as an example we remind of Inskeep, 1997; Swarbrooke, 1999; for further study see the various articles quoted in Aronsson, 2000, p. 135) and to the search for a “harmonious relationship between visitors and environment” as well as “mutual interdependence between tourism, recreation and the countryside” highlighted by Tribe et al. (2000, p.vii) along the lines already indicated by Budowski (1976).

The second concerns the identification of forms and structures of governance, relevant for the specificity of the community-type destinations. The fragmentation that characterizes these destinations and the strongly endogenous development that marks them, does indeed not permit to give up being the better known mechanisms of coordination linked to the market and/or hierarchy, instead relevant for the corporate destinations (Bieger, 2005; Pechlaner, & Raich, 2005; Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007). As underlined in the destination management studies, these considerations lead to integrating top-down actions determined by bodies authorized to carry out meta-management activities within the destination (DMO - destination management organization), with bottom-up development processes deriving from the collaborative relationship among local operators that reinforce its entrepreneurial capacity and competence. The development of local resources and the investment of capitals internal to the destination would also make it possible to benefit from the positive fallback of the tourist activities and to have also major control on the connected negative external aspects.

The hypothesis at the basis of this research is that the application of a development *iter* endogenous to the rural villages could create the conditions for a balance between conservation of local resources and their access to the tourism market in a sustainable way.

In order to analyze the effective and efficient tools of governance in the rural villages, in the first year of activity the territories have been selected in which to conduct the research and the framework has been determined for analyzing the possible development scenarios of these

destinations and for estimating the DMO effectiveness. The methodology adopted is illustrated in the following paragraph.

## **Methodology**

The research carried out in the first year (February 2009-2010) is divided into three steps.

The *first step* concerns the selection of the territories in which to carry out the field research in the six partner countries (Italy, Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia). The identification of these areas was done taking into account the specificity of the rural villages, object of the analysis, that is, emerging and marginal areas with community-type destination characteristics. After meetings and brainstorming activities among the partners, it has been agreed that the criteria for selection should have mandatory and preferential characteristics. The selected areas have per force a plurality of different stakeholders with different resources and are not yet developed under the tourism point of view but with an interesting unexpressed potential, or are territories that have already started a tourism development but are not in condition to maintain the competitiveness.

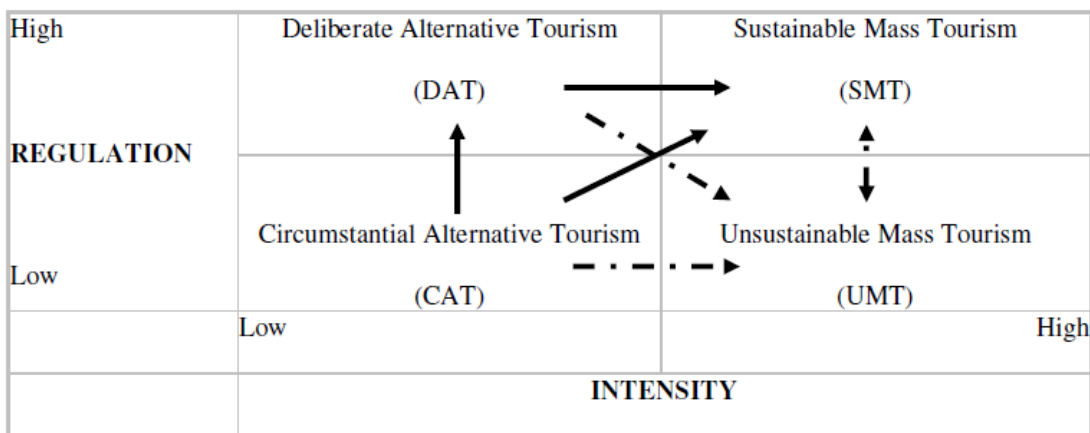
Furthermore, the selected rural villages preferably have defined border (single unit analysis), suitability to arrange financial support by public administration and/or private players, local laws in favor of private entrepreneurship, good disposal of local community to undertake a process of tourism development and presence of small dimension real estates which could be converted into accommodation.

Rural villages thus identified are 14, of which 3 are situated in the Trentino and 1 in Piemonte (Italy), 1 in Burgenland (Austria), 1 in Franconian Switzerland (Germany), 1 in Bohemian Switzerland and 1 in Usti Region (Czech Republic), 3 in OpolskieVoivodeship (Poland) and 3 in the area of Litija (Slovenia).

The choice of the rural villages on the basis of these criteria allows to analyze the territorial and structural characteristics such as the potential tourist resources, the prescriptive context, the socio-economic situation and the tourism facilities and services proposed. Furthermore, aspects of destination management and governance concerning the strategic decision making process and the division of power and resources among public and private actors, the networking and level of cooperation among local actors, the role of local community, the interconnection between tourism and other fields, the existence and the role played by the DMO and the policy of destination branding.

