

**LOCAL ACTION PLAN ASSESSMENT
ACTIVITY 3.1.3**
The operative plans revised after 3 years of project

Palestinian heritage trail (PH Trail) BEIT MERSIM TO BATTIR

The West Bank is the location of three walking trails combining walking with rural community tourism and hospitality. The three walking trails are: Masar Ibrahim and the Nativity Trail (long- distance), the Sufi Trail. The Sufi and Nativity trails are well connected with Masar Ibrahim. These initiatives have been successful in creating community momentum, some media attention, and additional visitors to rural areas. The walking trails have proven to be resilient to political/security upheaval and managed to bring income and job opportunities to rural communities.

Masar Ibrahim trail is the longest trail in the West Bank (see Figure 1) and integrates the other trails. Starting at a small scale, Masar Ibrahim has been growing over the last five years, attracting thousands of travelers, and gaining the support of government, and non-government organizations. The National Geographic ranked it Best New Walking Trail in the world, and it is conceived as a cultural hiking route that retraces the journey of Abraham, the legendary spiritual ancestor of over half of humanity, who is known for his hospitality and kindness towards strangers. The Path is 330 km long and extends from the village of Rummana northwest of Jenin to Beit Mirsim southwest of Al-Haram al-Ibrahimi (Ibrahimi Mosque) in Hebron. Along the Path's mostly rural corridor, there are about 60 rural, marginalized communities, some of which living below the poverty. Most of these very poor and marginalized communities are not targeted by other tourism programs (these communities just targeted by PH trail).

PH trail is a precious resource for maintain connections among Palestinians and between them and hikers from all over the world. The Path does not only invite hikers to experience nature but also to change their perspectives by recognizing shared common values and creating friendships along the way.



The West Bank offers a unique mixture of tangible (places/sites) and intangible (experiences) that revolve around religious, cultural and historical sites coupled with other intangible elements such as Palestinian hospitality and modern culture heritage, but the West Bank has only recently started to recognize and/or develop potential tourism products beyond religious tourism. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA), indicated that more than 3.2 million visited tourist sites in the West Bank in the first half of 2017, which included 1.40 million visits by inbound visitors and 1.86 million visits by domestic visitors. The number of inbound and domestic visits increased by 47.2% and 66.5% respectively compared to the same period in 2016, and this number is expected to continue to increase in the upcoming years unless the political situation degenerates and the episodes of violence increase. Most inbound visits were to Bethlehem Governorate (which presently attracts most of the visitors), followed by Jericho Governorate, Nablus and Jenin. Also, on average, tourists tend to stay for very short periods (primarily one day) in Palestinian cities. Overnight stays by foreign visitors to the West Bank increased in the last years, but majority of overnight stays still are in the Bethlehem area. This precludes small rural communities to benefit from the arrival of tourists and tourism investments and promotion.

In 2015, while neighboring countries generated as much as 37% of GDP and 19% of employment through tourism, the West Bank & Gaza's tourism sector contributed to only 4% of GDP and 2% of employment, despite rich in natural, historical and cultural sites which could be further developed to attract tourists.

Conscious of this situation, in 2017, The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA) released **a national strategy** defining a vision of “promoting the national image as an independent, safe, and distinguished destination, supporting a high-quality tourist product, rich in religious, cultural, historical and natural resources”.

The objectives of the strategy are to:

- (i) increase the Palestinian market share in the global tourism market by developing old markets and targeting new markets;
- (ii) develop and improve the level of services skills;
- (iii) create new tourist packages and develop existing tourist packages to encourage tourists to stay in the West Bank for at least a week;
- (iv) diversify the type of visitors;
- (v) increase the time and money spent in the host communities; and
- (vi) increase the geographical spread throughout the West Bank.

HOW?

The team used **participatory approach** to collect data about the new area as follows:

1. Results from SWOT analysis done with focus group
2. One focus group discussion meeting to learn about Battir model: being one of the few destinations able to attract about 12000 visitors per year in the country.
3. 2 focus group discussions –for the local authorities, services providers, community members.
4. 2 semi-structured interviews, one with MOTA, and the other with a tour operator.
5. An observation trips for the new area.
6. 2 meetings to share the research results and develop the local action plan.

