

MAINSTREAMING OF SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES IN TOURISM POLICIES IN SICILY

within the project

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TECHNICAL REPORT

ON THE RESULTS OF THE FOCUS GROUP “POLICIES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM” IN THE IBLEI AREA

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FOREWORD

This work, conducted between February and March 2023, was part of a consultancy provided to the Restart Med! Project¹ 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

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

¹ 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

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 ²	Ferla ³	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 partnership programmes and administrative bodies; the research sector, both universities and private research institutes and territorial associations.

² Representative could not participate in consultations

³ Representative could not participate in consultations

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 17th February 2023, from 16:00 to 18:00, at Palazzo Favacchio, Scicli. The Focus Group was attended by 11 experts, with transversal skills in the tourism sector in the Iblei area.

For reference, by Iblei area, this report refers to the territory interested by the Hyblaean Mountains, a mountain range located in the south-eastern part of Sicily, between the free municipal consortium of



Ragusa, the free municipal consortium of Siracusa and, to a lesser extent, in the metropolitan city of Catania. The Iblei are home to a total population of about 800,000 inhabitants, about 1/5 of the total population of Sicily, extending across 40 municipalities.

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. **Emanuele Caschetto:** tour operator and guide, works in the management of cultural sites, receptionist; manages the I love Scicli page
2. **Ignazio Occhipinti:** collaborator of the Scicli Albergo Diffuso, both in reception and hotel management roles.
3. **Barbara Sarnari:** vice-president of Svi.Med., working on European and Mediterranean projects on sustainable development and tourism
4. **Ezio Occhipinti:** manager of Scicli Albergo Diffuso.
5. **Luca Iozzia:** manages the farm stay *Le Chiuse di Guadagna*
6. **Raffaele Pluchino:** works in the field of cycle tourism, has created his own company Sicily Bike Routes and offers tourism services at 360 degrees, area contact person (south-east Sicily) for some tour operators
7. **Sara Adamo:** runs a small eco-friendly accommodation business.
8. **Paulina Nowakowska:** researcher on tourism development, works for Uncovered Sicily, and manages a B&B in Ragusa Ibla.
9. **Federica Schembri:** collaborates with associations and realities in the area in the field of tourism and the valorisation of cultural heritage and co-manages a holiday home in Sampieri

10. **Barbara La Rocca:** for 25 years she has been involved in tourism and in the management of accommodation facilities. She now manages a B&B in Ragusa that focuses on sustainability.

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 Iblei region, 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 socio-cultural, economic and environmental level?

In reflecting on this first question, the majority of participants agreed that the Iblei area was particularly well-equipped for territorial drivers for sustainable tourism. In particular, participants discussed:

- The productive aspects of the land, in terms of **agricultural production** and the human capital of the local productive system.
- The **rural landscape**, in particular with regards to its potential, if properly organised, to create unique experiences for tourists. Unique features of the Sicilian rural landscape such as dry-stone walls (which also are listed as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage) and *masserie* (farmhouses) constitute a significant competitive advantage for the development of an experiential touristic offer in the region.

Moreover, in terms of sustainability, the specific area of Ragusa is considered to be particularly virtuous in this respect, as it provides many examples of local micro-realities that are deeply engaged in advancing a model of responsible tourism, despite the fact that the Iblei region started late on tourism compared to other regions on Sicily. Overall, it seems that the social and cultural factors at play have reflected positively on the local population's sensibility with respect to sustainable development: there are **micro-realities, old and new, that are already benchmarks of sustainability and that are using resources responsibly to mainstream sustainability in the local touristic offer.**

The main obstacle that prevents the real scalability of these models is that they mostly work in isolation from each other, and from the broader touristic value chain. In fact, having both the strategic assets and the cultural sensibility to internalise sustainability, the real

challenge for this area is not in the number of actors and players active in the field. Rather **the main urgency remains that of developing collective strategies to make sustainability a territorial asset itself**, with a view of rendering the trade-off between sustainability and price competition less detrimental to economic sustainability, and on the contrary a benchmark of the territorial marketing strategy of the region. Efforts in this direction have been put forward in the Ragusa area, for example with the [ConsumelessMed](#) project⁴, which had set up a management committee to bring together these micro-sustainability champions with local municipalities with a view of creating a ground for collaboration to advance a shared strategy of territorial marketing.

