RURAL TOURISM: A KIND OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS

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Abstract:
Tourism has represented one of the major sources of balance of trade earnings for many years in the most developed countries. According to estimates by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), world tourism flows will grow by 4-5% annually over the coming years, reaching in 2020 an estimated number of 1.6 billion international arrivals, of which 378 million will be short haul international travellers (Lanfranchi M., Giannetto C., 2010). With the passage of time demand will become more diversified and this will lead to the spread of “new tourism”, the search for new products and increasingly diverse offers, characterised by organized local tourist systems. This paper underlines the importance of the tourist district (TD) or local tourist system (LTS) model as a strategic tool for creating innovative processes of endogenous development in a highly globalized framework, moreover it tries to highlight the peculiarities of tourist districts and their importance (as a network of heterogeneous actors operating at local level) in overcoming the major limitations of the distribution chain.

In this model we need to improve the use and knowledge of the cultural, environmental and gastronomic heritage of the area in question and this can only happen through the creation of a tight network of relationships, composed of and coordinated by both public and private entities able to meet all the requirements (accommodation, catering, entertainment, travel etc.) of potential visitors. Therefore, the birth of DT or STL represents an important opportunity for the promotion of tourism development of different local realities, because they are able to create innovative spatial models, capable of responding effectively to needs concerning the coordination of different tourism initiatives. There has been a heterogeneous response concerning implementation of STL in Italy, indeed some regions have not taken advantage of this potential tool for tourism development, while others have created a special discipline.

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1. Local tourism in relation to the changing competitive environment

Territory may be regarded as a complex system, formed by a series of interacting factors, such as actors, resources and infrastructure. It is characterized both by a spatial dimension and a temporal dimension. The former refers to a dimension characterized by resources and homogeneous features. Although located in a defined space not all activities conducted in a certain territory always originate in that context, and their effects are almost never felt exclusively within a single territory. The temporal dimension, on the other hand, shows that any relationship established is dynamic, that is to say subject to continuous development; for this reason, territory is often described as a vital system (Andereck, K., & Nyaupane, G, 2011), characterized by the evolution of the many actors that constitute it. Actors are an integral part of the system and they can include both individuals (private and public) and more or less complex organizations. In relation to these considerations, the aim of a territory, as a “living system”, is to provide and steadily and progressively strengthen all the necessary conditions for achieving economic, social and cultural improvements. For this reason it is important for it to be increasingly competitive, in relation to its global position and citizen welfare, in terms of employment and economic wealth (Blake, J., 1999). Thus, the competitiveness of a territory is not exclusively linked to macro-economic variables, such as GDP per capita or added value per capita, but also a set of conditions related to individual welfare, quality of life, environmental protection and landscape (Lanfranchi M., 2010). Territories, thus, compete to acquire and control resources useful for their sustainable development and for promoting the socio-economic advancement of the actors who participate in them. From a business viewpoint, a territory is evaluated in relation to the convenience it offers in starting up a business activity. For a company, the degree of attractiveness of an area is influenced by the specific type of production, by the industry it belongs to and by the type of competition strategy adopted. When assessing a territorial area certain variables should be taken into account, such as: the market, human resources, infrastructure, knowledge system, production system, institutions and public policies, the regulatory system, social and environmental quality, image and reputation. The choice of a geographical location in which to make a
productive investment is crucial for a company, whether it is engaged in the primary, secondary or tertiary sector. From the perspective of relative economic sectors, the competitiveness of a region is proportional to the quality of the tangible and intangible elements that constitute the wealth of resources it provides to operators and users (Dragulanescu I.V., 2013). The companies located in a territory increase their productivity level if they are able to differentiate their products, if they are efficient, and especially if they have a localization quality, understood as the ability to build good relationships and a high level of quality of life. In particular, if they operate in the tourism industry they must consider that the territory is seen as an area where you establish systematic interrelationships, where territorial organization is functional to meet tourist needs and elements of attraction are like interacting resources in a development framework that can be used as a tool for projecting a unified image with developmental capacity. In these local contexts, we can distinguish a systematic layout, in which integration is the result of a socio-cultural process that involves not only the territorial system in question but also its tourism space, and a network layout, in which integration originates as an instrument of strategic action for local tourism in relation to the changing competitive environment (Asciuto, A., Franco, C.P.D., Schimmenti, E., 2013). Systematic layouts include the relationship between tourism businesses and the economic and cultural effects generated by social interaction (the public sector plays a crucial role). Network interactions, on the other hand, establish a relationship between local and external businesses, with the presence of a leader; relations are stable, involve a limited number of subjects and they are strongly territorialized.

