

# **MAINSTREAMING OF SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES IN TOURISM POLICIES IN SICILY**

within the project

RESTART MED! Ref. n. C\_A.1.3\_0054, financed in the framework of the ENI CBC  
Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme 2014-2020

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## **TECHNICAL REPORT**

### **ON THE RESULTS OF THE FOCUS GROUP “POLICIES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM” IN THE ETNA AREA**

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## FOREWORD

This work, conducted between February and March 2023, was part of a consultancy provided to the Restart Med! Project<sup>1</sup> to produce a policy review on the status of sustainable tourism in Sicily and build a roadmap for local policymakers to mainstream sustainability challenges in tourism policies, in continuity with what has also been done in the other countries of implementation of the project.

## ROADMAP

The consultancy can be seen as consisting of three connected steps:

### 1. Desk analysis

A desk analysis on the main trends, policies and developments from a national and regional perspective was conducted as a first step to build the methodology and identify key focus areas of the work. This phase is built on output projects such as the *Tourism Sector and Policy Development Framework in Italy* research and other documents relating to the specificities of tourism policy-making in Italy and Sicily.

### 2. Consultations with local stakeholders

The consultations with local stakeholders, in the form of focus groups as described in this report, were carried out in order to shed light on the main challenges for sustainable tourism development in the region and understand how to tackle them.

### 3. Policy Review

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<sup>1</sup> ITB “Consultancy for mainstreaming of sustainability challenges in tourism policies in Sicily” in the framework of the ENICBCMED Project RESTART MED! Ref. n. C\_A.1.3\_0054 (Service Contract) External consultancy - Rome, 23rd December 2022 - Issued by CISP

The results of the consultations and of the desk analysis were then gathered and analysed in a policy review paper, addressing the main tools and strategies to advance the sustainability agenda in local tourism policies

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE ON THE CONSULTATION PHASE

With regards to the consultation phase, to which the content of this report refers to, the consultant and CISP (the contracting authority) agreed on a common strategy on how to organise the consultation with local stakeholders, of which the key features can be summarised here:

### Geographical focus

It was decided to widen the scope of the research from the implementation area - which aimed at consolidating the results of the [CROSSDEV](#) project in the Terre Sicane area, Via Selinuntina, in particular - to other areas in the region. This decision was motivated primarily by the need to understand how different contexts affect sustainable tourism development, hence moving from a regional to a local dimension. The specificities of the economic, social and environmental local ecosystems in the three areas selected - Terre Sicane, Iblei area and Etna - vary greatly and are symptomatic of different stages of tourism industry development, thereby returning a comprehensive and truthful picture of a varied and inhomogeneous regional ecosystem.

### Thematic Focus

In terms of thematic focus, particular attention was placed on understanding how the phenomenon of *cities of identity* in Sicily affects tourism development. The largest of such associations in Sicily is **Strade del Vino**, which organises promotional activities using the

strengths of gastronomic and agricultural products to valorize the identity of rural areas and optimise the investment of more municipalities in joint actions. Another association promoting the idea of *cities of identity* in the **Borghi Più Belli d'Italia** initiative, promoted by the Italian government through the Ministry of Culture, by allocating large sums to small municipalities, in the initiative Italian “BORGHI” (about 760 million euros), to promote, as less-known destinations several forms of sustainable tourism, where the village represents the ideal representation of the sustainable urban concept and expression of the Italian lifestyle. Finally, the impact of **UNESCO sites** (7 in total in the region) was also factored in in the territorial analysis. The table shows the degree to which each of the geographical focus areas selected reflects this identitarian dimension:

Geographical Area	Strade Del Vino	Borghi Più Belli d'Italia	UNESCO Sites
Terre Sicane	Strade del Vino Terre Sicane	Sambuca di Sicilia	
Iblei area	Strade del Vino Val di Noto <sup>2</sup>	Ferla <sup>3</sup>	Ragusa and Scicli
Etna Area	Strade del Vino dell'Etna		Mount Etna

## COMPOSITION

In terms of composition, each of the consultation conducted aimed at engaging a heterogeneous set of stakeholder, such as: tourism operators, both traditional and sustainability-driven; institutional stakeholders, such as municipalities, public-private

<sup>2</sup> Representative could not participate in consultations

<sup>3</sup> Representative could not participate in consultations





partnership programmes and administrative bodies; the research sector, both universities and private research institutes and territorial associations.