Other contributions have highlighted the fact that the challenge of developing strong territorial marketing strategies is not only due to systemic flaws, such as the mismatch between the public and private sectors' agendas. It can also be reconducted to a **lack of specific competencies within the private sector, preventing a spontaneous organization of the local economic activity into a winning model**. An example of a winning model in this respect is the Langhe area, in the Piedmont region. The Langhe are in fact an area comparable to the Ragusa area, with many farms that were dying and came together in an effort of cooperation and upskilling, leading to a boom in wine tourism and wine routes.

In many ways, the private sector in Sicily works by emulation of successful models. As the demand for change is continuously speeding up, more and more energy is devoted to keeping up with the changes, rather than planning ahead. **The main competence lacking, from a business perspective, is knowledge of the market itself**, which prevents the development of solid economic and marketing strategies and visions. Upskilling from a technical perspective – in terms of bureaucratic, business and economic skills – is essential to make the strategies of these actors more effective. Other contributions have built on this

⁴ Project funded under the European Union MED PROGRAM 2014-2020 – FESR, with a total financial allocation of 2.635.000 €, running from November 2016 to October 2019

and have highlighted the importance of investing in business literacy and providing the right training on how to manage a business. A key feature of this training should be a focus on needs analysis, as many operators start off with improvised strategies, without asking the right questions and following a model purely aimed at mass attraction (such as the Rimini model). To compensate for this a more systemic and integrated approach is needed, with a network of operators sharing the costs of training and the public supporting this process through the creation of capacitation opportunities for local operators.

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 response to the second question, several contributions were made with respect to the overall economic sustainability of not considering tourism as a purely economic activity. Concerns were expressed on the actual viability of limiting touristic activities to approaches conducive to local development, as this would significantly shrink a segment of the market that is specifically addressed to tourists. In addition to this, other contributions have highlighted that **it is not to be given for granted that the local community necessarily values local development over the profits of an aggressive model of tourism**. Models of “aggressive” tourism are often endorsed by the local community itself, seeing it as an easy opportunity for rendering profitable assets which are not of interest to residents.

Ragusa Ibla stands as an example, as its historical centre had undergone a phenomenon of gradual emptying of residents, who settled elsewhere in order to benefit from better public services and housing conditions. In the void left by this trend, the public failed to invest to improve living conditions for residents, and the private sector took over, investing to create tourist activities, without any type of regulation or overarching strategy. Where the local community settles for an unsustainable model of tourism, which depletes resources and surpasses the load capacity of a territory, **it should be the public sector to intervene and promote - and educate on - alternative models**.

This risk of **touristic gentrification** was also identified as a strong feature of Modica and Noto, where historic centres are turning into “tourist traps”, and there is no longer integration between the people who live in the area and tourists. Trends such as this one are thought as the main challenge for socio-cultural sustainability in tourism in the region, as it signifies that the organisation of the town is disrupted to promote tourism, and historic centres are being totally abandoned by the locals.

On the other hand, the Scicli model stands as a positive integration of tourism in the ordinary organisation of social, cultural and economic life of the town, something that is highly valued by tourists themselves. In particular, the specificities of the Scicli model are conducive to a kind of tourism that has been defined by the participants as *relational tourism*, that is tourism where the value of the touristic experience resides in the relationships between the temporary visitors and the local community.

This type of tourism requires adopting a clear stance with regard to the final target of the touristic offer. In particular, it calls for **developing models and services designed for travellers rather than tourists**, which create opportunities for travellers and residents to get together, and allow for cross-cultural experiences. Digital nomadism is for example cited as one increasingly popular travel format which well responds to the needs of the area, with examples of towns around Italy currently undergoing a process of depopulation and degradation investing in projects of digital nomadism to revitalise the area. This strategy requires innovation in the culture of hosting non-locals and in reception systems and services.

Moreover, **when embracing these alternative models, sustainability becomes not solely an objective**, or a mitigation process, **but a strategic asset for attracting the desired target.** Indeed, these types of tourists usually come from countries that are more advanced from a technological and sustainability perspective, and where awareness for sustainability is engrained in their cultural milieu, which is then reflected in their expectations. At the most basic level, a destination with garbage on the streets or plastic in

restaurants cannot be considered sustainable. These expectations can become a boost for local operators to further mainstream sustainability in their processes and services, as sustainability will be increasingly important and can become a competitive asset for destinations.

THIRD DIMENSION - POLICIES

The third question prompted participants to focus on political actions and strategies undertaken in the area and 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?