2. The model of multifunctionality of agriculture

The allocation of agriculture to more features, in addition to the canonical direct production of goods for the market, underlines the key role that the primary sector can play, if properly supported, in the revitalization of rural areas (Brandth, B., Haugen, M.S., 2011). Promoting rural development means to intervene in an area that includes the OECD countries making up 95% of the territory and 36% of the total population. In this habitat, structurally weak and with obvious deficiencies in the socio-economic structure, the agricultural sector plays a strategic role. Agriculture understood in its multifunctional value is realized in multi-employment benefits that maintain the presence of the population in these areas, thus avoiding the negative consequences of rural exodus. The exaltation of the concept of multifunctionality makes agriculture capable of promoting the growth
of all activities defined as minor, such as handcrafts, enogastronomic tourism, farm tourism, Bio-farm holiday, educational farms and B & B, able to diversify with related activities such as catering, tasting of typical products from business, hospitality, organization of cultural events, educational and recreational, and finally to interact with other sectors of the industry and are the driving force behind development of these activities in view of developing a policy of territorial and no longer sectoral (Choo, H., Petrick, J.F., 2014). The multifunctional agriculture is also finding application in the principles of sustainable development, biodiversity, market liberalization and food security, representing a new business model which places competitiveness in an expedient not longer protectionist, but in step with needs of today’s society. The farm, among the so-called minor activities, represents the type of agriculture that supplies services to the community, related to the landscape, environment, tourism, leisure, habits, customs and traditions. It is also a valuable tool for integrated development of the territory. In fact, when alongside the farm there are the those activities of reception and hospitality, the synthesis is made more meaningful with the concept of multifunctionality of agriculture, because the production is combined with the preservation of environmental heritage, also promoting the significant cultural heritage, artistic, gastronomic and craft that characterizes many of the Italian regions (Hansson, H., et al. 2013). The development of the farm also offers new employment opportunities, particularly young people and women, and is a source of supplementary income for business. The support income is becoming increasingly important, and this is even more true when referring to an agricultural system composed of small and medium-sized companies, like the Italian one, where the legislation has also created a law specifically for these businesses typical of the rural areas (Hibbard, M., Lurie, S., 2013). The farm is undoubtedly one of the concrete solutions that can help solve the problem of an atavistic low profitability in agriculture, which over time has led to deep social upheavals, such as the massive rural exodus and the abandoning of the land, while it can be considered the tool that allows proper remuneration for the multifunctional role of recognized agriculture company (Hara, T., 2008). In fact, only through this multi-activity the economy of rural districts can be bettered which cannot and will not become competitive in international markets, which are populated by large multinational agribusiness and by the production of commodities. However, these rural areas are of strategic importance in socio-economic and environmental profiles. Today by the agricultural sector valuates – and not only – the great economic opportunities offered to companies, because we will be seeking to translate multi-sectoral forms of remuneration to ensure economic sustainability while respecting and safeguarding valuable resources, such as water, soil and vegetation. It is implemented mainly through the small farms,
where the production function is considered instrumental in the realization of environmental and social functions.

3. Search Results in economics of rural tourism in disadvantaged areas

To solve the problem of economic depression in rural areas, different strategies can be applied both in the public and private sectors. In the former case, for example, by implementing local action groups through the Leader Program or the development of policies for local development (through Pur which adopts a bottom-up policy). But the development of disadvantaged areas can also come from private initiatives, such as tourism activities carried out by small businesses or farms. In Europe, rural tourism was born in central and northern Europe in the late 1950s, and is developed in southern Europe only twenty years later, in 1970s. Rural tourism makes use of spaces suitable for the practice of a wide range of activities related to agriculture or directly connected with environmental resources (sports, recreational and cultural). This form of tourism can satisfy different interests of tourists, supporting the natural heritage and rural culture of modern society, which is being eroded by the advent of new technologies. This form of tourism primarily includes:

- visits to farms;
- education on the types of crops grown;
- tasting of local agricultural products, etc.