## INTRODUCTION

This document describes the content of the exchanges and stimuli of the focus group of the Working Group on Policies for Sustainable Tourism within the ENI CBC Med Restart Med! capitalisation project, which took place on the 7th March 2023, from 16:00 to 18:00, at Isola, Catania. The Focus Group was attended by 12 experts, with transversal skills in the tourism sector in the Etna area and by five observers.

By “Etna area” this report refers to the territory of the 42 municipalities developing on the slopes of the volcano Etna in eastern Sicily. This area also coincides with the northern part of the current metropolitan city of Catania.



This focus group was part of a series of three rounds of consultations that explored the state and opportunities for sustainable tourism development in three different areas of Sicily, namely: Terre Sicane, Iblei and Etna. The results of the consultations will feed into a





final policy review paper that will propose policy actions at the local level to boost the environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability of the local tourism sector.

## PARTICIPANTS

The participants who took part in the conversation were as follows:

1. **Salvo Foti:** works in the field of wine consultancy and he is also a producer. His winery (I Vigneri) is based in Milo.
2. **Bianca Caccamese:** president of the KidsTrip association, which deals with activities for families with children with the goal of making tourism services and products family-friendly.
3. **Angela Russo:** reception manager at Etna Urban Winery
4. **Alessandro Scuderi:** associate professor of agri-food economics UNICT
5. **Federica Eccel:** advisory board member at Strade del Vino Etna
6. **Maurizio Lunetta:** agronomist, director of the Etna DOC Wines Consortium
7. **Germano Centorbi:** artistic curator and cultural planner. President of the cultural association Kadmonia.
8. **Carmelo Indelicato:** experiential tour operator in Sicily
9. **Fabrizio Ferreri:** expert in local development, with particular regard to inland areas. He is a researcher in political and social sciences at UNICT as part of a project on inland areas, particularly the Calatino area.
10. **Salvo Caffo:** volcanologist manager of Parco dell'Etna
11. **Giuseppe Lo Bianco:** director of IRSSAT (Istituto di Ricerca, Sviluppo e Sperimentazione sull'Ambiente ed il Territorio)
12. **Carmen Greco:** journalist at La Sicilia



## OBJECTIVES

The general objective was to stimulate the participants to propose ideas, comments, visions regarding the construction of a vision of sustainability for the tourism sector in the Etna area, and which could be translated into a political vision.

## METHODOLOGY

The content of this report is the result of a collective interview structured as a focus group, for the qualitative collection of data. The conversation on the proposed topics was facilitated and lines of communication were created between the various participants, from which suggestions, comments and opinions could be extrapolated. The meeting developed following a three-questions outline, that the facilitator proposed during the course of the focus group. The facilitator was supported by an observer, who had the task of assisting the facilitator in recording comments and opinions expressed by the participants and in observing the climate and dynamics of the group. The facilitator, at the beginning of the meeting, introduced the topic, defined the rules of intervention and its duration, and steered the discussion through the stimulus-response technique. Specifically, the questions proposed during the meeting aimed to explore the following 3 dimensions related to the sustainability of the tourism sector: **Territorial Assets, Vision and Policies.**



## FIRST DIMENSION - TERRITORIAL ASSETS

The first question brought to the participants' attention aimed at exploring the degree of maturity of the territory to accommodate and migrate towards a model of sustainable tourism, using what it already has and strengthening the lacking elements. The question was the following:

**How can the territory's assets be put at the service of a more sustainable tourism model on a sociocultural, economic and environmental level?**

Sicily is rich in resources, territorial but also intangible resources. **Sustainability should be a spontaneous consequence of the sound use of these resources.** The key is in developing the right awareness in the way we think about tourism and be able to leverage it for the creation of original cultural products. The values that tourists appreciate in Sicily are already drivers for sustainability: the analogue qualities of the way of living, the tactility of the territory and the slowness.