The *second step* identifies the framework in which to analyze the tourist development process of the rural villages, that is, the choices and activities that can guide these territories in the definition of an integrated tourist offer (from place/village to tourism destination). The research adopts the Weaver model (2000), a broad context model of destination development, within which various scenarios, including the classic Butler sequence itself, can be situated. The model consists of four inclusive tourism ideal types, based on the relationship between the level of tourism intensity or scale, and the amount of regulation associated with the tourism sector.

Figure 1: The Weaver model - destination development scenarios



Source: Weaver (2000)

As shown in Figure 1, the model considers seven possible bilateral scenarios involving the transition of destinations from one situation to a different one. This research focuses on three of these possible options, that is, it identifies for the rural villages analyzed the most effective and efficient tools for sustainable tourism development to move from CAT (or absence of tourism) to DAT or SMT. In any case (DAT or SMT), it is necessary to maintain the carrying capacity limits. Moreover, for SMT it would entail some modification of mass tourism characteristics to obtain desirable outcomes indicative of sustainability, such as higher level of local control, retention of a mainly mid-centric clientele and encouragement of local architecture.

The *third step* identifies the framework in which to evaluate the efficacy of the governance activities and the activity of the DMO within the rural villages. For this purpose the model suggested by Hockings, Stolton, Leverington, Dudley, & Courrau (2006) for assessing management effectiveness of protected areas has been chosen. Indeed, it has the advantage of limiting such evaluation to the use of single quantitative indicators (not always adequate for appraising the effectiveness of strategic choices), yet it considers a series of criteria focusing on the analysis of three dimension: design and planning issue, adequacy and appropriateness of inputs and process, delivery of objects. For each of these dimensions specific elements are being assessed, as

summed up in Table 1.

The results reached during the first year of research are illustrated in the following paragraph.

Table 1: Key steps, criteria and focus for assessing management effectiveness in rural villages (RV)

<b>Elements of evaluation</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Planning</b>	<b>Input</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Output</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>Explanation</b>	<i>Where are we now?</i> Assessment of importance, threats and policy environment	<i>Where do we want to be?</i> Assessment of RV design and planning	<i>What do we need?</i> Assessment of resources needed to carry out management	<i>How do we go about it?</i> Assessment of the way in which management is conducted	<i>What were the results?</i> Assessment of the implementation of management programmes and actions; delivery of products and services	<i>What did we achieve?</i> Assessment of the outcomes and the extent to which they achieved objectives
<b>Criteria that are assessed</b>	Significance Threats Vulnerability National context	RV legislation and policy RV system design Management planning	Resourcing of agency Resourcing of site Partners	Suitability of management processes	Results of management actions Services and products	Impacts: effects of management in relation to objectives

Source: adapted from Hockings et al. (2006)

## Findings

The Authors have played the role of coordinators of the research activity during the first year. A relevant variety of structural and economic characteristics has been observed, discouraging the idea of creating a tourism product network among European rural villages. The tourist resources of those territories are heterogeneous and, consequently, their potential attractiveness is diverse and unique.

Also interesting similarities among governance systems have been pointed out. Many rural villages suffer the lack of a proper institution in charge of managing tourism development. The areas are characterized by a high variety of stakeholders and the co-existence of polarized interests. A high level of fragmentation has been observed: all areas express the need for elaborating better network management tools. The research – target territories experience either the absence of a DMO or the existence of an embryonic organization in charge of tourism management and/or governance.

For example, in one of the rural areas interested by the project in Poland, called Dinosaurs Land, the action of a local group to enhance sustainable tourism development sees the opposition of a private investor strategy, which aims to transform the area into a fun park. The key issue of this village is to find an appropriate way of negotiating these opposite interests. In such and similar contexts, it seems that in rural villages local development highly depends on the interaction between the economic and the social system, i.e. on the way local players who try to reach certain goals undertake a synergic perspective, profitably combining cooperation and competition. A local system has to develop some institutions as a basis for cooperation, defining the rules of the game, reducing uncertainty, offering guarantees and coordinating exchanges within the society by indicating positive and negative incentives that contribute to limit individual and opportunistic behavior.

A priority for rural village tourism development is to implement a territorial strategy. It consists in the action through which some relevant goals for development are pursued by identifying and involving local actors with different structures, dimensions, role and relevance and whose interests are brought together in a common evolution trajectory. In this sense, the local government pursues a development plan by defining a systemic strategy, in order to develop and increase the amount of available resources.

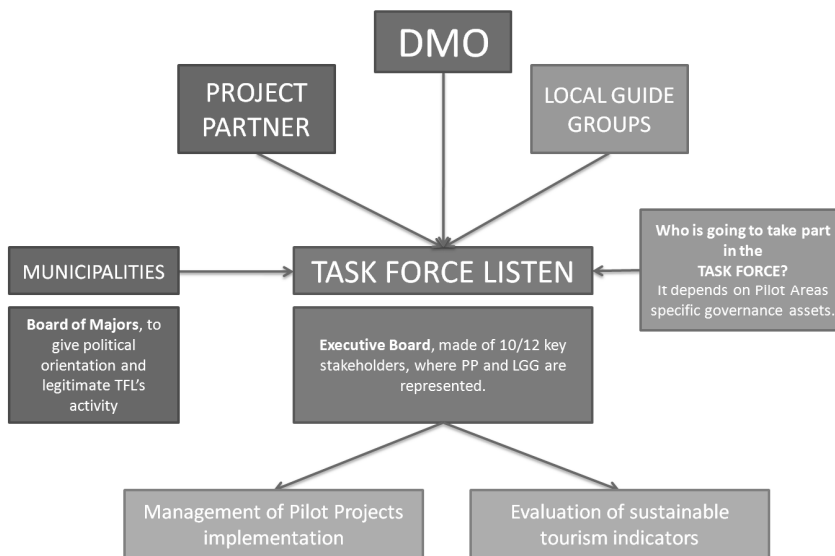
Therefore, a governance model has been elaborated able to enhance local development and make areas move from CAT (or absence of tourism) to DAT or SMT, as described in the Weaver model.