Local actors today, are finally aware of the potential multiplier effect of tourism in terms of creating additional income. To ensure proper promotion and communication of these activities, an important role is played by public authorities and stakeholders. To date in Europe there are almost 28 million rural tourist facilities. The countries with the largest number of structures are France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Germany.

Among the countries of Eastern Europe, Poland holds the record with 610,111 structures. The majority of rural tourist facilities have developed primarily in areas considered rural. Italy doesn’t follow this trend as from holiday centres are not included among rural structures because they have different legislation. The EU 28 countries that have a larger number of rural tourist facilities in urban areas are Italy, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. These farms, according to the business transition and rural development models, can address the current economic crisis affecting most EU countries by looking for alternatives and adopting a policy of diversification. As indicated by agricultural policies it is important to diversify, create and implement specialization and increase economies of scale. These alternatives are addressed in three directions:
• diversification of agricultural activities (diversification);
• growth in added value per unit of output (value);
• the reorganization of internal resources (refounding).

In the case of diversification, the firms develops relationships with the rural area, exploiting the opportunities offered by its agricultural activities or from the growing demand for 'green services' from public administrations. In the case of creation of value, the company analyzes new relational patterns within the sector, such as internalizing sales and processing operations or developing strategies for differentiation based on quality (organic products, geographical indications, slow food). In the case of refounding, the company restructures its workforce through, for example, part-time and family multi-activity. The last decade has been characterized by a general growth of firms that implement rural tourism in disadvantaged areas. Countries that have had the most significant increase are the United Kingdom (+17.1%), Lithuania (+6.2%) and Latvia (+5%); while the countries that recorded a decrease in these structures is so-called rural areas are Slovakia (-2.5%), Ireland (-2.1%), Belgium (-1.5) and Poland (-1.4%). Certainly the decrease of these structures can severely affect the economy of the less advantaged areas because, as mentioned, rural tourism creates “local tourism”, tourism that stimulates local initiatives, locally managed, with local profits, characterized by local landscapes and adding value to the local culture. Rural tourism is therefore characterized by small or medium-sized tourism enterprises, a kind of tourism in which man is the central and primary element. Many LEADER groups have engaged in this sense. However, it is necessary to prevent the expected progress are achieved at the expense of particularism and character “craft” of the acceptance. In this connection it must be stressed that local actors are now aware of the potential multiplier effect of tourism emerged in terms of creating additional income, synergies development and improvement of infrastructure and support services to the rural world, in the interest of the population and of tourists. In this perspective, rural tourism allows primarily to ensure the protection of sites and ways of life, to benefit both local residents and future generations (Lanfranchi M., Giannetto C., De Pascale, A., 2014). Despite the favorable trends arising from the continued growth of tourism in Europe and the contraction of tourism demand of traditional destinations , the supply of tourism products in rural areas remains relatively low profile. We find, indeed, a lack of products and advanced tourism services, especially in southern Europe. In this regard, one cannot speak of a real structured supply on the market (there are no specialist tour operators, in addition, this form of tourism continues to be characterized by strong seasonality, which limits the return on investments (Lanfranchi M., Giannetto C., Puglisi A., 2014).
4. Discussion: the importance of rural tourism districts for local areas

Tourism districts can be treated as a homogeneous network of operators in a local area and thus, like other networks, is of great importance for the territory. From the numerous contributions made on this subject we can formulate a definition by taking into account three main criteria:

- the geographical dimension;
- the attractions on offer;
- the strategic and organizational dimension.

The discussion of these three definitional criteria of tourism districts takes place from a holistic analysis perspective, which jointly considers supply and demand.

Indeed, the main point of reference for tourism districts is the subject interpreting the tourism experience (Lanfranchi M., Giannetto C., 2014).

The sectoral system is regarded as a set of sectors and commodities (economic and otherwise) and consequently finds a timeline in the geographical element.

We have a geographic dimension when there is a range of product-market combinations (supply nodes) which are followed by stable customer segments.

Another requirement is the presence of well-defined geographical areas that are portions of territory with homogeneous characteristics with respect to the maintenance of natural landscapes and habitats and where land development and land use characteristics are defined as rural.

The areas in which to identify territorial domains are those with high natural value such as parks, reserves, significant natural sites, or natural wooded areas, areas intended primarily for forestry activities in which human activity has affected natural evolution over time (Leco, F., 2013).