Among the examples of positive public interventions to increase the sustainability of the touristic sector, some measures have been highlighted, although they were **deemed too basic to be considered real improvements compared to European standards.**

For example, in Ragusa Ibla the municipalities had set up with funds from the tourist tax free shuttle buses, both for tourists and residents. The need for better mobility had emerged from tourism, but in many cases, it has had the effect of changing the habits of some residents and it stands as an example of a generative exchange. On the other hand, the decision of the municipality of Ragusa to engage through the [CCN](#) (Commercial Natural Center) - an association of 90 tourism - related enterprises located in the baroque district of Ragusa Ibla - in the development of a [tourism plan](#) is considered a positive and urgent intervention⁵.

The work of territorial organs such as the GAL (Local Action Group), has been brought to attention, in particular with the [Enjoy Barocco](#)⁶ initiative, and in this respect, it has been

⁵ On 10/12/2019, the municipal administration accepted the project proposal put forward last February by the CCN Antica Ibla among the proposals of the Participatory Budget concerning the creation of a Strategic Tourism Plan for the city of Ragusa, in order to implement a promotional marketing strategy of a unique and integrated offer.

⁶ Activity implemented within the framework of the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 - Measure 19 "Support to local development leader", sub-measure 19.2 O.P. 2/2020 CUP G64H19000100009. [Cita GAL](#)

noted that the implementation and **development of tourism strategies cannot happen in isolation but has to connect various municipalities.**

Overall, the degree of satisfaction with public intervention was very low. Public administration has been portrayed as an absent actor at best. In other cases, the intervention of the public sector has resulted in steps backwards. For example, the SIBIT project on bicycle tourism routes between Trapani and Malta, which had gathered strong momentum and endorsement from the local community, was effectively taken down by administrative decisions.

The main request expressed by the participants to the political apparatus is that of seriously working on the **capitalisation of existing experiences and projects to develop strategic lines of action.** In the first place, it is the prerogative of public bodies to undertake serious studies of the load capacity of the region and establish limits to tourism development accordingly, in particular for what concerns ecological and social pressures. Secondly, it is key to ensure continuity and capitalization of projects already tested in the region, which more often than not, simply end in a vacuum. A concrete proposal to overturn this trend was for example the strengthening of the regional Tourism Observatory with a view of mapping the many active initiatives on sustainable tourism and building strategies for their valorisation but also to connect various stakeholders in strategic planning.

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 / BLEI

		Very low	Low	Adequate	Good	Very good
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	<div></div>				
2	existence of initiatives of sustainable tourism in the area	<div></div>				
3	tourist operators have sufficient competencies to scale their sustainable projects	<div></div>				
4	tourist operators are working in synergy and with a common promotional strategy	<div></div>				
5	territorial identities are solid and valorised in the local tourism value chain	<div></div>				
6	the natural, cultural and social heritage is favourable for the development of a sustainable tourism strategy	<div></div>				
7	general infrastructure and services are adequate to support the development of a sustainable tourism market	<div></div>				
8	local public institutions are active in the valorisation of sustainable assets and in the construction of integrated tourism strategies	<div></div>				

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

The human capital of the Iblei area has been addressed as one of the main assets of the territory: the existence of a creative, productive and cohesive community has given a competitive advantage to the area.

2. existence of initiatives for sustainable tourism in the area

The territory is rich in micro-realities that are already benchmarks of sustainability and that are using resources responsibly to mainstream sustainability in the local touristic offer.

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

The capacitation of the private sector was identified as a key priority challenge to be addressed, in particular with respect to technical and business skills. By being unable to keep up with the needs and evolutions of the market, the competitiveness of such micro-realities is put considerably under stress.

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

Again, the lack of scaling-up potential within the private sector prevents a spontaneous organisation of the local economic activity into a winning model promoting a coherent and strong territorial marketing strategy. Most operators work in isolation, and this is perceived to be a hindrance to the development of a sustainable tourism sector.

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

With respect to territorial identities, the impressions of the participants were mixed. The Iblei area is portrayed to be at different stages in a continuum that goes from strong ownership of the local community over the touristic offer - such as in the Scicli model - to a serious risk of touristic gentrification - such as in the Noto, Modica and Ragusa case. The difference between these two models rests in the degree to which, in absence of public regulation, an aggressive model of tourism emerged that effectively transformed public space into tourist places.

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 rural landscape was perceived as a key asset in this respect.

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. Also, the reconversion of historical centres is a huge and urgent challenge for environmental sustainability.

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

Overall, the degree of satisfaction with public intervention was very low. Public administration has been portrayed as an absent actor at best. In other cases, the intervention of the public sector has resulted in steps backwards. The few examples of positive public interventions cited were deemed too basic to be considered real improvements compared to European standards.