Customers are attracted by stories, by the storytelling of people. It is necessary to create the right way of telling and characterising oneself: [Urban Etna Winery](#) is such an example, as it positioned itself as something different, a vineyard in an urban fabric. Overall the Sicilian region does not lack virtuous examples such as this one. There are many virtuous realities in Sicily, but they are not systemised and remain niches. The main reasons identified for this are twofold. First, these **alternative examples of touristic initiatives are not followed by adequate regional promotion**, focussing on marketing, communication and innovative elements, which instead is limited to depicting Sicily as Taormina, Mount Etna or coastal tourism. Secondly, **poor infrastructure and services constitute a fundamental hindrance to the development of an integrated touristic**

**offer.** The assets are there but more often than not they are not known, or they are difficult to reach, and therefore they are not economically viable.

Selecting the right target audience is key to ensuring the valorisation of territorial assets. Younger generations, for example, place greater value on socio-cultural and ecological sustainability. Testimonies from the group have highlighted that designing user experiences and interfaces that attract younger generations can facilitate the transition towards sustainable models.

Leaving aside the generational gap, from a social perspective, today we see a dichotomous situation: there is a target group that is attentive to sustainable tourism and then there is a majority that is completely disinterested. Notwithstanding that sustainability champions do exist, the lack of a framework strategy for their promotion means that sustainable models of tourism are only discovered by the customer when they are enjoyed. An ordered system of rules should be created, a structured matrix to create the scaffolding for sustainable tourism. Suggestions from the group have highlighted that **defining and measuring sustainability would be a fundamental first step to discerning what sustainability really is and set the foundations for a promotional strategy**, as it allows for the creation of a shared identity based on observable and recognisable characteristics. In the world of wine, two main standards were created to understand with objective and measurable parameters whether a winery is sustainable or not. That strategy is now a brand ([SOStain](#)) which is able to strongly position itself in the market. At the regulatory level, on the other hand, there should be a process of de-bureaucratisation to allow for more dynamism in the private sector.

Other contributions have highlighted that notwithstanding the existence of virtuous examples of sustainability, the broad picture reveals that the territory is not ready for

sustainable tourism. Taormina stands as an example of this. In the past, this was a winter tourism locality, due to the favourable weather conditions which attracted wealthy foreigners for longer periods. The growth of touristic demand and increased purchase power of the medium classes signified having set tourism operators on a path of aggressive and uncontrolled touristic expansion. This shows that there are reluctances and cultural blockages, which must be addressed. There is a **widespread cultural problem, where the value of sustainability is often not recognised as a priority, especially so among tourism operators themselves.** A transition towards sustainable tourism profoundly changes the priorities and way of thinking of the tourism operator. With regard to ensuring socio-cultural sustainability, tourism operators have to be aware of the value of the specificities of a territory, its resources and local identities. An operator who is not interested in the protection and valorisation of the social and cultural context of a specific territory cannot make sustainable tourism. Contextualising implies a reading of the territory not only in economic terms but also from a cultural perspective. In the context of the dizzying multiplication of the touristic offer, such awareness cannot be taken for granted. Therefore a strong regulatory system is crucial to limit the damage of aggressive tourism practices

The need for such awareness in tourism operators is also needed to achieve economic sustainability. **As long as price competition is the primary factor in shaping the touristic supply chain, the local economy will always be at loss.** If for example, a b&b in a small town offers for breakfast not the typical food of the place, but an industrial product, with no linkage to the local production, distribution of income will never be achieved. This element, which presupposes a certain social cohesion in that territory, is built through paths that are long and complicated, and this reveals that tourism intersects with other areas of local development which are multilayered and complex.



**Price competition also significantly affects environmental sustainability, as this type of sustainability is probably the most expensive to achieve.** Very often in historic centres, where tourist activities are concentrated, it is not possible to make environmental reconversions of buildings. When it is done, it presupposes a certain sensibility that has to be nurtured. The path towards achieving this level of awareness regarding the socio-cultural, economic and environmental value of a touristic activity should not be left to the goodwill of the tour operator.

**Together with tourism operators, another key target for strategies of territorial “re-education” are families,** with the ultimate goal of impacting the development of territorial sensibility in younger generations, which is something that at the moment is wholly lacking at the institutional level but where some best practices at the local level can be identified (for example [Kids Trip](#)).