Regarding attractions on offer within a district, there are elements that make the various sets of attractions unique and different from those offered by geographically neighboring districts, and changeable over time.

Attractions can be divided into: natural attractions and man-made attractions. The latter are particularly important because, unlike the former, they represent the part of the stock of resources upon which we can act to create more value.

This importance explains the possibility of finding districts geographically close and therefore with very similar natural resources, but with totally different kind of tourism development.

Finally, as regards the strategic and organizational dimension, there is a need to foster strategic and managerial style of district management, facilitating the development of a competitive advantage and creating a balance between supply and demand. This approach should be developed so that the district acquires a competitive position within the tourism market.
Tourism District boundaries become thinner, but despite this there is a complex network of businesses and tourism resources located within homogeneous areas, both in terms of demand and supply.

From the supply point of view, tourism districts that base their activities across the territory can produce goods, provide services and provide recreational and cultural experiences. Below there is a figure summarizing the supply of tourist districts (Dragulanescu I.V., Drutu I. M., 2012).

Regarding supply we can identify three types of tourist districts:
- Sectoral layout: intertwined causal relationships among the actors, without a real purpose or prior will;
- Supply system: the players agree in advance to create relationships, but there is no substantial cooperation;
- Network and constellation: fully-fledged relationships are established, there is an intent to co-operate, and leadership is created.

From the perspective of demand, Tourist Districts link together the human element, that is to say the tourist, the central element, which is represented by all the endogenous and exogenous resources at their disposition, and the information element, which is represented by all forms of communication.

The variables do not determine a defined geographical coverage but involve a mobile destination.

There may be some dissonances between the perceptions of the concept of district for supply and demand; if so, these differences should be eliminated by acting on supply and communication towards demand (for example through tour operators).

The actors operating in a local tourism system offer:
- accommodation services;
- catering services;
- entertainment services (bars, pubs, wine bars, cinemas, theaters, etc.);
- artistic, historical and environmental attractions;
- handicraft goods and services;
- local food and produce;
- public services;
- cultural and recreational events.

Therefore, they must correlate: services, experiences, events (business and leisure) cultural and tourist activities (business tourism and leisure tourism). A definition of tourism district was also offered by ACI-Censis (2007), stating that it is a geographical area with a population of SMEs that share a sufficiently homogeneous cultural heritage and which includes various product systems that address different customer segments, according to paths of integration and homogeneity (Sharpley, R., 2014).
From research conducted by ACI-Censis (2007) the distinctive elements of a tourism district are:
- degree of territorialisation: this represents the level of development of services and amenities in relation to primary vocations;
- quality of catering: identification of catering establishments of high quality;
- quality of hospitality: identification of hotel establishments included major tourist guide books;
- segmentation of catering: indication of the degree of differentiation of food and wine supply;
- segmentation of hospitality: indication of the degree of differentiation of hotel and other accommodation supply;
- the added extra of food and wine: indicates whether there is a particular element of differentiation and attraction compared to other districts.

These elements show that great importance is given to catering, food, and wine, and in this case, we can speak specifically of rural tourism districts.

5. The economic effects of rural tourism

Over recent years deep differences have been highlighted in various spatial contexts, both in restricted geographical areas, for example among regions, and on a global scale, indeed the gap between North and South has increased markedly (Lanfranchi, M., et al., 2014).

The differences that emerge reveal that the territory gives rise to social and political events and areas that can change continually, in relation to actions that are performed and the complexities of temporal and spatial dimensions.

From these considerations, it can be seen that the added value of a territory is the result of a number of variables, such as interpersonal networks, culture, politics, cultural and natural heritage, survivability and adaptability to exogenous circumstances. It is for this reason it is important for the local system to play an active role in order to achieve territorial development. The local system is characterized by the elements that compose it and strategies that are undertaken, and this also overcomes the theory of path dependence, which states that local development depends solely on the endogenous dynamics of the economy. Various solutions and policy actions have been explored in order to enhance the local economy, but those that may be most effective are the ones that aim at tourist development. For this reason, we have recently seen the adoption of measures for the improvement of territorial management from a tourism point of view, in order to promote the competitive growth of the national, regional and local tourism system.