Four types of **data collection tools** “questionnaires “were developed and used, as follow:

- Questionnaire to collect data about the communities along the new segment
- Questionnaire to collect data about the services providers
- FGDs’ Questionnaire
- Interviews’ Questionnaire
- Four phone interviews with MOTA and 3 tour operators (HALA , Diwan and Siraj)

THE MAIN NEEDS IN THE AREA

Community/field level

- Need to collect information about the sites, both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, install informational panels and rehabilitation (on some).
- Need to build the awareness of the communities about their cultural heritage and about tourism, welcome and cultural diversity.
- Need to develop comprehensive hiking program and try to include all the villages and women centers in tourism activities.
- Need to develop a disabled-friendly segment and to collaborate with NGOs operating in this field;
- Need more investments in trail development, guides training, and promotion of local products and food, to increase the economic impact of these trails, and to unlock all their potential.

Policy/public authorities level

- Need to invest and reach those rural communities that are not addressed by tourism and investments.
- Need to shift from exclusively religious tourism to heritage and natural tourism, from main urban-based to community-based tourism.
- Need of reaching out to UNESCO with a special tourism program for the UNESCO world heritage site, which are the areas of Battir and Husan villages and Almokrou and Beit Jala;
- The local authorities must advocate the importance for MOTA to take action and improve management of archaeological and cultural sites.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The analysis was conducted by the means of a focus group with relevant stakeholders of the area interested by the new segment development.

Strength

- Palestine is an active tourist destination
- Biological and natural diversity
- Different landscapes and unique historical and cultural sites
- Safety - hospitable and welcoming people
- New and unique idea for the area– hiking trail
- Strong engagement of civil society organizations, women and youth
- Cooperating local municipalities
- Have a friendly disabled segment
- The presence of people familiar with the region and its history
- Presence of old buildings that can be used as homestays;

Opportunities

- Networking and exchange experience between the 16 communities along the new segment;
- Youth groups can take an active role;
- People, authorities and communities are ready and looking for new opportunities linked to tourism.
- Presence of new investments and opportunities for natural areas;
- Economic growth for the marginalized communities and new job opportunities;
- New visitors – national and international;
- New donors;
- The possibility to develop new internal trails;
- Exploiting the media department in the local councils to take a role in promoting the new segment.

Weaknesses

- Lack of tourism infrastructure
- Lack of a hiking culture
- The private sector is not encouraged to invest in tourism
- Using of the private land may occur some problem
- People do not value the historical places in their communities, lack of information about them
- Neglecting historical places
- Some customs and traditions -e.g. no joint activities between males and females
- Lack of interaction between some communities.

Threats

- Hazard of occupation by Israeli military forces
- Possible confiscation of historical places and connected unwillingness to inform about private archeological sites;
- Tourism is still not integrated into local authority's strategic plan;
- Lack of tourism streams in the internal area of the country.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PLAN

The objective is to build community based tourism in 16 communities along the new segment of the trail – around 59 km and enhance the economic and social life in these areas.

In the specific the aim is to develop 5 new sub-segments with different leading themes, out of which 1 will be disabled friendly segment.

The products divided to 4 hiking segments as follows:

HIKING FROM BEIT MERISM TO ALKUM

(Walking through the origin of civilizations who inhabit Palestine)

Distance: 15.4 km

Time needed: 5-6 hours

Difficulty: Easy

Suitable for: adult/young adult/ sport and adventure lovers / elderly people family/children/nature lovers

Communities involved: 9 communities

Today's walk takes us through several villages and communities in the area starting with the villages of Beit Al Rush, Al Asal Al Foqa and Al Tahta crossing picturesque areas enabling walkers to enjoy nature and environment. Continue to the village of Sika passing through the quite center of town which gives walkers the chance to interact with local families. Afterwards, passing the villages of Beit Awa and Beit Baar. Our final destination will be reached after crossing Deit Samit village to Al Moraq and its historical castle

How to reach: Form the bus station in Star Street, near the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, you can take a public transportation to Hebron municipality taxi station then to Dura then to Beit mersim by Public taxi.

HIKE FROM AL-KUM VILLAGE TO BEIT ULA

(learn about the history of Palestine &The social and economic role of women)

Distance: 17.4 km-

Time: 6-7 hours

Difficulty: Easy

Suitable for: adult/young adult/ sport and adventure lovers / elderly people family/children/nature lovers

Communities involved: 4 local communities

This section starts from Qasr al marwq to a village called al marwaq previously calle mawarid. It passes through the ancient Bedouin phase, which is a wonderful Canaanite cave filled with olive groves. The trail passes between cypress trees, poultry farms, beautiful hills and agricultural lands. Passing through some Bedouin communities, the final part leads to the beautiful and wild hill called tell Qila.