### **Application of results**

Following the destination management approach in community-type destinations and the comparative analysis of the governance assets of the selected areas, the roles of local institutions, like DMO and local groups, a governance model for rural destinations has been elaborated in order to enhance sustainable tourism development in those areas (Figure 2). This proposal has been adapted to the specific characteristics of each pilot area. Every area has its own specific approach and relations within the territory, different legislative frameworks and levels of tourism development.

The aim of the work-group has been to create a description of a meta - management model adaptable to each area and able to contribute to the local development related to sustainable tourism. The example of the best experiences made should be followed trying to avoid mistakes that were made by other territories in the past.

Figure 2: Governance Model



*Source: own elaboration*

Leaving aside the tourism development policy that is undertaken at a regional and national level, the institutions responsible for the management of tourism development in the destination are the key players in the local tourism governance. Project partners, which have the responsibility of the “Listen to the Voice of Villages” project implementation, have a key role in the model proposal, together with the local destination management organizations - where they exist. For those territories where there is not yet a proper DMO, the model suggests a possible way for creating it.

According to the proposed model, representatives of the Project Partner, DMO and Local Guide Group create a Task Force (TF) for the implementation of the Listen pilot projects. This group should work as an executive board, made up of 5 to 10 key stakeholders in each pilot area, coordinated by a representative from the Project Partner. While the Local Guide Group has the role of defining the content of the pilot projects to be implemented in the next two years, the role of the task force is to manage the pilot project implementation during the development of the project and evaluate the sustainability of the process. This means, for example, that if pilot projects focus on some specific aspects of tourism development, only the organizations which are really involved in them will join the TF. In the territories where tourism governance still lacks a leadership and management tools, the Listen TF could become the first step towards the creation of a proper DMO.



The Public Administration is represented in the TF. It also establishes a separate organ, the Board of Mayors, which gives political orientation, supervises and legitimates the Task Force's action.

At a transnational level, it has been proposed to create the Vital Villages Association (VVA). It will be established in the form of a network among partner territories in order to develop and promote pilot areas.

The mission of VVA will be to train partner territories on sustainable tourism principles, according to the governance model, to support the creation and development of DMO and to facilitate the implementation of pilot projects.

Pilot projects are the first opportunity to test governance assets and sustainability criteria. While marketing and promotion should be left under the responsibility of the local DMO, the association is aimed to become a centre of studies and certification on responsible and sustainable tourism in Europe. VVA could become a certified brand, to be granted to those territories which follow the sustainable development path designed by the project. Project partners will be the first beneficiaries but, in the future, the brand VVA could be given to other European areas. VVA could then become the European network of green rural villages.

VVA will be a no-profit association. Its assembly will be made up of the project partners, with its President being elected by the Assembly. The Association Assembly will establish an Executive Board and a Scientific Committee and own the brand and logo Vital Villages which could be used by the partner territories and by other territories only after a declaration issued by the Scientific Committee.

VVA is innovative because it certifies both processes and their output, i.e. the pilot projects, while usually certification schemes involve single activities or services. In this perspective, DMOs will be those institutions that are in charge of territorial governance and promotion of Vital Villages projects, both in the case in which they are created as output of the project and in which they are pre-existent.

## **Conclusions**

The research carried out during the first year allows highlighting the peculiarities of rural villages in terms of tourism offer and territorial governance and/or management. The need for better cooperation among stakeholders emerges as well as the identification and/or creation of an institution which plays the role of pivot, in order to define, organize and promote the tourism offer. If such an organization is an output of project process, attention must be paid to the legitimacy of its

activity, in order to avoid overlapping with existing institutions voted to tourism management and promotion. A constant dialogue between new born local institutions and existing tourism boards is a key factor for competitive success.

In the next two years of Listen to the Voice of Villages project the governance model will be applied and tested in all villages through the implementation of pilot projects, in order to:

1. assess the management effectiveness of the newly established DMO, with reference to Hockings et al. model;
2. verify the sustainability of the development process through the application of sustainable tourism indicators;
3. enhance the local development of rural villages, with reference to the Weaver model (moving from CAT to DAT or to SMT).

In the meantime, the VVA will support the local processes and manage the brand value of vital villages, to gain international acknowledgement and help local organization to sell rural villages products on the tourism market.

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