In relation to the promotion of local tourism growth, article 5 of the new framework law reforming national tourism legislation, N° 135 of 2001, introduces
so-called “Local tourist systems” (LTS), defining them as *homogeneous or integrated tourist contexts*, including even territories belonging to different regions, characterized by an integrated supply of cultural, environmental and tourist attractions, including local agricultural produce and handicrafts, or by the widespread presence of single tourism enterprises, or groups of them. The purpose of this law and, in particular, of the article mentioned is to avoid excessive sectoralization and thus marginality of this sector in economic policies. Therefore, the setting up of LTSs is an attempt to create a “network” consisting of a series of relationships between the businesses in a given context and the local associative, environmental, cultural, artistic and historical context, in order to improve territorial management.

Indeed, these ties enhance and give more importance to quality, tourism development and the improvement of the organizational situation involving, among other things, the enhancement of local territories. LTSs can be defined as a territorial systems, i.e. a real network of destinations and attractions linked by homogenous and complementary factors, requiring however, a complete and integrated supply system and the adoption of product policies geared to the enhancement of territorial specificities.

To achieve these objectives we need to take certain actions such as identifying local employment systems established by ISTAT, detecting the industrial zones and local production systems legally recognized by the various regions of Italy, analyzing and comparing tourism practices and policies on a regional and national level, developing innovative products for sustainable tourism, studying GIS, etc...

In relation to these instruments, there has also been a change in the way politics is conducted, with a move from *top-down* development policies to *bottom-up* development and thus tourism policies have undergone a process of refocusing, moving the centre of gravity from government action to governance action (Moseley, M.J., 1995).

Today we can distinguish three operational instruments of tourism policy:
- public / public partnership;
- public / private partnership;
- partnership between private parties.

In the first case several public institutions agree to support initiatives in favour of tourism activities; in the case of partnership between public / private institutions the public and private sector agree to resolve problems or implement initiatives in order to promote local systems (Stoian, M., 2013). Finally, in the third case, several private parties agree to create consortiums and partnerships. The setting up of partnerships (i.e. networking) can be used to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, capable of reaching new markets, developing new products, improving operating margins and service quality, and above all achieving new economies of scale (Viswanathan, M., et al., 2014).
LTSs can bring about three kinds of effect:
- direct effects: these originate from the volume of production required to meet actual tourism demand (tourism goods and services, accommodation, meals, local produce, leisure services, etc.);
- indirect effects: in terms of tourism expenditure, these concern the overall volume of output required by the suppliers of the “tourism product” and other businesses that produce real services (these are the less noticeable economic effects and, if there is a lack of an adequate local tourism system, they often benefit external areas);
- induced effects: these are related to the volume of output required to meet the consumption of workers who have earned their income in activities directly or indirectly supporting tourist demand.

The degree of economic activity and the level of the multiplier effect of tourist spending at the local level are determined by a mix of factors related both to the characteristics of demand, and to those of the territory, such as the characteristics and consumption habits of visitors, the organizational model of tourism production, and the characteristics and scope of the entire local production system (Slee, B., Farr, H., Snowdon, P., 1997). A tourism district is a particular form of tourism system; indeed, it is expected, for example, that a tourist’s stay in a tourism district must take place within a geographical area, coinciding with the geographical and cultural boundaries of a locality (Sakellari, M., Skanavis, C., 2013).

6. Conclusions

Rural tourism born in the 50s in many countries of Central and Northern Europe and in the ‘70s in the southern Europe, became immediately a powerplant instrument for revitalizing local economies by helping to reduce the exodus of the population, creating jobs and promoting economic and social development of disadvantaged areas. Several factors are behind this evolutionary process: that tourism form can meet the demand for alternative tourism and not mass: response to the growing interest in natural heritage and rural culture of an urban public tired of his daily life. This form of tourism provides, among other things, farm visits, excursions, sports and agritourism activity, etc. The benefits of implementing a form of rural tourism in disadvantaged areas are manifold, such as maintaining an optimal balance between ecological, socio-economic and cultural systems of the area, while introducing a form of endogenous economic development; it brings to local people an additional source of income that permits them to face the crisis of agricultural systems and rural communities. It contributes to the diversification of economic activities by increasing the supply of services and local products, and
also, promotes exchange between cultures and peoples in knowledge and in mutual respect as a factor of solidarity and social cohesion.

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