How to reach: Form the bus station in Star Street, near the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, you can take a public transportation to Hebron municipality taxi station then to Dura then to Alkum by Public taxi.

HIKING FROM BEIT AULA- AL JABA

(Enjoy the beautiful landscape and nature)

Distance: 13.4 km

Time: 4-5 hours

Difficulty: Moderate

Suitable for: adult/young adult/ sport and adventure lovers / elderly people family/children/nature lovers

Communities involved: 3 local communities

This section connects Hebron and Bethlehem, starting from Beit ula where you will see the beautiful hill of Qilla and a roman tomb. We continue into the land of Beit ula to Surif. This valley is rich in beautiful green landscape and fertile farmland. As we reach the bottom of wadi Hilwas , filled with towering cypress trees, the valley passes olive trees and historic carob trees leading to Jabba`. The trail ends near the homestay in al Jabba` that overlooks the wonderful nature from all sides.

How to reach: Form the bus station in Star Street, near the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, you can take a public transportation to Hebron municipality taxi station then to Beit Ula.

HIKING FROM AL- JABA' TO BATTIR- BREATHTAKING NATURE AND WATER SPRINGS
 (Walking through the origin of civilizations who inhabit Palestine)



Distance: 13.1 km

Time needed:

Difficulty: Moderate

Suitable for: adult/young adult/ sport and adventure lovers / elderly people family/children/nature lovers

Communities involved: 4 communities

This hike starts from the ancient village and great mosque of al Jabba` down a valley filled with olive trees and sheep pens to wadi fuqin. Then pass the rehabilitation section connecting Hussan village with Battir. Here, hikers arrive at a stairway leading to Ain Al Haweya Spring where you can take a break and hear stories about it. Then the trail continues to Ain Jameh in Battir to the roman bathhouse! In this hike you will enjoy the Palestinian heritage trail with all its nature, mountains and dazzling water.

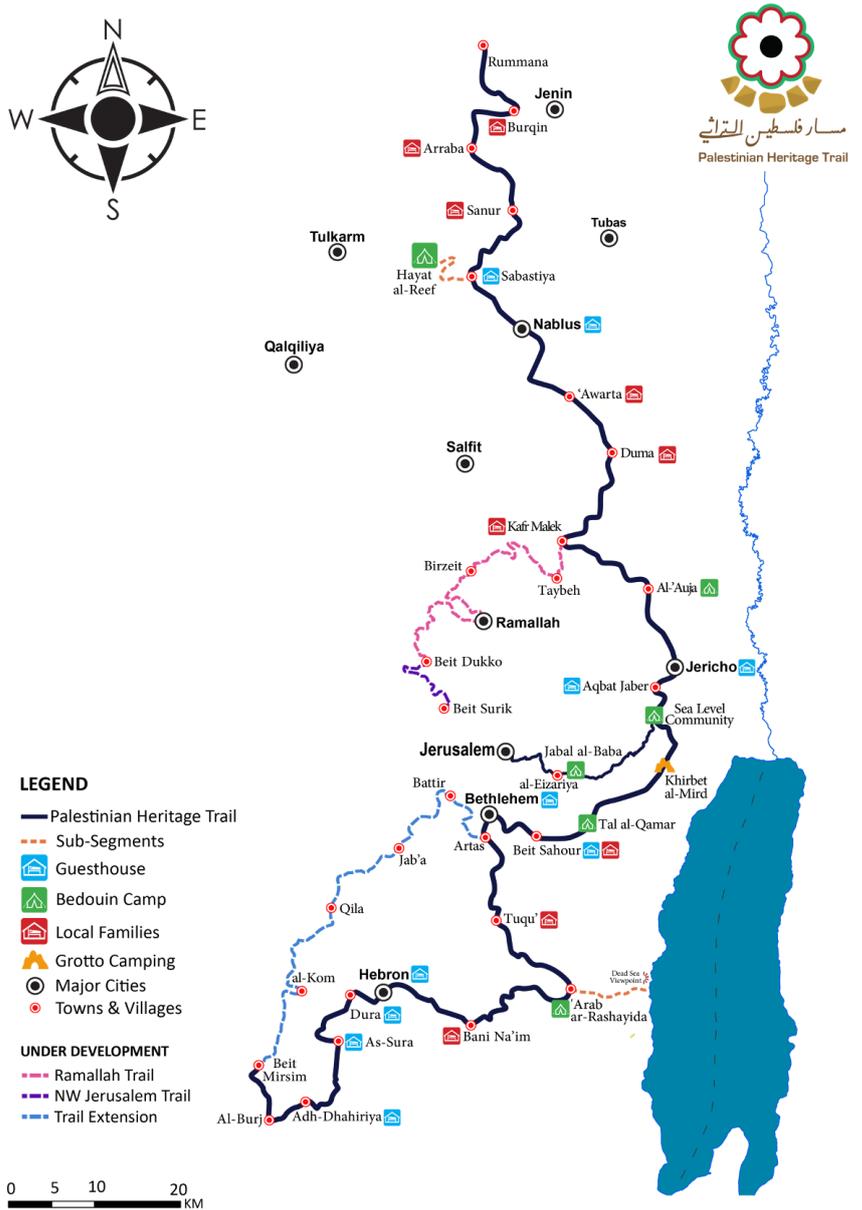
How to reach: Form the bus station in Bethlehem which located in star street-near the nativity church - take a public transportation to Jaba' Public taxi