## SECOND DIMENSION - VISION

In contrast to the first question, the second question aimed to overturn the dichotomous relationship between tourism as an extractive practice and sustainability as a mitigation tool. It, therefore, encouraged participants to reflect on tourism as a vector of a local development model, and thus to consider virtuous land-use models such as community-based tourism. The question posed to participants was as follows:

### **How can tourism become a lever of social, cultural and economic development for the territory?**

In continuity with the first area of discussion, contributions to the second question stressed once again the importance of tourism for the valorisation of the tangible and intangible assets of the territory. One connotation of this implies **the transformation of cultural value into economic value**. This is seen as crucial, as sustainable tourism is an expensive practice, which cannot solely compete with traditional tourism on a “best value for money” basis. The fact that products and services that valorise the social, cultural, environmental and human heritage of a destination have to cost much more than traditional products has to become engrained in our culture. Without economic sustainability, no other aspect of sustainability can be guaranteed.

Another dimension presupposes the centrality of human resources, in a human-centric vision of tourism. This vision goes back to traditional practices where the productive capacity of a territory depended on the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation. **In the contemporary world, a human-centric vision for tourism implies leveraging tourism as a tool for the creation of highly skilled professions**. Together with the human-centric vision of tourism, another possible interpretation proposed by the



participants has been that of a territorial-centric vision. Since “territory” is a concept that retains landscape, cultural, anthropological, social, productive and labour values, the main difference is that, compared to the human-centric vision, it places greater emphasis on concertation strategies which go beyond the single actors of touristic activity, to bring together and synthesise different interests. Therefore **there needs to be a territorial direction along the lines of a “vast area strategy”, which is the only type of strategy that can guarantee tourism has an impact on local development.** These strategies, to be effective, must be able to compete in the long marketing networks, but also to regain sovereignty of local value chains.

This macro-objective has to come to terms with the reality of the situation: at the regional level there is a cultural lack of interest in belonging to a system that together promotes a certain culture of values. Contributions have exposed a common worry with regard to the level of maturity of the local actors in subscribing to a system made up of standards, rules and a shared territorial promotion, once again stressing the importance, already emerged in the first part of the focus group, of addressing both the lack of awareness in operators and beneficiaries and the lack of a strategical direction from the institutions.





## THIRD DIMENSION - POLICY

The third question submitted to the participants acted as an instrument to synthesise the many suggestions that had already emerged during the discussion on the role of policies and of strategic interventions of the institutions. The question asked:

**How do you evaluate the effectiveness of policies related to sustainable tourism in Sicily? In your experience, have there been measures at the local or regional level that have produced observable results in terms of reducing environmental impact and supporting local communities?**

Few interventions focussed on identifying already existing best practices, while the majority stressed once again the need to **push institutions towards the creation of territorial strategies to promote tourism in Sicily as a sustainable practice**. Some interventions further characterised this urgency in the restructuring of the branding strategy of Sicily. Branding is perceived as the most effective way to move the touristic offer away from a model based on the quantity of production towards the quality of experience, and hence to strengthen the exchange value of territorial assets and downsize their use value. The Sicily brand is fashionable today. Using that brand intelligently to **increase the value of the local resources and traditions through storytelling** is a way to ensure sustainable development of the touristic value chain. In this respect, the engagement of the private sector in a common storytelling strategy is a key aspect to ensure a certain positioning of the touristic product along sustainable lines.



An example of a solid territorial strategy mentioned during the focus group which follows this approach in Sicily is the [Strategia nazionale per le aree interne \(SNAI\)](#)<sup>4</sup>, in which sustainable tourism plays a very important role. In SNAI there is a shared vision, specifically constructed and orchestrated primarily by public organisms, which frames tourism as an economic activity attentive to identity and capable of mobilising participation from below, which is then put on the ground primarily through a path of capacitation for the operators.

Other contributions have confirmed that broad strategies of cultural awareness should be the primary objective of political intervention, as it is extremely complex to govern a process solely at an aggregative level. Projects aimed in that direction, such as Consorzio Arancia Rossa di Sicilia or Via della Zagara, even though it is still alive, proved to be unsuccessful in the long run. This was because there was no perception as to the value it could generate for the local communities and territorial development more broadly, and everyone involved moved in random order. Other aggregative projects and platforms such as the GALs, in reality, are solely used to fund ad-hoc projects through calls and tenders, which only last for the time being of the financial allocation, generating distortions in the ecosystem. Connected to this, the existence of certifications of excellence, such as the title of UNESCO heritage site in the case of Parco dell'Etna, are not a guarantee of local and political recognition of value. **In absence of real cultural awareness, excellence tends to remain in the region a purely formal connotation, supported by little political actions and programmatic planning.**

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<sup>4</sup> The National Strategy for Inland Areas (SNAI) is a territorial policy promoted by the Cohesion Agency aimed at improving the quality of services to citizens and economic opportunities in inland territories and territories at risk of marginalisation, first contemplated in the National Reform Programme (NRP) of the year 2014 and defined in the 2014 - 2020 Partnership Agreement. In Sicily the policy is implemented in five inland areas: Calatino, Madonie, Terre Sicane, Valle del Simeto and Nebrodi.



## CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the various stimuli that emerged from the various rounds of consultations conducted in the various geographical areas under consideration, a matrix was elaborated that conveys the common key priority areas identified by the local stakeholders with respect to sustainable tourism development.

The table below provides a short visual account of how well the Iblei area performs against this matrix, on the basis of the results of the focus group.



## KEY PRIORITY AREAS *ETNA*

KEY PRIORITY AREAS ETNA		Very low	Low	Adequate	Good	Very good
1	the area's <b>human capital</b> has the right opportunities, skills and awareness to embark on projects for the touristic valorisation of the local heritage					
2	existence of <b>initiatives</b> of sustainable tourism in the area					
3	tourism operators have sufficient <b>competencies</b> to scale their sustainable projects					
4	tourism operators are working in synergy and with a <b>common promotional strategy</b>					
5	<b>territorial identities</b> are solid and valorised in the local tourism value chain					
6	the natural, cultural and social <b>heritage</b> is favourable for the development of a sustainable tourism strategy					
7	general <b>infrastructure and services</b> are adequate to support the development of a sustainable tourism market					
8	local <b>public institutions</b> are active in the valorisation of sustainable assets and in the construction of integrated tourism strategies					



**1. the area's human capital has the right opportunities, skills and awareness to embark on projects for the touristic valorisation of the local heritage**

Various initiatives have been mentioned during the focus group, suggesting that possibilities of engaging in sustainable tourism development are viable. At the same time, the predominant view is that the value of sustainability is often not recognised as a priority, especially so among tourism operators themselves, signifying a certain lack of awareness.

**2. existence of initiatives for sustainable tourism in the area**

There are indeed various sustainable companies and projects operating in the area. Still, they are seen as a niche market, struggling compared to traditional tourism products.

**3. tourism operators have sufficient competencies to scale their sustainable projects**

The theme relating to the strictly technical capacitation in operators was not addressed as a significant challenge for sustainable tourism. At the same time, a poor understanding and definition of “sustainability” was perceived as one of the factors negatively affecting the development of a sustainable tourism industry.

**4. tourism operators are working in synergy and with a common promotional strategy**

The reluctance of tourism operators to organise themselves according to a system of shared regulations, principles and strategies is seen as a key challenge for the development of a sustainable tourism community. Indeed, contributions have exposed a common worry with regard to the level of maturity of the local actors in



subscribing to a system made up of standards, rules and a shared territorial promotion.

## **5. territorial identities are solid and valorised in the local tourism value chain**

Participants agreed that territorial identities were not sufficiently valorised in local tourism value chains. In particular, price competition is seen as the primary factor in shaping the touristic supply chain, pushing aside the valorisation of the social, cultural, environmental and human heritage of the territory. Hence the transformation of cultural value into an economic value was seen as crucial to make tourism based on territorial identity competitive along the value chain.

## **6. the natural, cultural and social heritage is favourable for the development of a sustainable tourism strategy**

All participants agreed that the territory is particularly suitable for the development of a sustainable tourism offer, and in particular the *human* and *territorial* heritage was seen as a key driver for building unconventional, competitive and sustainable tourism offerings.

## **7. general infrastructure and services are adequate to support the development of a sustainable tourism market**

The lack of services and infrastructure was mentioned in the course of the focus group as a systemic hindrance, in particular with regard to mobility and care of public space.

## **8. local public institutions are active in the valorisation of sustainable assets and in the construction of integrated tourism strategies**





Confidence in public institutions was quite low among all participants. In particular, the inability of the public sector to build effective territorial marketing strategies was particularly criticised, to the extent that not even widely-recognised territorial excellences are valorised by public strategies.