PARTNER ROLE

PH trail is an NGO managing and working to constantly improve the Route and its services.

PHTtrail association is at the head of the Destination Management Organization of the PHtrail stimulating cooperation and interactions, fundraising and managing projects for local development through community-based tourism.

The Palestinian Heritage Trail (formerly known as Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim) is the longest trail in the West Bank. Starting at a small scale, the PHTrail has been growing over the last seven years, attracting thousands of travelers, and gaining the support of the Palestinian Authority and NGOs. The map below shows how the Trail, which is about 500 km long, currently extends throughout the whole West Bank, from the village of Rummana northwest of Jenin to Beit Mirsim southwest of Al-Haram al-Ibrahimi (Ibrahimi Mosque) in Hebron. The Trail passes through more than 60 cities and villages in the West Bank. Up to before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 47,000 travelers walked the Trail. National Geographic ranked it as the Best New Walking Trail in the world in 2014. The Trail is more than just a hiking trail; it is a means of meeting and making connections with local Palestinians and hikers from all over the world.

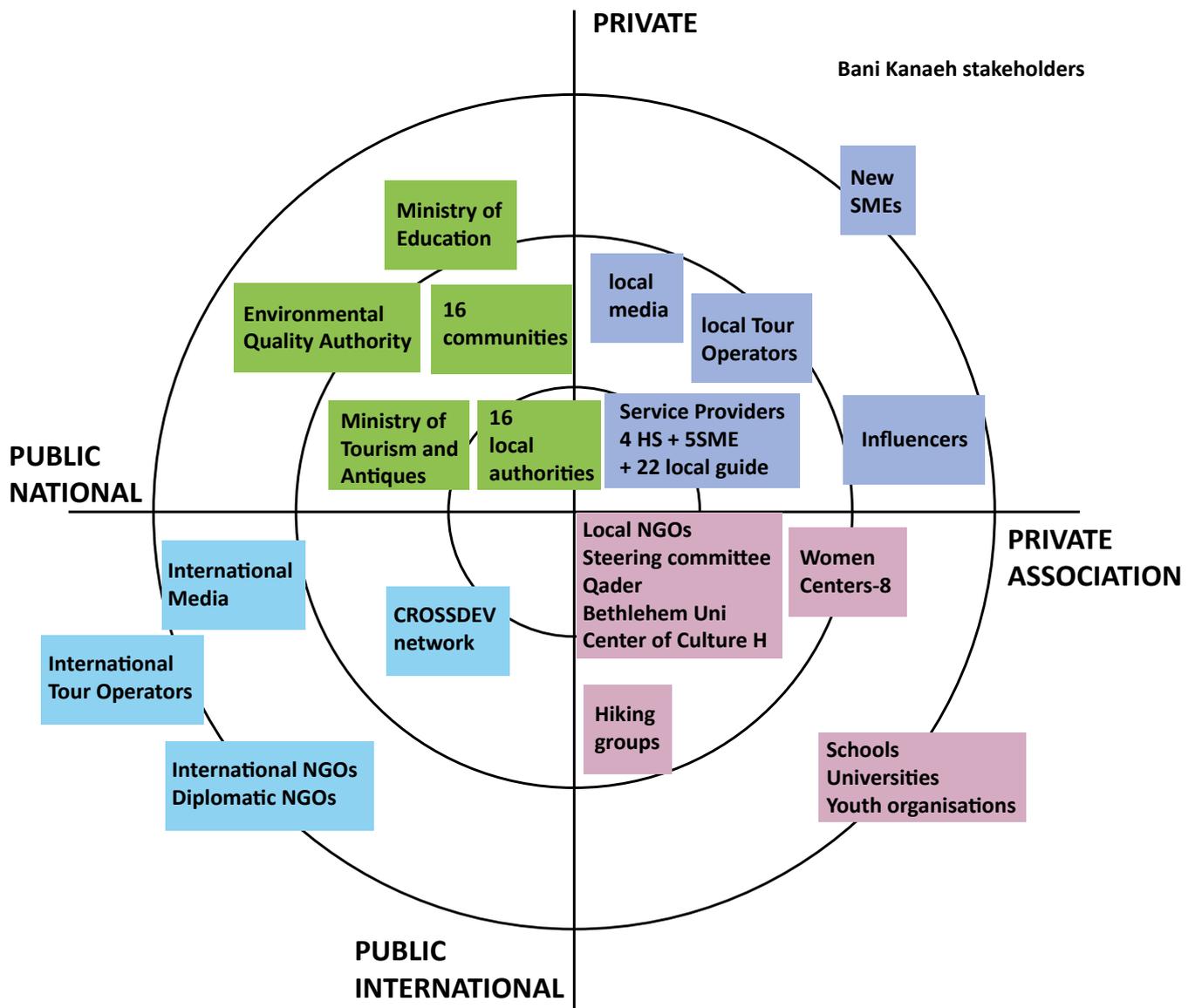


Stakeholders are identified and categorized according to the typology (public national, public international, private association and private business). Further, stakeholders identified are then prioritized according to the level of involvement and proactiveness in collaborating to achieve partner's objectives.

The **most involved stakeholders** have a balance between private for profit, nonprofit and public national, while there is no public international organization highly involved, a part from CROSSDEV partners.

At an **intermediate level**: there are public national authorities such as Ministry of Education and Environmental Quality Authority.

With a **limited level of involvement** there are mainly public and private international authorities, organizations of youth and students, and new SME involved.



The stakeholders that we will need to get involved in the future are:

- local media with a more active role in promoting tourism.
- tour operators, both national and international.
- network with the Italian Ministry of Culture and other CROSSDEV partners to learn how things are done in other contexts and best practices.

How we consulted the stakeholders to develop and endorse the LAP

- 3 introductory meetings with local authorities which included (Alkum - Beit Awwa - Deir El Assal – Ska, Battir, Wad Fuken - Husan -Ethna, Tarqoumia, Al Der and Beit Olla villages) located in the new segment of the Masar.
- Establishment of the Steering Committee (see below)
- 3 public meetings with local stakeholders to a) introducing the actors to the notion of community-based tourism and CROSSDEV project and b) sign agreements with local authorities interested by the new segment, c) collect information about resources and needs through a survey.
- Signatories’ local authorities organized themselves meetings to engage their communities in the project.
- Meeting with managers and stakeholders of Battir segments to learn from a best practice.
- Focus group discussion meetings with local authorities, youth and women institutions and SMEs to assess the resources already in place, identify potentials and challenges.
- Two final meetings with stakeholders to share results of the consultation (needs assessment, SWOT, suggestions), **present the LAP and validate it together.**

How we engaged the stakeholders during the whole project

- Consultation meetings (every three months)
- Developing the local action plan and identifying needs
- Serval trainings and capacity building program
- Awareness campaign) clean up activities
- Hiking trips
- Promotional activities
- Developing of the trail
- Developing of the service providers



1

Swot analysis
Focus group discussion



2

Case study meeting



3

Semi-structured interview

4

2 meeting trips
2 meetings to share the results of the LAP and agree on the LAP



Oct 2019 - Mar 2021

Activities that took place in the first 6 months of the project

PH trail focused on enhancing and developing a Destination Governance. This to guarantee the full engagement of the 16 communities and the main actors in the project activities. Further, having a governance structure in place, including all the communities, facilitate the development of community-based tourism and cooperation among territories.

PH trail developed:

1. A tourism local committee (TLC) in each of the 16 communities with the following aims

- To develop the CBT in the community
- To develop a tourism strategy and plan to be shared with the cluster committee
- To build awareness of the community members about sustainable tourism
- To develop and implement a promotional plan for the village/ city and cultural and historical sites
- To count the number of visitors
- To supervise the work of the service providers.

2. Destination Management Organization (DMO):

Each TLC is represented in the DMO to share the needs of their villages / cites in the cluster's meeting and will work together on the following: develop a tourism strategy for the destination; develop an action plan for the coming 3 years; promote tourism in the destination to attract visitors; write proposals and contact donors; advocate for the tourism and environment issue.

3. Steering Committee:

composed by associated partner (the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and Institute of Hotel Management and Tourism at Bethlehem University), QADER for Community Development (NGO), the Heritage Preservation Center and CISP Palestine.

Activity	Intended Outputs	Changes in respect to the original Plan	State of the Art
Sign agreements with the local authorities	16 agreements to engage the communities		Done
Sign MOU with local and national authorities and other actors to implement the agreed LAP	Joint MoU to guarantee project's sustainability		Will be done at the end of the project
Developing the management and governance system of the clusters – CBT	Develop and enhance sustainable tourism in the area	2 clusters (DMOs) were planned, 3 were realized	Done
Sub-grants planning for 11 service providers	Develop of MI trail along the 16 communities		Done
Development and promotion of the friendly disabled segment	Widen the target and accessibility of the trail	Big promotional event to be done in the next future	Done; promotion is in progress
Update the Trail general plan and develop services for the new segment	New segment and communities to be added in the map; identify and activate services providers	Service provided contacted, trained and activated along the segment were more than originally planned (from 8 to 44)	Done
Collect information about tangible and intangible cultural heritage	Improve knowledge, awareness, and storytelling	Need of the approval by the Ministry of Tourism to be able to share the contents > delays	Done
Identifying of the guides and provide them with training	Activate hiking products	From a target of 10, now there are 22 guides available. They also help in environmental campaign	Continuous
Train the main stakeholders	Empower and enhance stakeholders along the new segment	Increased number of trainings from original plan	
Community awareness raising: implementing environmental campaigns	Involve communities and introduce the concept of sustainability	From 2 to 3 campaigns; worked with ministry of tourism, education, environmental quality authority	In progress for finalization
Develop comprehensive itinerary /hiking program for the new segment	Develop the tourism product		To be finalized
Promotional activities: presence in the map, videos, brochures, booklet, social media	Increase the outreach and attract tourists		In progress
Contribute with 4km to the development the world heritage sites – Husan to Battir segment	Increase international connections and relevance		Done
Meetings and activities to enhance the involvement of local and National authorities	Include community-based tourism in local development strategies; Establish connections with MOTA and increase their engagement	Delays given to local elections in November 2021; some local authorities have already declared interest in new segments development and tourism services	In progress

Still to do before the end of the project

- Signing the local action plan during the final event
- Promotional and marketing activities

Our future needs towards the sustainability of the LAP

- Need for more promotion of the new segment, its itineraries, and local services.
- Need of coordination and careful planning promotional activities to be appealing for local and international tour operators.
- Need for more engagement from local authorities, especially in promoting the segments themselves.
- Need to add new segments to make the entire Masar Ibrahim a circular Route.

The resources needed in order to make this project sustainable beyond the end of the project. i.e. Type of resources (finance, human capital, infrastructure, organizational, marketing,...)

- Marketing resources and knowledge - MIAK provided marketing training to service providers, but it is not enough, they need to develop their own marketing materials.
- Capacity building both for local actors (technical assistance for service providers) and for local authorities (hard and soft skills to become Trail Managers).
- Financial resources to support the DMOs in the long term because now they are exclusively supported by external projects and funds.

From whom we expect to derive additional resources (e.g.local, visitor tax, project funds etc)

- MOTA should take the lead of DMOs also from a financial perspective; this will be difficult but highly advisable.
- Tour operators and accommodations might collect a sort of “visitor tax” to support the DMOs activities.
- Other EU Funds and grants from international donors for start-up activities of new segments – i.e. MIAK won a new grant from the World Bank to activate sub-grants in new segments.

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v a l u i n g n a t u r e

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